

The \$281 Million Question

Why would we NOT instruct county commissioners to increase the budget to educate all our children?

Spring is budget time for the schools. And the discussion has only something to do with numbers.

It has everything to do with what we as a community value.

Supt. Eric Smith's budget presentation to the school board Tuesday had a breathtaking bottom line: A \$52 million increase in local money. The breathless words first uttered among county commissioners sounded a good deal like "NO!"

But since this budget really does have everything to do with what we as a community value, perhaps it would help commissioners reconsider and say "YES!" if all taxpaying residents took a look at the substance of the superintendent's proposals, either in the details that follow or in the little "penny" box that accompanies this article.

The details point to some interesting issues:

- There are some great ideas here (we'll start with those just for fun) that could really leapfrog this system into a place of excellence.

- Education is frightfully expensive. We all know this, but the scale on which Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools must operate to serve more than 100,000 children is truly amazing.

Some folks react to the expense by sharpening their pencils and micromanaging the budget, trying to find a few dollars here or a few there. They feel better. They save the equivalent of a mouthful of food at one evening's dinner out. The children lose. Avoid the temptation.

- North Carolina's history is one of being a desperately poor state. Its tax base has long called on governments to do with half a loaf. The underfunding of critical services is nowhere more evident than in the

schools, and in the educational opportunities missed by many of today's adults. Examples from today's budget requests include many of the teacher pay initiatives below, and such things as finally setting up a fund to regularly replace copier machines.

Overcoming this tradition of underfunding ALL students has begun in the schools here, but will take years, decades to complete.

Some folks react impatiently to this history. They want the books closed; they want to move on. To do so would save a few dollars out of the public till, but the children would lose. Avoid the temptation.

- About 20% of the budget increase would go to equalize neglected schools in poor neighborhoods. Expensive, small-group and one-on-one help is the proven way to raise children to achieve the best they can be. This is the cost of "breaking the cycle of poverty," and it is one of our community's most important pieces of work.

Some folks hide from this moral imperative to serve "the least of these," often after invoking the nostrum of lazy parents. But it is the children who lose. Avoid the temptation.

- There is talk today that

the community should fund the schools only if the school board "settles" pupil assignment. Such a quid pro quo is impossible. Rulings by the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals and possibly by the U.S. Supreme Court are months or years away. And the courts' rul-

Kids: If you don't like big numbers, go find 52 pennies. We'll show you how Dr. Smith wants to split up the new money he says the schools need. Put your pennies in 4 piles like this:



- 6 pennies would run schools for new students who are growing up here or moving into the county.
- 11 pennies would be spent on repairs, electricity and stuff you don't see that keeps the schools going.
- 15 pennies would pay teachers and other adults, and train them.
- 20 pennies (the biggest pile, right?) should be spent on things you can see - classes for little kids, supplies, more computers, textbooks, library books, reading programs and neat activities like chess and Battle of the Books.

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE BUDGET .. Continued from Page 1
 ings on whether CMS has obeyed earlier rulings to dismantle an illegally segregated system go to the heart of where we go from here on pupil assignment. To act quickly, and blindly, would just run the tragic risk of another cancellation of the equivalent of last December's Showcase of Schools and choice plan.

Some folks seem to want to barrel ahead anyway. They want the books closed; they want to move on. In this case, parents, teachers, children – and the community's national reputation – would all lose. Perhaps we can instead stand together patiently, respectfully and wait on the courts.

The school board votes on this budget April 10. The county commissioners will close the books on the issue for this year sometime in June.

Speaking of closing the books – or in this case opening them – Dr. Smith's budget included money to adopt those new reading textbooks next fall. You'll find the details below.

“Now is not the time for anyone in this can-do community to talk about why we canNOT.”

– Supt. Eric Smith

Classroom supplies \$1,891,700

Educate! has been publishing charts showing results of surveys on instructional materials. Most schools miss the mark. Some of the greatest needs are at high-poverty schools, but magnets are in bad shape and schools on the county's rim have the same needs.

Computers to 8:1 ratio \$1,400,000

The work to wire classrooms for computer use is 62% complete, and the computer-to-student ratio stands at 8:1. This is the first of a four-part plan to cable all classrooms, thereafter maintain the equipment, establish a 5-year replacement cycle for all computers, and at the same time move toward the goal of a 5:1 computer ratio. Costly business – but a move toward mirroring accepted business practice.

Intensive care reading effort \$900,000

This is all about struggling readers. They are at the core of the system's problems getting everyone on grade level. The money would be spent on teacher training and computer-based learning programs specifically aimed at lagging readers.

Equity for co-curricular programs \$500,000


Math Olympiad, chess, Battle of the Books, debate and Science Olympiad: These educational programs are not at all schools; all children do not now have equal access. The money includes site fees, supplies, travel expenses, stipends for coaches and the costs of covering their classes during trips.

