



Patience, please!

Schools case moving, but slowly; community deserves better than hasty words and untimely action

By LUCY BUSH

The week brought another twist in the long saga of school desegregation in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Emphasis on *long*.

On Wednesday, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals said it would review the Nov. 30 ruling in the desegregation case. The review postpones for months what many parents want most of all: closure, an end of uncertainty about where their children will go to school.

The community needs strong voices to be speaking out right now. In conversations at kitchen tables, at community meetings, in the media and in corporate boardrooms, voices should be raised favoring patience, and in support of school leaders as they move forward in the midst of a very fluid legal environment.

Charlotte Chamber President Carroll Gray should step back from his comments, quoted by the Charlotte Observer Dec. 24, that the city cannot stand being under a court order. Last time we looked over this city that's been under court orders since the 1960s, it was thriving.

Corporate leaders, who for decades have led the fight for a community that works together, should be nurturing their investment, not standing by.

And pastors know that they have a role to play as well.

Learning mustn't depend on the stars

It often, if not always, comes down to the principal.

If the principal is a star – or a saint – a school thrives. If not, the school may fail its students for any number of reasons.

Last week, principal Ken Simmons was reassigned from Wilson Middle. Simmons is a strong personality. Many had hoped he could turn Wilson around.

Four schools are in the “turn-around” stage right now. Reports to the school board Jan. 9 suggest that the three others appear to be thriving.

The other three appear to be improving because they have stars or saints leading them.

Are there enough stars around to improve all the schools that are failing to meet their students' needs? Eric Smith thinks he has

one more: Kathy Smith (no relation to the superintendent), who has done well at Albemarle Road Elementary.

Whatever Simmons' strengths and weaknesses, the situation now in the spotlight may only be the tip of the iceberg. Neighborhood pupil assignment plans will create more schools like Wilson: It will create a larger number of schools where most of the students are poor, where it will be harder to attract teachers. More places where the principal must not only be an educator, but a star – or a saint.

Students did so poorly on tests last spring at four schools that they were assigned assistance teams and a lot of extra help. Three schools (West Charlotte

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Patience, please: Schools case slow

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Many parents are tired of not having all points of the legal situation resolved. Many vocal ones want their children go to school close to home.

If history is any teacher, it will be years before all legal points are resolved.

A few points are worth remembering:

□ Parents in the 1970s, white and black, wanted their children close to home. The main parent group fighting court orders to desegregate, the Concerned Parents Association, circulated fliers headlined, "The CPA still stands for neighborhood schools." Even Vera and Darius Swann, who filed the schools lawsuit that continues today, just wanted their son to go to the nearest school (from which he was barred because of the community's segregation). The courts said then that there were issues at stake larger than the length of a bus ride. There still are.

□ School board efforts to avoid full desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s led to annual tinkering with the assignment plan. Each time, the court refused to accept the delaying tactics, and the board rewrote the plan. As a result, many children were re-assigned four times in four years. The current school board is trying to avoid annual upheaval and that's something the community should applaud.

Board chairperson Arthur Griffin recently summarized his "fundamental principles" in this interim period as "(1) Be Legal, (2) Do No Harm, and (3) Be Interim – until a plan can be developed for the entire district."

□ Ending segregation in schools took the form of ending dual systems operated by counties. The

When TV needs a citizen opinion...

By ROSALYN ALLISON-JACOBS

Thursday night, I happened to be watching NBC 6 at 5:00 when they did a story on parents' reactions to the school board's most recent round with student reassignment. So struck was I by the suburban, homogeneous, homemaker profile of those that they chose to interview that I called the station to speak with the reporter who did the story.

She was very receptive and open to my feedback, but stated that the station is hamstrung by CMS's unwillingness to let them go onto school campuses to get a cross-section of parents. She asked if I was willing to be contacted in the future. I said yes, but that I was sure that many Swann parents would be willing as well.

Let's use Swann to collect for NBC 6 and other media a list of informed, balanced parents who might be willing to be contacted for future news stories. If you'd like to be on the list, message the Fellowship at SwannFello@aol.com

courts set as a goal the elimination "root and branch" of all vestiges of the separate systems, largely on the grounds that dual systems were unequal and deprived minorities equal access to the community's educational resources.

The arguments in the Charlotte case focus in part on whether or not all the vestiges are gone. When the courts decide they are gone, the schools will be "unitary."

At that point the schools will lose key tools that have allowed them to keep track of racial balance; they will become "color-blind" by public policy. Parents fighting for choice say that's how the schools should be run.

But can government officials answerable to the public deliver equal access by all children to the community's best teachers, schools, supplies, etc.?

Evidence from this system says that poor children are not getting equal access (see "Education shouldn't depend on stars," Page 1).

The courts may rule the system "unitary" and vestiges of racial segregation gone. But are we meeting all children's need for an education? Focus on the children, for they didn't pick their parents:

If some parents are not providing as much training and discipline at home as your neighbor's parents are, that doesn't make it less incumbent on the community to help the children out.

As the courts slowly decide the legal questions, the community has time to ask the larger questions about how to serve all children.

That is a conversation we need everyone involved in.

Pastors from their pulpits. Corporate leaders from their boardrooms. All of us from wherever we stand.

Expect some disagreement. Anticipate anger. And be prepared for suspicion, for many, many, many promises made to the undereducated have been broken.

