

Is There Hope for the M-DCPS System?

En Español

April 23, 2002

Contact: Zulay Gayle-Mendoza (305-995-2794)

[Marta Pérez's
Home Page](#)

[Articles &
Newsletters](#)

[Send E-Mail](#)

Is there hope for the MDCPS system? What should the public demand of its elected board at this time of transition?

Having taught in the public school system, raised two children, conducted business, received a Doctorate of Philosophy in Education from the University of Miami and served on the School Board for over three years, I find the following:

In order for the system to survive, the style of leadership of the board requires mending. Compare the district's growth with the growth of a child. A baby's proportionate heart and brain serve its small body well. But as the infant matures, the entire body develops, too. Over the years, this school district stretched beyond projections of even the most visionary of planners. We mushroomed from a three, five, seven to a nine-member board, cultural and ethnic waves washed ashore, single member districts, record enrollments, suffocating overcrowding. . .the miniature swelled to the fourth largest school district in the country! But the leadership, the board, the "heart and brains" of the system stayed a toddler.

Board processes endure as under old schemes. Some of the members with the longest tenures clutch outmoded paradigms of leadership. This grasp causes entropy, mistrust and, tragically, corrupts the system.

There is hope if the board quickly prioritizes to create a clear, understandable vision of what MDCPS should become, and then sets out to achieve it. This is not easy because change is not easy. It requires setting aside egos and deciding on rules of leadership and team building. Rules based on the values we give lip service about to our children.

We have come to this point because the growth of the district has created a vacuum in the processes that govern the board. As a result, politics dominates the leadership. As things are now, the positions of chair and superintendent fall into an unhealthy symbiotic relation. Both need five crucial votes, generally the same votes, from the board. This situation fosters vote trading, behind the scene deals and courting for votes, at the same time it often blocks integral decision making.

Power and money are the fodder of politics. Under the previous administration, it has been reported that a powerful chair ran the district. Political power came through career associations within the system and cronyism. Now, money manipulates procedure. If unchecked by appropriate rules, a "pay to play" disease may choke the district's integrity. The "I scratch your back if you scratch mine" cancer cannot continue to fester.

As policy makers, the board members must reject the archaic and harmful to the goals of education. We teach children character education using nine core values that include honesty and integrity. Now, we must model the behavior in order to be credible to our students. If not, the unfortunate, confusing, dangerous lessons they receive from the board's behavior are:

1. Do as I say, not as I do.
2. The values we teach you do not really help you get ahead in the real world.
3. The core values are not meant to apply to the elite.

If we hope to perpetuate a civilized society, we need to establish integral rules and then play by them. This is the lesson to model and teach our students.

Among other systemic, easily achievable changes for the board may be to lead through example, as follows:

1. Clarify its goals and align all district activities to meet those goals. This is the reason we were voted into office.
2. Support the Ethics Commission and an Inspector General's position that

are independent of the board.

3. Study. Enroll, as a board, in boardsmanship training. Florida School Boards Association is at the vanguard of information and courses for board members to help them deal with the new paradigms associated with becoming a school board member. These modules have worked for Fortune 500 companies and have been successful at other boards.

If we don't consider these and other remedies, the board can look forward to the continued, unhealthy horse-trading, back room deals, lobbyist influence, and courting of votes that has practically doomed the system.

To conclude the comparison, if the board refused to change, it will continue to be the ill infant who cannot lead an educational system, and will instead whine and blame Superintendent after Superintendent for its failings. The urgency is that:

1. We can do a better job!
2. The public is watching and parents have other options for their children.

The nine board members must decide whether they want to continue to play the old political games of influence, that stifle excellence, or mature to a exemplary role model for our students.