

Time to stand up! Or call! Or write!

County leaders are preparing budgets, have schoolkids' futures in their hands

By **ARAMINTA S. JOHNSTON**

CMS Supt. Eric Smith and school board members called multiple meetings last week to build community support for increased county funding of the school system.

Area clergy and leaders of a variety of organizations attended, and the message was clear:

Get your members to tell county commissioners that if schools are to improve, they need not only the \$14.5 million increase recommended by County Manager Harry Jones, but the full \$59 million sought earlier by the board.

This debate is an annual one. The county has almost never provided the school system with the full amount of its budget request. And the superintendent and the school board regularly make the case that they need more. But this year school officials have significantly ramped up the level of discussion.

That ramping up results from the fact that the controversy really is different this year.

It's not just about paying for the school system to get bigger; it centers this time on a number of systematic efforts to make that system *better* for all its students.

For two decades the school system and the county have focused on funding the school system's growth. Most of the new money has gone to build new schools and hire teachers for them. With little money left over, maintaining existing facilities and supporting

more needy students' educational needs have been underfunded.

The growth continues – the system expects to add 3,000 new students next fall – and Jones' budget proposal is committed to funding that growth.

What Jones has recommended against funding, however, are a series of so-called "Balanced Scorecard" initiatives aimed at two objectives: creating more equitable opportunities for all CMS students, and improving CMS business practices.

What remains to be seen, however, is whether parents, voters and other citizens will put the pressure on county commissioners to commit the community to paying for a system that's not only bigger, but also better for all chil-

'Call to Action'

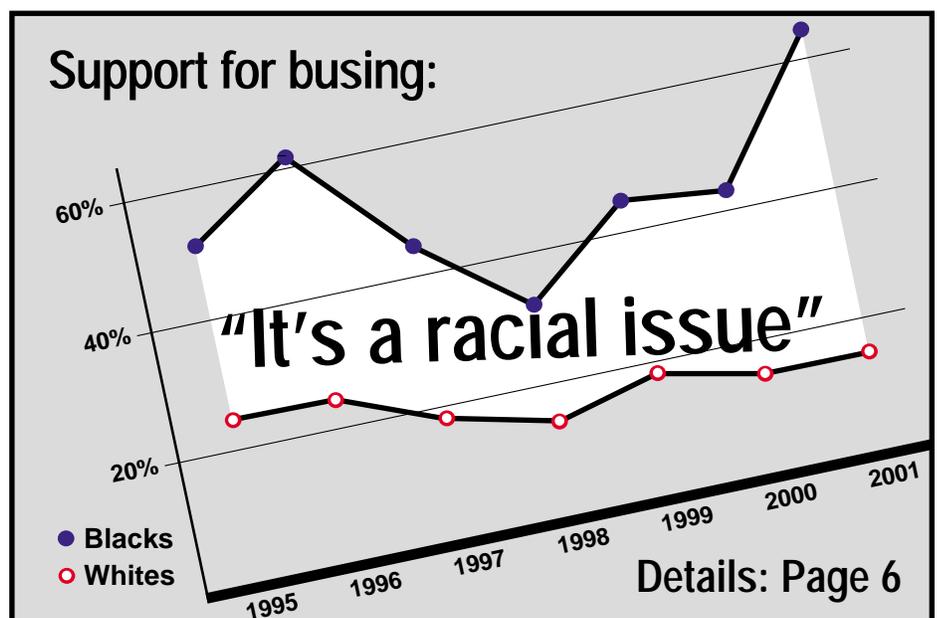
The schools issued a "call to action," saying the proposed 2001-2002 county budget "will not meet the challenges that our students, teachers, staff and schools face each day." Officials suggested:

- Attending budget meetings and hearings scheduled by the county. See box, page 4.
- Speaking in favor of CMS funding at meetings, hearings.
- Writing, e-mailing, faxing, or calling county commissioners. See box, page 2.
- Writing letters to the editor in support of CMS funding. See box, page 3.
- Organizing 10 of your friends and neighbors to contact county commissioners or to attend meetings and hearings.

