

September 12, 2008

As the director of schools for the Maury County Public School System, I feel compelled to write this letter in hope of sharing the facts concerning the actions and/or events in recent days involving the Maury County School Board and the Maury County Commission. As the director, I am often put in the middle and asked "Why do you not make a statement that will explain to the citizens of Maury County the facts relating to the issues at hand?" As I enter my fifth year as director, I feel that it is time to alert the citizens and parents of this system as to the "political scheming" that are influencing the decisions being made that will drastically affect the students of Maury County as well as businesses, economy, and life itself. I would encourage parents to attend Maury County School Board meetings and Maury County Commission meetings. I also realize that parents may learn of the events by reading the local newspaper or listening to the local radio broadcasts. Until one attends the actual meetings, often the true nature of comments and actions of the board and commission are not perceived or clearly understood. I hope to inform the citizens of Maury County on several topics that will educate them on many, but not all, issues that have been raised in recent weeks.

As the third largest employer in Maury County, we have 1,635 employees and serve approximately 12,000 students, including pre-kindergarten. There are twenty schools, the central office and a maintenance department. While our number one goal is the education of students, we also provide transportation, meals, guidance, and extracurricular activities and we are charged with meeting the academic, emotional, physical, and social needs of a very diverse group of students. We must do this in a safe environment. "The mission of the Maury County Public Schools is to provide progressive quality educational opportunities and experiences to all students and communities to prepare them to succeed in a global environment."

Maury County Public Schools appreciates the majority of the commissioners and the trust they place in the school system leadership. These commissioners weigh the issues and vote their convictions. We realize that the county commission has funded capital projects including, but not limited to buses, lighting, computer leases, and major construction projects. The school board is grateful for these contributions and they have not gone unnoticed. General Purpose funding is the major issue at hand. When we consider local funding, the Maury County Commission should focus their efforts and attention on that local funding. The Maury County School System currently receives approximately 10% in federal, 52% in state and 38% in local dollars. For this school year, 2008-2009, the Maury County School Board hopes to maintain "status quo". However, even with this planning, there must be an increase in funding due to the increase in prices of fuel, utilities, and the cost of living. If the commission chooses not to fund the budget requested by the board, it will necessitate a reduction in programs, benefits, or personnel.

The Maury County Commission does not fund the total school budget, but 38% which is less than the state average of 43%. Maury County has a tax rate of \$2.50 and is funding their students locally at \$2,702. Commissioners should be concerned with the local per pupil allocation rather than the total of

federal, state and local contributions. This kind of thinking reflects the importance placed on education by some commissioners. Commissioners should praise local educators for the efforts put forth to earn federal and grant dollars that will make our system better without putting a burden on the local tax payer. Some county commissioners insist that they are meeting maintenance of effort as required by law. This is the minimum required by the state department of education. Are we to be satisfied with the minimum? Conservative spending enabled the schools to spend less than was budgeted in the 2007-2008 school year. Maury County is spending less in per pupil expenditures than the state average. The state portion of our funding is based on Average Daily Membership. This number comes from an average of how many students are on our rolls and is used for state BEP funding. Our funding from this source is based on last year's enrollment numbers regardless of how many students we are currently serving.

As with any organization, Maury County Public Schools must adhere to the many policies, rules and regulations set forth by local, state and federal guidelines. I will attempt to explain a few of these guidelines to create a better understanding.

- Licensed Employees/Highly Qualified: With the implementation of No Child Left Behind in 2001, all teachers must be "highly qualified" in the core subject area that they teach. This requirement had to be in place by the end of the 2005-2006 school year and includes more than certification. Teachers must pass either a National Teacher's exam (Praxis) or prove competency by past experiences and/or being evaluated. All teachers, administrators, and licensed staff must hold a current certificate issued by the Tennessee State Department of Education. Teachers' licenses must be renewed every ten years by taking additional course work. Advanced degrees must be held by administrators, and 49% of our classroom teachers hold advanced degrees. Having educators who have attained advanced degrees is certainly a positive characteristic of any school system.
- The Educational Improvement Act of 1992 set forth the guidelines that mandate the numbers of students that can be served in any classroom. The maximum and averages of numbers in certain grade spans are set. If a system exceeds these limits, the State Department of Education will intervene and cause a system to come into compliance. Maury County currently meets those guidelines. However, as growth happens, more teachers will be needed.
- The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools/ Council on Accreditation and School Improvement is an accrediting body and accredits more than 13,000 public and nonpublic educational institutions from early childhood centers through university level. Maury County Public Schools is honored as one of approximately 60 districts in the nation and one of approximately 7 in Tennessee to receive SACS CASI District Accreditation. This process assures that the system not only meets minimum standards, but also demonstrates a commitment to providing quality education programs aimed at improving student performance. Our association with SACS/CASI began in 1917 and has benefited teachers, students, and the community. Businesses and industries will question whether or not a local system is accredited when seeking to relocate. Maury County Public Schools can proudly boast of district accreditation!!

