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Assessing schools

Citizen panel weighs what parents need to know to choose schools; you can help shape the list

By **ARAMINTA S. JOHNSTON**

What do parents want to know about a school before they send their children there?

What does the community need in order to judge system progress toward school equity?

That's the question that members of CMS's Student Assignment Oversight Committee pondered Friday as they met in preparation for a presentation to the school board March 13.

Members of the committee, Mecklenburg County citizens who were appointed by school board members a year ago, came up with a preliminary list of over 20 items that they believe parents should have available to them as they make decisions about their children's schools.

Before its next meeting on

February 26, members of the committee will choose and rank what each of them believes to be the top 10 most important of the 20-plus items.

The items would also become part of an "equity score card" that the school system and the community can use to evaluate whether they're keeping a commitment to move toward increased equity throughout the system.

Committee members agreed that not all parents would want all the information that might be made available, and discussed how to make at least two levels of information available.

They also discussed briefly how to make information that is not always self-explanatory available in ways that help parents interpret that information usefully.

For example, high teacher turnover might reflect real problems at a school or, as with a language immersion program, it might reflect visa difficulties that native-speaking immigrant teachers experience or it might reflect needed "housecleaning" conducted by a new principal.

Committee member Nancy Pierce Shaver suggested that any information be presented in at least three categories: school system input, student population the school is working with and third, outcomes given the system input and population.

In their discussions, committee members have shown a strong inclination to pressure the school system to make more information available to the community about the relative success of various

Teacher turnover

Churn can impair children's education, but issue is complex, and local expert wants to know more

Education Foundation President Tom Bradbury, commenting Friday on the Foundation's recently-released report on Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools, called again for more information to be made publicly available in order to help the community judge its educational performance.

Speaking specifically about data on teacher turnover in CMS, Bradbury pointed out how additional information about turnover would help citizens make better

judgments about the meaning of that turnover.

"Turnover's not always bad," he said, pointing out that it may be the result of a new principal "cleaning house" or of visa difficulties experienced by native-speaker immigrant teachers in a language immersion program, as well as inexperienced teachers dealing with a challenging student population.

Very low turnover rates at a school could also signify an

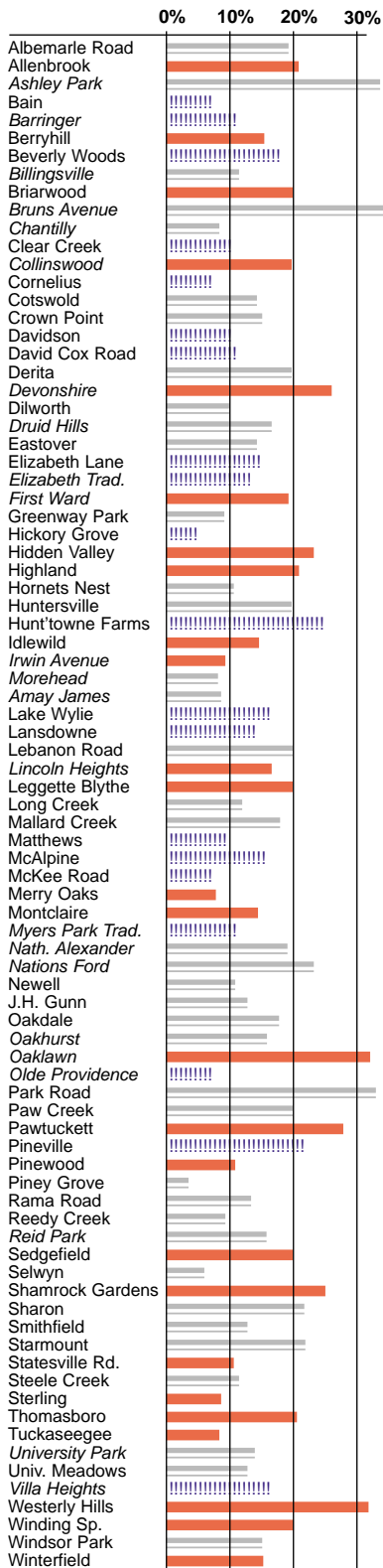
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Elementary Turnover

3-year avg. *Magnets in italic.*
Free- and reduced lunch, '99:

55%-99%
30%-54%
0%-29%



Data from Education Foundation, CMS

Teacher turnover: Factors are multiple

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absence of “new blood” needed to keep a school vital, he noted.

But Bradbury pointed to the data about teacher turnover that he received from CMS, essentially the only available source of information about the system, as another example of how additional information would be helpful.

On teacher turnover, CMS provided the Foundation with a three-year average of turnover at the system’s elementary schools. Bradbury said he thinks the community and those making judgments about school performance need also to know such information as annual teacher turnover at schools.