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Citizens who oppose the additional funding, many of whom are recent transplants to the area and/or live on the county's suburban edges, argue against more

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It's time to stand up or to write

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money partly on the grounds that it would entail higher property taxes – an argument that any property owner has a certain natural sympathy for.

More quietly, however, opponents also argue that the county should refuse to give the schools additional funds beyond Jones' recommendation until the school board approves a pupil assignment plan.

In a similar move last year, Jim Puckett, then a school board member and now a county commissioner representing the northern end of the county, abstained from a vote to approve the system's 2000 budget request because he said that the schools should have a student assignment plan before setting a budget amount.

The issue of pupil assignment continues to be complicated by the fact that the school system is still awaiting a ruling from the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals (see story, page 5) in a lawsuit originally brought by a white suburban parent objecting to CMS pupil assignment policies.

A majority of the school board, however, has directed Smith to create an assignment plan that would offer parents wide latitude in their decision about where to send their children.

Last week a usually reserved Supt. Smith waxed passionate at the meetings he and board members called.

He described the impact of a potential county failure to fund a number of initiatives. Those programs, he said, are key to improving CMS operations. They also keep a commitment to equity that has been voiced frequently not

How to contact county commissioners

At-large

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1500 Two First Union Center
Charlotte, NC 28202
704-372-4884
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only by the school board, but also by individuals and groups on all sides of the pupil assignment debates.

Speaking of Jones' rejection of a request that would add 1,000 new seats to the system's acclaimed Bright Beginnings program, Smith said, "It is bizarre to me that we would pay to maintain a new building, but not to maintain a child."

Bright Beginnings is designed to prepare underprivileged children for kindergarten and early elementary success.

Smith added that he is "absolutely committed" to adding

the 1,000 children to the program next fall no matter what amount of money the county finally gives CMS.

If county commissioners refuse to provide additional funds beyond those in the proposed budget, and Smith makes good on that commitment, the inevitable result would be reallocating funds from other areas of the budget.

At this point Jones has recommended that commissioners agree to provide funds for:

- A 2 per cent raise for teachers;
- An increase in the schools' contribution to rising health insurance costs;
- The expected 3,000 student enrollment increase; and
- New personnel and main-

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"The Recommended 2001-2002 Budget: An in-depth look at what the budget means" reviews school budget needs. Download at:
<http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/inside/news/budget01/propbudget.pdf>

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tainance costs for five new schools opening this fall, as well as athletic programs at the two new high schools.

The school system had asked for a 4 per cent increase in teacher pay to cover employees' share of the increase in health insurance costs.

According to Smith, if the county provides only the 2 per cent raise, "a significant number of teachers will actually take home less money" because of the increased insurance costs.

Another Smith initiative that the county's proposed budget fails to fund is the replacement of a variety of existing reading materials with three new systemwide reading curricula.

The elementary adoption is called Open Court and is a phonics-based teaching method. Research indicates it is highly successful at increasing literacy levels. (Related story, page 4.)

The change in reading curriculum will require a series of summer training workshops for teachers. And Smith said last week that the system has already signed a purchase order for the Open Court materials and has begun receiving delivery.

Among other initiatives that Jones' proposed budget declines to fund:

- A \$375,600 expansion of Smith's A+ Program, which "aims to increase academic performance while reducing the gap between minority and majority students";

- Faculty Equity Initiatives costing about \$1.7 million. Included are \$2,500 supplements for teachers at high-poverty schools. The supplements would offset the bonuses tied to student achievement that these teachers may not see at high-poverty schools, but likely would receive elsewhere;

- A \$1.16 million expenditure to

Quote Unquote

"We've treated our newcomers better than we've treated our natives."

— School board member Wilhelmenia Rembert on the recent history of funding

"That would take us back to 'vestiges of segregation' in a heartbeat."