- Licensed employees must be paid according to a state salary index. Also, the Maury County Education Association negotiates with the board to determine the local salary index. This negotiation process also determines additional benefits, working conditions and supplements for extra-curricular activities.
- Federal dollars that are received and used by Maury County have very specific guidelines as to how they can be spent. Literacy, math, and graduation coaches, professional development, and other services for special needs children are a few of the ways that have been identified as acceptable uses for federal dollars. The state strongly encourages and may mandate some of these positions.
- The Maury County School Board and The Maury County Commission have very distinct roles to play in the educational realm of county government. The “powers and duties of the school board” are listed in TCA 49-2-203. The role of the Maury County Commission can be found in TCA 49-2-101. In summary, the board hires the director, makes policy, manages construction projects, grants tenure, and prepares the budget for the system. The county commission allocates local funding.
- The director is hired by the Maury County School Board and answers to the school board chairman on a daily basis. TCA 49-2-301 delineates the duties of the director of schools. He and his staff are responsible for the daily operations of the school system. Educational advice is given to the board, and all decisions come from a consensus of the board while following federal, state and local policies.
- No Child Left Behind causes systems to be highly scrutinized by the state and federal departments of education. Maury County was “targeted” to be a system on the High Priority List whereby the state would come in and mandate major changes in our system, including but not limited to moving personnel, directing the system as to how funds were to be spent, and other necessary implementations of programs. Fortunately, Maury County raised test scores and was able to meet adequate yearly progress. Our system was removed from the targeted list; however, we still have room for improvement in five of our schools.
- The graduation rate for Maury County has increased 7% in the last two years , from 73% to 80%. We are progressing. We have also surpassed the state goal attendance rate of 93% with 94%.

In closing, I want to take this opportunity to respond to comments that I have heard, read, and or received in recent days. Many times, misinformation causes citizens to form conclusions that are in error. This article is not aimed at creating debate, but rather at implementing understanding.

- “Do away with assistant principals/supervisors. Can’t someone off the street do these jobs?” Administrators and Supervisors are required to have advanced degrees by the state department of education and must have hours of administrator training to fulfill their roles as administrators.
- “Squeeze the budget until the school system realizes that the county commission will control all expenditures”.

The County commission by law does not control line item expenditures. They do fund the budget but cannot dictate how the money is spent. Both the Board and Commission must agree on the final budget.

- “Four or five commissioners are always in favor of the school system no matter what the issue.”
It is disturbing that one commissioner would chastise his fellow commissioners for supporting our schools. Four or five commissioners seem to always find fault with the board and the administration. They tend to provide incomplete facts to support their arguments. When school leaders present the full facts on an issue they have been interrupted and asked to stop speaking or not allowed to speak at all.
- “It is amazing that a retired, former educator and some that were educated in Maury County are so anti-Maury County Public Schools.”
I cannot explain what motivates people. I would hope that they would reflect on past experiences and realize that their benefits from a Maury County education would take many years to repay.
- “Why do people campaign to support education and then do the opposite?”
Commissioner’s actions should be remembered when election time comes again.
- “Why do some people use research against education, rather than in favor of education?”
Again, motivation cannot be explained. Facts can be distorted to support almost any argument. If research is done it should be done to improve our schools not destroy them.
- “Why does it take so long to make construction projects a reality in Maury County?”
Obviously, the commission does not place the importance on building projects that neighboring counties do. Growth is anticipated in Maury County, and we will not be ready if the commission continues to have a lack of vision and planning.
- “Were there not studies conducted to advise county government on better spending?”
Yes, the MGT study was conducted by the county commission at a cost of approximately \$250,000. Very few, if any, suggestions were implemented by the county. The school system implemented suggestions that were attainable without extra cost.
- “Maury Vision 20/20 survey reported that education should be the number one focus of Maury County. A recent study sponsored by the Alliance and conducted by an MTSU professor also reinforces the fact that to lure new business to this area, education must become the focus of the community. Are these recommendations going unnoticed also?”
It would seem that is the case.

We, as citizens of Maury County, must do everything in our power to change this trend. We must make our leaders realize that we do care about our children and the future of Maury County. Commissioners

and board members must work together to make Maury County Public School System exemplary in our state and the Southeastern United States. We certainly have the dedicated professionals and knowledge to do this. First, the funding must be available to make the dream a reality.