“A turnover rate of 33 per cent in one year may mean something different from an average 33 per cent turnover rate over three years,” he said.

But he added that the three-year averages still provided substantial evidence of inequities among CMS schools. “Of the advantaged schools in the suburbs, I see none with high turnover.”

Although he pointed out that

there are anomalies in school turnover rates that aren’t readily explained by socio-economic factors, he acknowledged that the numbers show that a “cluster” of factors, such as a low SES student population, low student performance, discipline problems, and school location have a significant effect on teacher turnover.

Many intriguing questions remain to be explored:

- Do inexperienced teachers first employed out on the county’s edge at wealthy schools have a consistently lower turnover rate?
- Has turnover always been high? Is there a baseline of turnover that has been fairly consistent in urban districts?
- Are principals the primary factor in varying rates of turnover?
- Do CMS alumni coming back to teach have a lower turnover rate?
- Do lateral entry employees (those starting to teach after having another career) have a consistently different turnover rate from younger teacher?
- Do children pay a price where there is high teacher turnover? What exactly is it, and how can the system make amends?
- To be perverse, do we save a lot of money by having high turnover? Is the money saved mostly by the state or by local government?

The high costs of high-poverty schools

CMS’s Equity Plus II “framework for addressing the needs” of high-poverty schools sets a goal of a K-3 student-teacher ratio of 16-1 and a grade 4-6 ratio of 19-1. It also includes a teacher bonus tied to achievement of certain goals. The bonus is either \$2,500 or \$1,500.

In an article entitled “Beyond Equity to Adequacy” that accompanied the recent report on Milwaukee schools titled “The Return to Separate and Unequal” (Educate!, Feb. 11), Whitney Allgood and Richard Rothstein, research associates at the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, wrote that costs of programs for at-risk children run about 2.5 times higher than those for the well-prepared children of affluent districts.

“A minimum salary increment of \$10,000 per teacher, over the typical salary, is necessary to recruit teachers of superior quality,” they wrote.

Assessing schools: Panel drawing a list

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programs and how individual schools perform in a variety of areas.

The school system has not had a strong record of making such data publicly available, although Superintendent Eric Smith has shown more willingness in this area than his predecessor John Murphy.

Experts outside the system, such as Education Foundation President Tom Bradbury, formerly an editorial writer on education for The Charlotte Observer, have pressured the system for years to be more forthcoming with information about its operations.

Although part of the system's foot-dragging may well be the result of an aversion to greater public scrutiny of its performance, it is also probably the result of a shortage of the necessary technology and personnel.

In any case, the result has been an institutional culture disinclined to share information freely with the public, especially when that information contains "bad" news. The SAOC's efforts, given current public concern over school performance, may be more successful than similar efforts have been in the past.

The committee's brainstorming session identified a lot of issues,

collected below under general subject categories. The list makes clear that "equity" is not just about things like desks and computers and roofs that don't leak. Equitable opportunity often has to do with well-qualified teachers, or access to courses, even to a school environment not totally dominated by a single category of students in need. The issues:

System resources

Information about area superintendents.
Budget allotment for media center.
Technology.
Amount spent on physical plant in the preceeding year or years.
Information about school leadership, including principal and vice principals.
Teacher experience levels.
Average teacher salary per school.
Number of teachers teaching in and outside their areas of expertise.
Absentee rates of teachers.
Teacher turnover.
Cocurricular offerings, such as chess clubs, Odyssey of the Mind, and similar programs.
Security of school environment.

Student data

Percentage of students taking AG courses.
Percentage of students receiving free- or reduced-price lunch.
Percentage of students in English as a Second Language programs.

Percentage of students coming into a grade already performing at high levels.

Student mobility.
Absentee rates of students.

Parent involvement

Parental involvement and strength of school PTA.
Amount of money school PTAs raised the preceeding year.

Student outcomes

Percentage increase in end-of-grade test scores during the previous year.
For high schools, average SAT scores.
For high schools, breakdowns of AP test scores.
Dropout rate.

Have suggestions?

What do you want to know about a school before you send your children there? What does the community need to know in order to judge whether the commitment to equity is being met at all schools?

Look at the above list. Are there details about those general subjects you'd want to know? Are there items that are not on the list?

Send your suggestions to us at SwannFello@aol.com. We'll pass on to schools staff any information we receive, and may return to this subject in another issue of Educate!

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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.

Letters

Smith hasn't met goals

Dr. Eric Smith, CMS Superintendent, came to Charlotte nearly five years ago, publicly announcing an admirable goal of closing the scandalous academic gap in black-white test scores – generally in the average range of over forty points – to about ten points. Moreover, he also made a professional commitment to promote and/or to sustain CMS's goal of becoming the “premier urban, integrated system in the nation.”