— Supt. Eric Smith on refusing to fund equity initiatives

complete a multiyear effort to replace the schools' business computers. The schools are still using a mainframe scrapped by Harris Teeter in 1988. The system won't let CMS departments such as finance, purchasing, and personnel share records;

- A \$2.7 million piece of a preventive maintenance program recommended by the school system's Bond Oversight Committee, whose membership is composed largely of business leaders;

- A series of initiatives totaling \$4.2 million and designed to ensure systemwide equity of

resources and such co-curricular programs as Odyssey of the Mind, chess clubs and debate teams.

Smith says these programs can "make the difference between getting into Chapel Hill or not"; and

- A nearly \$1 million expenditure to initiate a new teacher induction program highly successful at cutting new teacher turnover in other school systems.

CMS annually loses about 20% of its new teachers each year. Children are the big losers from that turnover, but the turnover also increases the schools' recruiting costs.

Sound off! for quality education

Your words in support of a quality, equitable, integrated education can help make the case for community support of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. Pick up your pen! Or get your mouse in motion! Here's information on how to submit your letters to area media.

The Charlotte Post: By e-mail: thepost@clt.mindspring.com; by fax: 704-342-2160; by mail: Editor, The Charlotte Post, 1531 Camden Road, Charlotte, NC 28203-4783.

The Charlotte Observer: By e-mail: opinion@charlotteobserver.com; by fax: 704-358-5022; by mail: The Observer Forum, The Charlotte Observer, P.O. Box 30308, Charlotte, NC 28230-0308.

The Charlotte World: By e-mail: warren.smith@thecharlotteworld.com; by fax: 704-503-6691; by mail: 8701 Mallard Creek Road, Charlotte, NC 28262-9705.

The Leader: By e-mail: editor@leadernews.com; by fax: 704-347-0358; by mail: 800 E. Trade St., Charlotte, NC 28202-3014

Creative Loafing: By e-mail: charlotte@creativeloafing.com; by fax: 704-522-8088; by mail: P.O. Box 241988 Charlotte, NC 28224-1988.

La Noticia: 6101 Idlewild Road Suite 328, Charlotte, NC 28212.

Educate!: By e-mail: SwannFello@aol.com; by fax: 704-342-4550; by mail: 1510 E. 7th St. Charlotte, NC 28204-2410.

The Highland, Thomasboro stories: Resources bring student success

CMS officials last week held up Highland and Thomasboro elementary schools as examples of what county funding of their budget request could accomplish on a systemwide basis.

Highland, located in north Charlotte, serves a low-income student body that's 100% eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch.

Last spring, Highland's ABC scores showed 62.5% of students on grade level. As CMS will formally announce later this week, this year 87% of Highland stu-

dents scored threes or fours on the state's ABC reading tests.

(Because the state apparently set passing scores on the ABC math test too low, school officials are largely discounting math scores in all schools until the state refigures the scores.)

At Thomasboro Elementary, for several years designated by the state as "low performing" and where over 80% of students qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch, ABC reading scores increased approximately 20 percentage points as about 60% of students scored passing grades.

Veteran schools official Mildred Wright came out of retirement to turn Thomasboro around as principal. Wright recently spoke to the school board in support of the system's new Open Court reading series, which has been in use at her school this past year. She attributed her school's success in raising reading scores in large part to the new program.

Deputy Supt. James Pughsley noted last week that while schools designated as "low performing" ordinarily experience a 33% turnover in staff, next year at Thomasboro no staff vacancies are anticipated.

In addition to the leadership of Thomasboro's principal, Pughsley also attributed the school's turnaround to lower teacher-student ratios of one to 16 in primary grades and one to 19 in upper grades.