Upgrading library holdings \$450,000

Media centers need to update their books. The February survey found only 6 schools that met standards. This is a “first phase” of solving the problem of decades of neglect. Expect more later.

A+ program for minority achievement \$375,600

A+ is aimed directly at closing the test-score gap between minority and majority students. The money goes to teacher training, lesson plans and testing. This year's pilot program for 3,000 students will be expanded to 25 more schools.


 ***Neat or notable***

First-year teacher mentoring \$984,000

Last year, CMS brought 800 new teachers on board. This money would boost mentoring, training and staff support. “Similar systems used in other districts” have cut turnover to 6%. The Education Foundation says turnover among new teachers is higher than 30% at some schools.

Temporary instructor fund \$300,000

The key to improving classroom work is the teacher. With substitutes hard to find, the schools have successfully piloted a program to dispatch full-time instructors to classrooms that would otherwise turn into study halls or nap centers. What a great idea!


 ***Making up for past mistakes***

Bright Beginnings expansion \$6,293,900

About half the pre-kindergartners eligible for this early education program are now served. This money will bring in another 25% of those eligible. The gains made by program graduates, according to recent reports, are sustained for the first several years, then dissipate. Other initiatives must deal with the dissipation. This fund continues to give these children a boost they need to make the most of elementary school.

Bonuses at high-poverty schools \$200,000

This is the annual bonus to attract – and keep – experienced teachers at high-poverty schools. Smith says it’s working.

 **Signs of the times**

Security for athletic events \$494,300

Games take athletes, popcorn – and security. This money is for additional coverage by refs, police officers, ambulance crews and school law enforcement.

New assignment plans \$200,000


No question that this fund won’t cover the full costs of a Showcase of Schools-type choice plan. But it does indicate preparations for dealing with assignment changes for 2002-03.

Employee background checks \$195,000

After a recent criminal case, the schools added Internet screenings to its long-time pre-employment screenings. This supplement will bring the budget closer to actual costs.

Background checks on volunteers \$45,000

For safety, the schools decided in January to run criminal background checks on volunteers, with the depth of the check in direct proportion to the amount of direct contact volunteers would have with children. This is an estimate of the cost of implementing the program.

 **Costs of growth**

3,094 new students \$3,573,400

Come fall, about 3,100 more children are expected. This item covers 22.5 staff positions to supplement the 184 the state will pay for; supplies; equipment; and other services.

Supplemental staff for new schools \$1,490,500

Five new schools open this fall. Every existing school has on staff more teachers than the state pays for. To give the new schools their share of additional local staff, CMS will finance 10 teachers, 4 office staffers, 2 assistants, 2 athletic directors and 8 law enforcement officers.

English as a Second Language \$444,600

The ESL population is up 27% in a year. The state is sending more teachers. This money would add 8 locally funded positions to maintain workable

teacher-student ratios.

Advance staff for 2002 new schools \$421,400

Seven schools will open in fall 2002. This fund pays to put the core leadership in place early to be sure the school is up and running when kids arrive.

Athletics for 2001 new high schools \$321,000

Opening this fall are Hopedale High near Lake Norman and Waddell High in the southwest. This is the cost of their athletic programs.

 **Doing right by the staff**

Employee 4% pay boost \$6,664,700

This figure represents the cost of giving locally-paid teachers a raise matching the state’s planned 4% increase.

Retirement fund \$4,488,800

The state-mandated rate for set-aside to the employee retirement fund varies annually. The last three years have been 10.83%, 8.83% and 7.13%. This coming year’s estimate is at least 10.83%.

Health insurance \$1,683,900

This is an estimate of next year’s increase in the employer-paid portion of state health insurance premiums. The jump, 25%-30%, is down from last year’s 35% increase.

Pay adjustments \$482,000

Keeping pay in line with market conditions for the nonteaching staff is the goal. Last year’s smaller-than-requested appropriation from the county cut in half phase two of this effort. This is phase three, and a fourth will be needed next year.

Local supplement increase \$169,600

To compete for new recruits, this fund would boost pay by 0.25% for teachers with less than 4 years of experience. The boost would bring starting salaries to \$29,000. Smith’s goal is \$30,000. But he says Charlotte competes for recruits with Atlanta (\$32,398), Houston (\$33,750) and Fairfax, Va. (\$36,483). “It is imperative that we remain competitive with new teacher base salary in order to recruit and retain excellent teachers,” says the budget narrative.

Boost for professional development \$120,000

This money appears to be for putting a number of current training programs online for wider use by staff.



Tending the store

Textbooks \$7,692,000

The state covers some of the textbook costs, but CMS spends more to keep its books up to date. A major piece of this year's budget is the cost of adopting new reading books for all grades (Educate!, March 11).

New, renovated school maintenance \$3,630,300

The schools this year are opening spaces totalling the size of a regional shopping mall – except they are spread out all over the county, further increasing costs. This fund hires custodians, electricians, plumbers; pays for privatized services; buys vehicles and equipment; and, yes, buys the cleaning supplies. Note to experts: Maintenance services are pegged at \$3.64 per square foot.

