

# Quid Est Veritas

## For Whom The School Bell Tolls

By Patrick Weadon

*"This budget has been described as an effort to tighten the belt in Anne Arundel County. I want you to know, however, that when it comes to the school system this is not simply a belt tightening. It's mainourishment."* - Tricia Johnson, president Anne Arundel County School Board

The May 5 edition of the *New York Times* contained a wonderful OP/ED piece by esteemed surgeon Atul Gawande. A leading expert on the removal of cancerous tumors, Gawande related that often times during one of his operations a member of his staff will ask: "How could someone let that thing get so huge?" He made the point that many of his patients go for years without taking action regarding their health, and by the time they decide to seek help it's too late.

The article goes on to make the point that human beings are adaptable creatures who have no difficulty taking prompt action when faced with a sudden calamity - like terrorists attacks - but more insidious threats - such as slow-growing tumors - are often ignored.

Gawande was talking about health care, but his analysis could easily be applied to the political leaders in Anne Arundel County who failed to fully fund our school system. For years we have put cutting taxes ahead of our children's futures. Like a slow growing tumor, our schools are deteriorating before our eyes, but we have yet to pay the price for our apathy. Judgment day, however, is quickly approaching.

All one has to do to understand the mess we're in is read the May edition of the *Severna Park Voice*. Page A6 features John Singleton's "Nine Questions" interview with a current school board member; halfway through the article the board member states that one of his main goals is to "Improve the educational environment." There is no mention of how the school board should achieve this worthy goal.

Ironically, a front page story in the same edition (also written by Singleton) addresses a possible answer - put our children in trailers. Yes, my friends "fiscal responsibility" is slowly turning the Blue Ribbon School that is Jones Elementary into a place where, increasingly, dedicated teachers and gifted students have to do their work in temporary buildings.

County Schools Facilities Manager Larry Alberts noted in the April 18 edition of the *Baltimore Sun*: "We've mainly been working with a lot of Severna Park schools, which are tight with space and bursting at the seams... We have 17 schools to do and 10 of them need portables. It's just one of those realities parents need to understand."



Not to disagree with Mr. Alberts, but parents in Anne Arundel need to realize that County leaders are very good at saying "no" when it comes to adequate money for our schools, but exceedingly inept when it comes to finding creative ways to generate the money and resources required to fund the 41st largest school system in the country.

It is no secret a majority of the citizens of our county are against any increase in property taxes, but property taxes are not the only way to generate educational revenues. For a brief moment our county executive appeared to see the light and was bold enough to consider a tax on the thousands of rental cars at BWI airport. If passed the initiative would have generated millions for our schools and other vital programs.

At the time, I was pleased that someone at the top was finally getting creative in terms of finding ways to keep our school system healthy. Sadly, in the end Leopold was too gutless to pursue this innovative proposal stating, "I am loath to talk about any tax increase of any kind."

Asked if he was considering other taxes to help fund schools Leopold said: "I will cross that bridge when I get to it."

Well, start walking John, you and your predecessors' inability to provide adequate funding for county schools is slowly diminishing the efficacy of the entire system.

The county exec would do well to listen to the sentiments of Mimi Shea, the parent of a Jones student who noted, "We didn't buy a house, we bought a school district." Shea and her family, like so many of us, apparently moved to this area due largely to the reputation of our high-performing schools. Well, Mimi welcome to Severna Park where, if things don't change from a funding perspective, we can look forward to educating our children in trailers suited more for livestock than young students.

Leopold and the rest of the "Let the School System go to hell" crowd would do well to remember a former one-term county executive by the name of John Gary. Back in 1998 most of the citizens of Anne Arundel County were as kooky about tax increases as they are today, and Gary, like Leopold, thought he could get away with trashing the teachers and the school system. Like Leopold he refused to adequately invest in the children, teachers and buildings so critical to the health of the

Continued on page A16