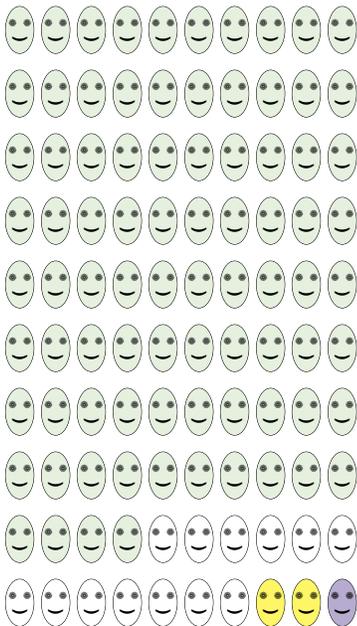
He pointed also to the fact that the school received a 30% increase in instructional supplies over the previous year.

The initiatives at Highland and Thomasboro are not unique. They represent some of the equity initiatives planned or under way at all high-poverty and low-performing schools that are helping all students achieve their potential.

Where the kids are

Here's where our children went to school in 1999-2000, as reported by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation.

-  Public schools
-  Private schools
-  Home schooling
-  Charter schools



Meetings this week offer opportunities to speak out

County commissioners have scheduled two events this week to hear from the public about County Manager Harry Jones' budget proposal. And they have more meetings after that until June 19, when they are scheduled to adopt the Fiscal Year 2002 budget. The schedule:

TOWN MEETING
Tuesday, May 29, 7 p.m.
Christ Covenant Church
800 Fullwood Lane, Matthews

County officials said Friday the town meeting would include a budget presentation by County Manager Harry Jones, then time for discussion. People wanting to speak during the session will be able to sign up at the beginning of the session.

PUBLIC HEARING
Thursday, May 31, 6 p.m.
Government Center
600 E. 4th St., Charlotte

Commissioners have stated that if the room is not full of protesting adults and children, they will assume that the slashed school budget is just fine with their constituents. So be a presence! Take a sign! Be counted! And some of you should show up late: As people there to support other parts of the budget leave, be ready to take a seat and remain a presence at this hearing as long as it lasts. To sign up to speak during the hearing, call 704-336-2559.

BUDGET WORKSHOPS
JUNE 6, 7, 13, 14
Government Center
600 E. 4th St., Charlotte

Call 704-336-2559 for details of commissioners' public meetings on setting the budget.

Letters

Consider enrolling in Leadership North Carolina

Leadership North Carolina is a great program to understand the workings of the state. 40 to 50 participants meet on a monthly basis across 6 months to discuss in great detail education, the economy, the environment, health and human services and government. Each meeting is two days and brings in some of the best speakers from across the state. [Tuition is \$2,500; partial scholarships are available.]

The 2001-2002 schedule:

Orientation: Nov. 8-9, Boone.

Education: Dec. 6-7, Winston-Salem.

Economy: Feb. 7-8, Wilmington.

Government: March 7-8,

Raleigh.

Health/Human Services: April 4-5, Charlotte.

Environment: May 9-10,

Asheville.

Graduation dinner: June 14, Greensboro.

Applications are due June 1, although there may be an extension.

I went through the program about four years ago, and have served on the board ever since. It is a great program, and I would highly recommend it.

Waiting on the judges

Lawyers, school administrators and many residents are waiting on Richmond these days. A ruling from the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals in the Swann vs. Mecklenburg case could be released any day.

The ruling, when it comes, will have an impact on Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' plans for student assignment. The retooled choice plan, most recently promised by early June, could well be affected by the holdings of the court in this long-running challenge to how CMS has handled desegregation issues.

When courts rule in such

cases, the first people to know generally are the lawyers involved in the case. That stirs the news media, and quickly the word gets out.

With the 4th Circuit, new rulings are posted each day at about 3:30 p.m. on the court's Web site.

So if you want to read the decision for yourself, here's how:

Go to the Web site illustrated above. It is at:

<http://pacer.ca4.uscourts.gov/opinions/opinion.php>

The screen will allow you to enter a case number in the box to the left of the arrow in the illustration above. The Swann case number is 99-2389. Insert that number in the box, then click on Submit Query.

That will deliver to you a list of opinions in the case. As of this weekend, two items are listed, preliminary rulings from May 2000 and January 2001. When a ruling in the case is released, it should be the third item listed.