Preventive maintenance, all schools \$2,765,000

Fixing roofs. Repaving parking lots. Pulling out yellowing Plexiglas. Even removing dead trees. Preventive maintenance has gotten the short end of the stick as the focus has been on building new schools. The bond issues of recent years have taken on the major renovations. This is Phase Two of an effort to institutionalize the regular maintenance of all school facilities.

Higher utility bills \$1,485,000

Your gas bill went up. So did the schools' – along with higher electricity bills as new schools open.

Business operations computers \$1,161,400

The joke used to be that CMS's mainframe computer operations were running on a system discarded decades ago by Harris Teeter. Only it wasn't a joke. Dozens of school board members have asked management questions, only to learn that the schools had no way to answer the questions. This long-term effort to give school leaders modern management tools is painfully slow, but absolutely necessary.

Additional communication \$555,000

The public relations efforts of the schools are improving. This fund boosts support for printing costs, equipment replacement for CMS-TV, in-school communications efforts and outsourced work. The focus is on making better use of existing channels.

Liability insurance \$503,600

The school system is self-insured. Contributions, "preferably annually," cover claims of up to \$1 million per incident.

Leadership training \$500,000

The money is for outside trainers to work with a group of principals and their assistants, literacy specialists, department heads and guidance counselors on leadership and management skills. The first group of certified graduates would train others. The process "will create a career path for school-based leaders."

Copier replacement program \$300,000

Another bad business practice may be about to end. This money would set up a program of regular replacement of copiers and similar equipment, in the same way that other budget items will tackle roofs and preventive maintenance. An example: A one-shot purchase put fax machines in the schools during the Murphy years, but no money was put in for replacement. This money will become part of future operating budgets and lead to regular replacements.

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.mind-spring.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.

Briefs

Smaller not better: Stanford economist Edward Lazear says teachers know that the biggest barrier to student learning is not class size, but disruption. The New York Times reported on Lazear's work, which models results from reducing class size. In laymen's terms, a disruptive student in a smaller class impedes learning of fewer children, so class size arguably somewhat improves education. But Lazear says districts waste their money reducing class sizes for nondisruptive students, and instead should focus available money on disruptive students. www.nytimes.com

Teacher update: A study of teacher hiring in Texas, reported by the Dallas Morning News, included these nuggets:

- 19% of jobs were unfillable in rural districts.
- Statewide, the jobs hardest to fill were bilingual education, 21%; math, 17%; foreign languages, 13%.
- 36% of the math and science teachers hired were not fully certified. Overall, 25 percent weren't certified in their subjects. www.dallasnews.com

High school revamp: Seattle schools are, like many nationwide, examining how to break up large campuses into friendlier units. The motivation is in the numbers. At one school, 500 freshmen enter each fall, but only

300 seniors graduate. Many schools are looking to create 400- to 800-student units. The Seattle Times quoted Rick Lear, director of the University of Washington's Small Schools Project (funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation): "There are kids who are well-served in large, comprehensive high schools. They tend to be middle-class, and they tend to be white. But that comes at the expense of other kids, and that's not equitable." www.seattletimes.nwsourc.com

Recruiting: Cleveland schools are recruiting teachers in India. And for a system that has trouble retaining teachers, the immigrants on special H-1B visas present an opportunity, perhaps to the detriment of the new hires: The Plain Dealer reported that school officials "see the immigration restrictions as a way to guarantee the loyalty of these teachers." www.cleveland.com

More carrots: Denver schools, trying to lure executives into the teaching profession, aren't using money as an incentive. The Denver Post says the new recruits will be paid regular starting-teacher wages of \$30,000, and will owe \$3,500 over two years for training. The incentive appears to be a short route to the classroom: Training will be five weeks during summer school, with college classes later. www.denverpost.com

Porcine: The Center for Disease Control and Prevention had these numbers for USA Today on the number of children over-

weight in 1999: Age 6-11: 13%; Age 12-19: 14%. The CDC says 20% to 25% of all children are either overweight or at risk of becoming so.

www.usatoday.com

Support for standards: The fourth annual poll by Public Agenda showed that the nation's parents think educational standards and public and private schools are now about the same. The Los Angeles Times reported that, in the first survey, 42% said private schools had higher standards, while 22% said public schools did. Public Agenda said the numbers had evened up because of testing programs. www.latimes.com

Calendar

- 20** Bond oversight committee, Building Services, 7:30 a.m.
School board budget work session, 5 p.m.-8 p.m.
- 22** Interfaith service for peace in the schools. First United Presbyterian, 7 p.m.
- 27** School board meeting, Board Room, 6 p.m.

Young Artists:

Share with all of us what you see! Send your words, digital photos and digital artwork to SwannFello@aol.com. Mail goes to The Swann Fellowship, 1510 E. 7th St., Charlotte, NC 28204-2410.

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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.