Last week in Educate! county commissioners chairman Parks Helms wrote, "It is time for all of Charlotte and Mecklenburg to come together on the issue of education. We need a common goal – agreed upon by every segment of the community – governing boards, civic and religious groups, and individual citizens.... We must make our own decision – based upon what's best for this entire community."

Let the conversation begin!

Briefs

Snow Alert: The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation's annual meeting, postponed by snow last year, is scheduled for Feb. 13, Convention Center, breakfast buffet at 7 a.m., meeting 7:30-9. \$15. Ask about tickets by Jan. 31. 704-335-0100 or cmef@cmef.org. UNC President Molly Broad speaks.

Master Teachers: Arizona's education chief says top teachers should be labeled "master teachers" and paid up to \$100,000. "We know how to tell whether a teacher is a great teacher... We should quit pretending like we can't pay great teachers for being great teachers," the Arizona Republic quoted her as saying.

MeckMin Director: Rev. Andy Baxter, recently at Davidson United Methodist, is the new executive director of Mecklenburg Ministries. The Charlotte native, who graduated from West Charlotte High in 1988, sends the Fellowship greetings:

"I commend your efforts to see that Charlotte-Mecklenburg provides all of our children the kind of education it offered me – an education marked by academic rigor that matched, if not exceeded, that of our private schools and a chance to mature in an economically and racially integrated milieu that no other civic institution, including my churches, could or would offer. Thanks for all that you are doing."

Baxter is at 347-2404 and meckmin@bellsouth.net

School Size: In Utah, some legislators want to keep elementary schools from growing larger than 600 students. They want middle schools with no more than 800 students, high schools with 1,000. Educators have responded with a warning of high costs – but maybe some agreement that

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.

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

smaller schools might have educational advantages. The Salt Lake Tribune reported that the Utah Education Policy Center found no pattern of higher achievement at smaller middle and high schools. But a report cited evidence that smaller elementaries might benefit kids.

Lawyer to Speak: Luke Largess, lawyer with the Ferguson Stein law firm involved in the schools case now before the Appeals Court, will speak to Sarah Stevenson's Tuesday Morning Breakfast group this Tuesday, Jan. 23, at 8 a.m. at McDonald's Cafeteria, 2810 Beatties Ford Road.

Learning by Talking: At an Alexandria, Va. recreation center last week, teens talked about race, their differences, and why they tend not to talk to one another at school. The Washington Post said the group included blacks, whites, Latinos, Asians and African students, some of whom don't yet speak English. The kids talked about being close in ele-

mentary school, then separating in middle school. Some thought change unlikely. But talking may have planted seeds: An El Salvadoran, speaking in Spanish, pleaded for understanding, saying his family had fled persecution. "We just want a new chance," he said. When some blacks who did not know Spanish began to laugh, their friend Jahaira Berkely quieted them. "I may look black, but I am also Hispanic," she said. "My Mom is from Panama." With that, the girls quieted down. The complexity of Jahaira's news appeared to surprise them. All they could do was listen," the Post reported.

Education and Civil Rights: President Bush celebrated the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday in Houston. "The dream of equality is empty without excellent schools – schools that stress reading and discipline and character and decency," Bush said.

"That goal will take presidential leadership," Bush said. ". . . It is a goal we will work endlessly to achieve."

Education shouldn't depend on the stars

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High, Wilson Middle and Thomasboro Elementary) got state assistance teams. Olympic High got a local team doing much the same work.

In its report to the board Jan. 9, the staff listed in mind-numbing detail all the initiatives begun at each school to raise scores. They fall into a number of categories: curriculum and teaching; additional staffing; security and discipline; and outreach to parents.

Simmons was credited with closer collaboration with the PTA, and an overall increase in parent participation in the school. At West Charlotte, Delores Lee was credited with getting everyone working together, and improving the sense of safety on campus. At Olympic, Pam Espinosa is using teachers' planning periods for training (28 teachers were new to the school last fall), but the board was told she needs more time. At Thomasboro, Mildred Wright is credited with encouraging experienced CMS teachers to join her, and all classes were cut to 16 students.

There are ill omens in the



Grace Howell/Alexander Middle

recent review of the low-performing schools.

Our community says it wants to educate every child. Educators believe – must believe – that they can succeed with every child. But the evidence is that schools can get overwhelmed if the vast majority of their students are way behind and lacking support at home. That's common sense, but it will be hard to build that common-sense observation into a long-term solution to pupil assignment in this community.

West Charlotte has so many

students below grade level that many classes are at remedial level. That's what must be done to help those students, but a school committing a great deal of teacher time to remediation may struggle to offer a range of upper-level courses that will meet the needs of well-prepared students.

At Wilson, the board was told that high teacher absenteeism and the lack of substitutes has been part of the problem.

While some teachers and substitutes may not have wanted to work for Simmons, the problem is bound to be more complex than that.

If stars and saints are the answer, what happens when the star leaves?

Albemarle Road Elementary may, alas, be about ready to find out!

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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 nonprofit organization exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code 56-2106776. 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.

Young Artists:

Take up your black pens and share with all of us what your eye sees! Send a message to SwannFello@aol.com with your words, your digital photographs and digital artwork. Mail paper submissions to The Swann Fellowship, 1510 E. 7th St., Charlotte, NC 28204-2410.