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Educate! a newsletter of

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IN THIS ISSUE:

- New assignments come fall? Or maybe not!
- A perspective on why schools need work
- A note about lead time in constructing school projects
- Accountability standards information available

NEW ASSIGNMENTS COME FALL? OR MAYBE NOT!

Charlotte-Mecklenburg's student assignment issue is before the courts. A "stay" of Judge Potter's 1999 ruling effectively blocks any substantial change in student assignments, either in the direction of more neighborhood assignments or more assignments to promote racial or other diversity. The case may go in any number of directions in the future. The stay could be lifted and the system ordered to reassign students without regard to race. The stay could be kept in place while one side or another appeals the case to the Supreme Court. There are other possibilities.

The superintendent and area media continue to refer, as The Observer did once again this morning, to how "Next fall, the school district moves to a new system that allows families to choose their schools instead of being assigned to one."

Citizens on both sides of this issue: Be patient. Advise your friends to be patient. The first round of this case, in the late '60s and early '70s, consumed six years; this round may not be completed any more quickly. When the appeals court rules, the school board may not be free to act, either toward neighborhood schools or toward further diversity.

And the last thing anyone wants is to start moving kids and teachers and mobile classrooms down one road, only to turn them around or in another direction a year later.

A PERSPECTIVE ON WHY SCHOOLS NEED WORK

Charlotte-Mecklenburg's wealth is a relatively new phenomenon. One of the key motivations

Continued on Page 2

behind the 1959 city-county consolidation, for example, was the inability of the county at that time to afford the school facility replacements even then required. Today, schools both in older parts of the city and out in the county need work.

Travel the county's few remaining byways and you'll see reminders of our poor rural past -- jammed up against circular-staircase subdivisions.

The 1998 school facilities master plan document has some useful comments on the ways a growing but not-rich community coped:

"...the deferred, or breakdown, maintenance approach and the practice of requesting only the funding thought to be available rather than the funding required to meet actual needs have contributed to the deplorable conditions that exist in some facilities today.

"Another significant contributor to these conditions has been the competition between bonds for school renovations and bonds for construction of new schools. In the past, it was a given that construction of new schools had priority. Also, it appears that in the CMS annual budget, allocations for necessary maintenance frequently have suffered because of the demands of competing interests."

A NOTE ABOUT LEAD TIME IN MEETING SCHOOL NEEDS

Some people talk about how the schools couldn't need more bond money -- because bonds were so recently passed in this community. The material above suggests why our community has fallen so far behind in keeping schools up-to-date.

As citizen committees have assured us, all the bond money previously approved by the voters has either been spent, or is committed to projects now under way or still being planned. Why isn't bond money spent immediately, you ask?

North Carolina's rules that control the construction of public buildings are there for the best reason: to protect the public's money from scandal and abuse. Following those rules -- designing, preparing bids, taking bids, etc. -- takes much time. A recent example:

At its June 13, 2000 meeting, the school board had before it the contract approvals for much-needed work at Newell Elementary near UNCC. The \$4 million in contracts will build a new media center; a multipurpose room; and renovations to the kitchen and cafeteria. Voters were convinced these were pressing needs and approved the sale of bonds -- in November 1997, nearly three years ago.

This fall's bond issue will no more be immediately turned into new classrooms than the 1997 bond monies were. Today's needs will be met tomorrow.

It's a slow process, and because it's slow is one reason to support approval of bonds to meet the school needs we now know about. There will be a long enough wait for relief as it is. And remember who is waiting for relief: It is our children, and their teachers, who today, and tomorrow and for two or three more years, will be using the buildings that we know are outmoded today.

And for those of you appalled by the slowness of this process, message swannfello@aol.com and we'll set you all up to correspond amongst yourselves about pay-as-you go financing, which has quick results but involves, oh, a doubling of your annual tax bill!

N.C. ACCOUNTABILITY STANDARDS

The website run by the N.C. Department of Public Instruction has posted on its Student Accountability Standards page some brochures that describe what those standards are and what they mean for third-graders, fifth-graders and eighth-graders. To view these items or download them as PDF files go to:

http://www.ncpublicschools.org/student_promotion/

 Send us e-mail addresses for people you think would like to receive this publication. Your comments and contributions are also welcome.

THE SWANN FELLOWSHIP

Lucy Bush, president

B.B. DeLaine, vice president

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 nonprofit organization exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code 56-2106776. The Fellowship does not solicit funds via e-mail but, for the record, a copy of the license to solicit charitable contributions as a charitable organization or sponsor, and financial information, may be obtained from the N.C. Department of Human Resources, Solicitation Licensing Branch, by calling 919-733-4510. Registration does not imply endorsement, approval or recommendation by the state.