***Look Who Came to Dinner***

By Kristen Milton

Poolesville school officials recently made another attempt to discover if the way to an education board's heart is the same as to the proverbial man's: through the stomach.

As at past meetings, school cluster members treated visiting Board of Education members to a full sit-down meal at cloth-covered cafeteria tables during their May 14 visit to the town rather than the finger foods more usually served at such events, but in spite of pulled pork, collard greens, and homemade desserts, Poolesville Commissioner Jerry Klobukowski said the group received little encouragement on the issues foremost on its list of concerns. "I think the answers were the answers we were hoping not to hear but kind of expected to," said Klobukowski, the event coordinator.

Board of Education members cycle visits through the schools regularly, making a stop in each cluster approximately every three years. "Board members really enjoy meeting with PTA members," school board member Pat O'Neill (Dist. 3) said in a phone interview, "having a snapshot that's a little longer than the three- or four-minute [budget] testimony."

Poolesville is unique in the spread provided by PTA funds. "We've always thought if they come out this far, we ought to treat them a little more special," said Klobukowski, who serves as the town commission's education liaison.

"Poolesville has long had a tradition of feeding us well," O'Neill said. "Board members enjoy that since they may be coming straight from work, and it's nice to be fed like that rather than cookies."

The May 14 event included student performances and a high school tour before attendees—including cluster representatives, school principals, and others—settled in for a question-and-answer session. Familiar concerns raised included expanding the accessibility of courses offered elsewhere in the county, fast-tracking the high school modernization now set for 2021, and finding ways to increase the cluster's population either through transfers or boundary changes.

Poolesville Elementary School PTA president Tiffany Ayers said tour leaders made sure to point out the high school's "too-small cafeteria" as well as nails showing through the gym roof and other challenges but were advised to support efforts to keep the current modernization schedule on track.

O'Neill said the cluster's desire to advance the modernization was her key impression of the meeting. "It's really a question of money," she said. "We would like to see every single high school in the county new and modern, but Poolesville High School is just flourishing academically with the *Newsweek* listing and all."

Days after the May 14 visit, the high school was included on *Newsweek*'s annual list of the nation's 1,000 best. The school was last modernized in 1978.

PTA members also raised the question of course equity for the cluster. "If a student at our school wants to take a course available elsewhere, they should be able to take it—[whether the class size would be] two or 22," Klobukowski said.

Coordinated video-conferencing may eventually solve the issue, but until then, O'Neill said, "a critical mass of kids" will be required to offer certain classes; however, O'Neill said Poolesville students have many opportunities available. "MCPS has invested in the magnet program there—much to the dismay of some other schools in the county because it creates a brain drain—but we have invested in Poolesville," she said.

Ayers said in written comments that she did see some reason for hope in the possibility of enlarging the cluster's population through shifting boundaries.

"With the overcrowding of schools county-wide and a lack of funds to continue to build new schools, the board did signal that they may look at boundary changes down the road," she said. "This would bring a needed influx of students to MES and would be welcomed by those families who are indeed close to MES and want their children to attend the school."

Klobukowski said the event was worthwhile in that cluster members received direct answers to their concerns even if they did not get immediate promises of change. "We were hopeful that some of the stuff would have made an impression on the tour," he said. "We think we made our point."