Monocacy Elementary to Remain Open for Now

By John Clayton

Montgomery County Superintendent of Schools Jerry Weast has released new recommendations for Monocacy Elementary and Poolesville Elementary Schools, highlighted by the statement, “I am recommending that Monocacy Elementary School remain an operating school for the foreseeable future.” The recommendations follow Mr. Weast’s 2009 recommendation that Monocacy Elementary School (MES) be closed and its students transferred to Poolesville Elementary School (PES). The proposal triggered an organized resistance from parents and other interested parties representing the interests of both schools.

A roundtable discussion group was formed in November 2009 to review low enrollment levels at MES and PES and to develop approaches to resolve the situation. The roundtable group, composed of community representatives from the Poolesville, Clarksburg, and Northwest school clusters, met from March to May 2010. Mr. Weast’s current statement addresses the recommendations from those roundtable proceedings.

Mr. Weast’s decision to keep MES open was based on growth projections from new residential developments in Poolesville, which, combined with the influx of students from MES, would necessitate the eventual expansion of Poolesville Elementary School, or the addition of temporary or “relocatable” classrooms, within the next six years, thereby increasing “the cost of consolidation of the two elementary schools.” Mr. Weast also said in his report that PES would be assessed for modernization in 2011, and any decision to expand the facility should be made in concert with that study.

While the new recommendations keep MES open for the time being, they do not embrace all of the roundtable’s suggestions for encouraging student body growth at MES. One suggestion that Mr. Weast rejected was for the Montgomery County School Board to establish lower recommended student enrollment levels for schools located in the Agricultural Reserve. The minimum county standard for elementary schools is two classes per grade, or 300 students, which PES maintains, but MES appears unlikely to meet. Mr. Weast said that, in fact, MES is the only elementary school whose district or service area is entirely within the Ag Reserve (a number of schools are partially in the Ag Reserve) and he did not concur with creating a special Board of Education policy for just one school. He also noted that “exceptions to preferred enrollment levels already are evident in a number of schools that either are below these desired enrollment levels or above them. The minimum and maximum enrollments are described as ‘preferred,’ not mandatory.”

Mr. Weast did accept the roundtable’s suggestion that students from the PES service area be allowed to transfer into MES from any grade level. Currently, a PES area student must apply to MES beginning in kindergarten. The school board provides transportation for these students, and under the new recommendation, students from all grade levels will be provided transportation to MES.

A number of the other recommendations from the roundtable were for establishing new programs, such as language immersion programs or magnet programs, either at MES, PES, or in the Poolesville Cluster which also includes John Poole Middle School and Poolesville High School. These suggestions were tabled based on the remote location of the Poolesville Cluster schools, which he observed make it both hard to attract students and expensive to transport students.

The superintendent’s recommendations will be discussed in a Board of Education Work Session on November 4. Public hearings on the issue will be held on November 10 and November 11, and a Board of Education Action is planned for November 18.