If you would like more information, you are welcome to either look at our Web site, www.LeadershipNorthCarolina.org, or contact me or our executive director, Patrick Farlow, at 336-

279-6599 or
leadernc@bellsouth.net.

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The name: The Swann Fellowship was named for Darius and Vera Swann, who on behalf of their son James became the lead plaintiffs in Swann vs. Mecklenburg in the 1960s. Darius Swann was the first African American Presbyterian missionary ever assigned outside of Africa. His experiences in India led him to appreciate the value of an integrated society for human development.

The vision: As people of faith, our vision is that all children in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System will have excellent educational

opportunities which are both equitable and integrated.

The background: Formed in 1997 out of several Charlotte religious congregations, the Fellowship focuses on being a witness to the value of diversity, and educating the public on public school issues as they relate to this and allied subjects. The Swann Fellowship is a non-profit organization exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code 56-2106776. Financial information about this organization and a copy of its license are available from the State Solicitation Licensing Branch at 1-888-830-4989. The license is not an endorsement by the state.

Annual survey stumbles upon a racial divide

Amid the sameness of the year-to-year numbers, some quirky results show up in this year's Annual Assessment by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation.

Voters say they don't want their school system isolating low-income or minority children in a few schools. Yet, overall, they don't support the busing that would prevent that from happening.

What do they want – racially and economically integrated neighborhoods? Alas, the Ed Foundation didn't ask.

For now, voters are left to ponder the split, illustrated on page 1, between whites and blacks on the busing issue.

"It's a racial issue," says Luke Largess, a lawyer representing black parents in the suit awaiting a ruling in Richmond (see story, page 5).

Education Foundation President Tom Bradbury seems to agree. In the report on the poll findings, Bradbury wrote:

"The racial divide on busing is striking, and will continue to serve as a huge challenge for this community."

In the end, however, Bradbury sees the glass as two-thirds full.

"The strong support of both whites and African Americans for ensuring that low-income and minority students are not concentrated in a few schools represents common ground for voters.

"While the means to achieve these ends produces disagreements among some, the shared commitment of about 65% of our community on this issue is a strength on which creativity and flexibility can build."

A school board election is coming up in November, but the survey indicates that few voters are yet paying attention.

About three-quarters of respondents didn't know what seats would be on the ballot.

Highlights from the CMEF survey

82% Say improving teacher pay is highly important to them.

78% Say "ensuring equity" in school facilities is highly important to them.

65% Say they do not have children in school.

65% To some extent support ensuring that low-income and minority children are not concentrated in a few schools.

57% Are willing to see an increase in property taxes to finance the schools' budget needs.

52% Rate "improving public schools" as the most important of five issues facing the community.

50% Support teachers, a decline from last year. The superintendent's rating is 40%, the school board's is 18% and only 12% had high confidence in county commissioners. All confidence measurements are down, likely over assignment issues.

50% Whites by 44%, blacks by 68%, *strongly* support ensuring that low-income and minority children are not concentrated in a few schools.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation has conducted the Community Assessment survey since 1995. It surveyed 1,210 registered voters between March 2 and March 21 by telephone, with the sample balanced by school board district, race, sex and age. The margin of error is plus or minus 2.8 percentage points.

"Only 3% provided the correct response: district school board representatives are up for re-election," according to the report.

"Some might interpret this finding as predictable and far from alarming, given that the election is over five months away.

"Others might view this as a serious sign of ignorance and a bit ironic, given that the same survey identified public education as the single most important local issue.

"Either way, the months between now and the election provide an excellent opportunity to raise public awareness about the election and the candidates."

The Annual Assessment is a treasure trove of data on public views of what the majority of voters believe to be the community's most important issue. This report

cannot possibly do it justice. Educate! will continue to use material from the assessment in future issues.