Foluke

Eric Smith has worked hard and commendably, under often difficult circumstances, to perform his job, including the implementation of programs such as AVID and Bright Beginnings. However, I would give him a “marginal” if not “poor” rating in providing genuine education for black students and families and an “unsatisfactory” grade as an educational administrator in relation to ethnic sensitivity and creative development of strategies to address unique unmet needs of “disadvantaged” black students and their families.

Test scores, per se, are not an adequate measure of genuine education; indeed, there is little or no correlation between high test scores and successful living, the latter simply defined as wholistic spirit-mind-body development. For generally, academic testing does not measure those most fundamental criteria for inner enrichment or success in life, most notably spirituality, i.e., personal integrity-honesty-character,

courage, persistence, compassion, communal commitment, etc. But these factors notwithstanding, our public schools, thanks to shallow-minded politicians, are engaged in an absurd, inane testing mania, allegedly to promote greater “accountability” in the system.

Smith has failed, abysmally, to reach his pronounced academic goal. For the present gap in black-white test scores remains essentially unchanged, generally in the average range of forty points, with some narrowing of the gap in reading and mathematics, with science, social studies, SAT scores and other indicators still rather constant.

Significantly, however, other counties in North Carolina have out-performed CMS in this area of educating-testing black students.

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.

Tragically, and far greater than the failure to close the test score gap, Eric Smith has failed to implement the 1993 “multicultural” policy of the School Board, especially in relation to the present Eurocentric curriculum. In essence, Black students, unlike White students, can graduate from CMS almost totally ignorant of their rich ethnic heritage and culture, especially in ancient Africa, the “Cradle of Civilization,” before the common era. And this tragic reality, in great measure, contributes to scholarly documented low self-esteem and related problems among black students, including, perhaps, low academic achievement and high disciplinary or punishment rates.

Gyasi A. Foluke

Briefs

Role Models at School: The News and Observer profiled Kenneth Barnes, a pharmaceutical company technician who took a \$10,000 pay cut to teach math in Durham schools. He's one of the 8% of that system's teachers who are African American males. In Wake, only 2% of the teachers are black men. The paper quoted Dr. Kamau Kambon, a former education professor at St. Augustine's in Raleigh. "Teaching is a female-dominated profession," he said. And the lack of role models for black boys means that 'many of them drop out soon after kindergarten. I don't mean they drop out physically, but they drop out mentally ... psychologically.'" www.newsobserver.com

Role Models at Home: The Fort Worth, Tex., school system has beefed up truancy punishments by having a single local court judge handle all student cases. Increased cooperation with police, letters home and the threat of misdemeanor charges and \$500-per-missed-day fines have reduced absences. The Dallas News found schools attendance clerk Gloria Mitchell aware of the program's limits: "It's the parents responsibility, but many of them are not equipped to enforce it.... Some of these kids are children of children who were pregnant at 15. They don't think there's anything wrong with it because they stopped going here in the eighth grade...." But added schools official Cecelia Speer, "We feel like we're doing something. Even if the growth is small, we have to start somewhere." www.dallasnews.com

Reading to Comprehend: A new Rand Corp. draft report suggests more research to identify education efforts that produce sustained gains in reading ability. "The public discourse about

improving reading achievement has oversimplified the issues by suggesting that once we have all children reading at grade 3, that is it – we're home free," EdWeek quoted Harvard prof Catherine Snow as saying. "But real problems emerge in middle school and later grades, even for children who, it turns out, are doing fine at the end of grade 3." EdWeek says test scores often drop "after 4th grade, when students are required to master increasingly complex subject-based material" and the focus on developing reading skills themselves is de-emphasized.

www.edweek.com

Bury the Bard?: Rumors spread quickly after an advisory board to the British Government suggested eliminating study of Shakespeare from the curriculum to make room for "Internet studies." The BBC found Wellington College English prof Jane Lunn "horrified." "The government is very aware of what employers want but in making this change, key cultural elements of our country would be lost." The government said the rumors were much ado about nothing.

www.bbc.co.uk

Ignore the Test: University of Miami (Fla.) education prof Okhee Lee has classes of low-achievers making huge gains on state tests with nary a memorization exercise or rote drills. The Miami Herald reported that teachers and students following her program use cups and straws and tape to make wind and rain machines. Working in hands-on teams to debate and argue, think for themselves and explore – the same methods used to challenge high-achievers – Lee's students follow a prescribed course of writing, math and graphing exercises that develop all the skills the state tests require, without the boredom of rote exercise. "My phi-

losophy is you don't become a victim of the system," the Herald quoted Lee as saying. Instead of fighting the tests, "you become one of its components."

www.herald.com

Paperless SAT: The College Board has run pilot programs at 13 high schools with teens taking the Scholastic Assessment Test by computer through March 3. All work is done with a mouse, a calculator is on-screen, students can mark the questions they want to come back to, and they can work at their own speed. Testing officials hope to find that the electronic system eliminates marking-the-wrong-line-of-bubbles problems and ends errors with calculating results. They already know that teens love the instant results: Grading is immediate and there is no "pacing in front of the mailbox" for results. Many hurdles must be overcome before automated SATs appear at schools nationwide, among them: security, and the limited number of computers available at some schools.

www.eschoolnews.org

Let 'em Drop Out: Kentucky legislators are again trying to raise the dropout age to 18, the Lexington Herald-Leader reports. One source of opposition: It would cost up to \$40 million a year to add high school capacity to teach teens who now drop out. Kentucky has a 25% dropout rate, similar to North Carolina's. CMS's Long-Range Planning document, as approved by the school board last week, assumed that the dropout rate would not improve.

www.kentuckyconnect.com

'Yes You Can': Claremont education dean David Drew writes in USA Today that Chinese students perform well in science and math because they do more homework, they work in groups – and everyone assumes that they can do the work. Drew draws the parallel to driver's ed in this country: Adults

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Briefs

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and teens assume that every teen will ultimately pass the test and get behind the wheel. "They should take the same attitude toward math and science achievement," Drew writes.

www.usatoday.com

All Kids Are Teachers: The 300-resident town of Jamestown, Colo. fights to keep open its one-teacher school that serves the 18 elementary students in the hamlet north of Boulder. Parent Heidi Kummler told the Denver Post her shy child "has blossomed. He's getting an education through the older kids. And I think the older kids like teaching the younger ones." The Post found that all curriculum "revolves around science. Students study solar energy and gauge the temperature and quality of a local stream throughout the year." And the annual science fair is "a big draw" in town.

www.denverpost.com

Don't Be Duped: An article in TC Record, a publication of Columbia University's Teachers College, warns against the vaunted promises of educational technology plans. It seems everybody's beating up on Texas these days, and the group uses that state's plan as an example:

"Imagine a home where every parent regardless of native language or socioeconomic background can communicate readily with teachers about children's progress, improve parenting skills, and get a degree or job training without leaving home or work.

"Imagine a school where every student regardless of zip code, economic level, age, race or ethnicity, or ability or disability can be immersed in the sights, sounds and languages of other countries; visit museums; research knowledge webs from the holdings of dispersed libraries; and explore the inner workings of cells from

inside the cell or the cold distance of outer space from inside a virtual spacesuit."

The authors' warning: "It is no surprise for the state technology plans to take the form of idealistic vision statements because they are used to rally political support. However, the pattern of privileging innovative over social practice discourse in state technology plans is problematic for a number of reasons.

"It downplays serious inequities in the U.S. education system that will impinge on access and opportunity to learn from technology as a function of racial, social class, geographic, and gender stratification;

"It underestimates the complexity of social change inherent in educational reform by overselling technology as the solution or *deus ex machina* for education;

"It is guilty of technocentrism which both dupes us into believing in technologically-driven progress and eliminates a conversation about the possibilities and constraints of computer hardware generally, and specifically about the variety of software packages available, each with its own constellation of possibilities and problems; and

"It simplifies the challenges of students developing complex understandings of their social and natural worlds and blinds us to the contextual nature of technological innovation."

www.tcrecord.org

Centers of Community: Former S.C. governor and Clinton-era Department of Education chief Dick Riley has joined the board of Cincinnati's KnowledgeWorks Foundation. He told the Cincinnati Enquirer, "I am particularly taken by their strong emphasis on designing schools as centers of community and fully involving citizens in the process."

<http://enquirer.com>

Building Strong Teaching: Baltimore schools Supt. Joe

Hairston has broached the idea of curbing teacher transfers out of schools with lots of low-performing students. An earlier plan to give differential pay was blocked by the teachers' union. Hairston's proposal would allow transfers after three years instead of two, and also limit the number of transfers a principal could hire each year. The hope is that the plan would discourage teachers from leaving schools where they are needed most. Parents and teachers worry that teachers will instead just leave the school system.

www.sunspot.net

Calendar

- 19** Teacher work day.
- 20** Building Oversight Committee, Building Services, 7:30 a.m.
- 20** School Board-Commissioners-City Council lunch, Government Center Room 267, noon. Commissioners meet 6 p.m., televised.
- 24** "Conversation Among Equals," Spirit Square, 9:45 a.m.-4 p.m.
- 26** Student Assignment Oversight Committee, Board Room, 7:30 a.m.
- 27** School board meeting, Board Room, 6 p.m.

March

- 13** School board meeting, Board Room, 6 p.m.

Correction

Educate!'s Feb. 11 edition included a wrong telephone number for school board member John Lassiter. His preferred number is 704-542-1426.