Inner change

Mecklenburg Ministries offers to facilitate sessions at churches or other community groups exploring "issues of race, power and prejudice." Weeknight programs run three hours once a week for four weeks. Weekend workshops begin Friday evening and continue Saturday. For more information, contact Shantel Ingram, program director, at 704-347-2404 or shantel.ingram@meckmin.org

Briefs

Testing bias: In a study of Michigan's testing program, some questions gave blacks more trouble than whites, the Detroit Free Press reported. One of the questions identified by consultant Ernest Bauer was this: "What formed the basins occupied by the Great Lakes?" The answer is glaciers, and Bauer told the Free Press he could find no reason for a racial difference in the test results on that question. But an education professor blamed the limited experiences of children in poverty -- that few of the urban poor had been to upper Michigan and personally seen the effects of glaciers.

www.freepress.com

Dolley's husband: The test czars in Massachusetts were dealing with whether to drop one question from computation of the state's spring test results. Seems the question referred to Dolley Madison as the "wife of President John Madison." The Boston Globe reported that middle school student Nicholas Holsing spotted the erroneous reference to James Madison, an error missed by test-maker Harcourt Educational Measurement and state educators.

www.bostonglobe.com

Will Brits bend? A math test that's been part of British teacher's licensing requirement for some time has come up with a new number: While 5% used to fail it, 25% failed this year. There are calls to remove the test, or offer exemptions for teachers who have proved they can teach the material. But the BBC reported that government officials are standing firm that teachers "need these skills.... to do the job the nation asks of them." Two sample questions from the "numeracy" test: "In a test a pupil scored 18 marks out of 24. What was the

pupil's score as a percentage?" "As part of a 2 1/2 hour literature workshop, pupils watched a film lasting 1 hour and 42 minutes. How many minutes of the workshop remained?"

www.bbc.co.uk

Will Tar Heels bend? School districts having trouble recruiting new teachers are trying to get N.C. officials to give new teachers two years instead of one to pass the Praxis II test, an exam in each teacher's major field. The News and Observer reported that 3,400 teachers are in classrooms statewide under temporary licensing, and local school officials don't want to lose them if they don't pass the test in their first year. Tom Blanford, head of the N.C. Professional Teaching Standards Commission, said he doesn't want ill-prepared teachers to be in classrooms for two years. "There's a definite, research-based correlation between level of content knowledge and student achievement. It seems to me to be going

in the wrong direction."

www.newsobserver.com

Remediation: Arizona's testing program faces a civil rights challenge because schools have no remediation efforts in place and last fall's results found 80% of minority 10th-graders failing. A similar test in Texas, with similar minority results, earlier passed federal muster because the state had remediation programs in place that were effective in raising test scores.

www.arizonarepublic.com

Cyber what? Pennsylvania school districts are fighting the loss of money going to "cyber schools" that, set up as charter schools, enroll students statewide in online coursework. The child's local school district is supposed to transfer per-pupil funds to the cyber school, but some are refusing to pay.

www.eschoolnews.org

Graduation Calendar

Tuesday, June 5

Metro School	Metro School Multipurpose Room	7:00 p.m.
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Wednesday, June 6

Midwood	Dana Auditorium, Queens College	7:00 p.m.
Northwest	Ovens Auditorium	7:00 p.m.

Thursday, June 7

West Charlotte	Charlotte Coliseum	8:30 a.m.
South Meck	Charlotte Coliseum	11:30 a.m.
Olympic	Charlotte Coliseum	2:30 p.m.
Harding	Charlotte Coliseum	5:30 p.m.
West Meck	Charlotte Coliseum	8:30 p.m.
Butler	Cricket Arena	8:30 a.m.
Providence	Cricket Arena	11:30 a.m.
Garinger	Cricket Arena	2:30 p.m.
Vance	Cricket Arena	5:30 p.m.

Friday, June 8, 2001

Independence	Cricket Arena	8:30 a.m.
Myers Park	Cricket Arena	11:30 a.m.
East Meck	Cricket Arena	2:30 p.m.

Send your friends an invitation to an *Educate!* ion

If you have friends or associates you think would get something out of reading this free e-mail newsletter on education, please send us their e-mail addresses and we'll be sure they get a copy. Message SwannFello@aol.com