

Consensus grows for full budget Business leaders signal support for tax hike to fund schools

By **ARAMINTA S. JOHNSTON**

The evidence was strong Friday morning that the Charlotte business community is pushing Mecklenburg County commissioners to raise taxes to fund the community's educational needs.

In a breakfast meeting sponsored by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation, a pri-

vate group funded largely by local corporate money, officers of the Foundation seemed to be giving commissioners present that message.

The strongest version of the message came from Pat Riley, who chairs the foundation's board and is chief operating officer of Allen Tate Company.

Riley told Commission Chair Parks Helms, Vice-Chair Becky Carney, and Commissioner Dumont Clark that the county must find a way to fund Supt. Eric Smith's request for additional funds for Bright Beginnings, the system's acclaimed pre-kindergarten program for four-year-olds at risk for future school failure.

Riley also said that "every penny" of the requested funds for new reading materials "must be funded," and added that for the school system's Equity Plus II schools, which will be heavily populated by students at academic risk, "we have to get the resources there for extra pay for teachers, for mentors for new teachers, and for smaller class sizes."

He even suggested that the county should provide greater financial incentives than requested by the school system for new teacher mentoring and for teacher salaries in Equity Plus II schools.

In response, Helms indicated for the second time in a week that he's willing to vote in favor of an increase in local property taxes to fund public schools.

Referring to CMS as "the largest business enterprise in the county," Helms said, "This is not a tax increase. This is an investment in our future."

Of Mecklenburg County parents who send their children to private school, Helms said, "They're paying \$12,000 a year for private schools. Why do they expect us in the public schools to be able to educate children on \$7,000 a year?"

Carney, who is also chair of the

Last call for tutors

Fifth-graders across the school system are nearing a key test day. All children will be taking end-of-grade tests that really count. Those who don't do well enough will be going to summer school, and taking the test again and again. Those who do not pass this summer will be retained in fifth grade or, perhaps, moved to middle school buildings but kept in fifth grade next fall during remedial instruction.

CMS officials as late as last Tuesday were calling on the public to volunteer to tutor. Even a bit of last-minute encouragement may mean the difference between an esteem-building test experience and a bad test day with lifelong fallout.

To volunteer, call an area school. Here are some suggestions – schools that earlier testing showed to be places where children are struggling. Call the office and ask if you can help.

School	Address	Phone
Thomasboro	538 Bradford Drive	704-343-6000
Shamrock Gardens	3301 Country Club Drive	704-343-6440
Westerly Hills	4420 Denver Ave.	704-343-6021
Hidden Valley	5100 Snow White Lane	704-343-6810
Berryhill	10501 Walkers Ferry Road	704-343-6100
Sedgefield	700 Marsh Road	704-343-5826
Statesville Road	5833 Milhaven Lane	704-343-6815
Tuckaseegee	2028 Little Rock Road	704-343-6055
Park Road	3701 Haven Drive	704-343-5830
Pinewood	815 Seneca Place	704-343-5825
Oakdale	1825 Oakdale Road	704-343-6076
Devonshire	6500 Barrington Drive	704-343-6445

Listing based on performance composite numbers on 2000 ABCs.
Data from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation

Consensus grows on fully-funded budget

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commission's education committee, added, "We didn't raise taxes last year and we probably should have. We're playing catch-up."

Commissioners were facing an election last year when they made budget decisions.

County Manager Harry Jones, also present at the meeting, sounded a cautionary note, however. Speaking of the proposed budget he'll present to commissioners next week, Jones said he has to face the question, "how do I balance the competing demands of this community?"

Jones said he wouldn't talk about the budget numbers until that May 15 presentation, but added, "I'll say up front that we're looking at a tax increase for the coming year."

In addition to their comments about funding, Riley and Helms echoed recent pressure on school board members to act quickly on pupil assignment, despite the fact that federal courts have yet to render a final decision about whether the school system has completely removed the vestiges of its earlier policies of racial segregation.

Helms told school board members present, "I believe that our school system is at risk as long as we have uncertainty" about pupil assignment.

Chamber buys Bright Beginnings

The May edition of Ventures Monthly, the newsletter of the Charlotte Chamber, lists the schools' key budget requests as outlined to the chamber's CMS Partners for School Reform committee in March.

The article says "the team believes there are three items that need to be among the top priorities:

"– Funding for the Bright Beginnings pre-kindergarten program (\$6.3 million).

"– Equitable resources for all schools, a key factor in establishing equity for all children (\$11.9 million).

"– Quality teachers, which includes compensation, recruitment, and retention (\$15.3 million)...."

In the chamber's budget summary, it was noted that an \$11.9 million request for supplies, materials, technology and media resources includes \$7.7 million for new reading textbooks "which PRSR feels is extremely important."

www.charlottechamber.org

Home sales executive Riley began his remarks to the group by saying that suburban developers "have no chance of selling houses until they can tell buyers where their kids are going to school."

"What hurts me the most is our airing of our dirty laundry all around America," Riley said.

School Board Chair Arthur Griffin responded to both men's comments in his remarks.

To Helms he said, "Parks, this community has an ethical and moral responsibility to make sure that every child gets an equal education."

Griffin's comment seemed to be

aimed not only at encouraging Helms to support full funding of the school system's budget request, but also at making the point that funding alone might not create such equal education.

To Riley, Griffin said, "Pat, we need to get to a place where people say, 'Whatever school my kids are assigned to is fine.' We need to make sure that there're only winners, not winners and losers."

Sounding a favorite theme, Griffin added:

"We have to find a creative way of creating a diverse public school system because our democracy depends on it."

Survey finds public still thinks education is the #1 issue

Here, from the Education Foundation's Tom Bradbury, are headlines from the group's annual survey, due out this summer:

– Once again, the most important issue among those surveyed is improving education. Support may in fact be shown to have broadened. The second most important issue continues to be preventing crime. Only 11% said

that not raising taxes is most important.

– When likely voters were asked if they support the county commissioners raising taxes to fund educational needs, 57% indicated that they support such a move and only 21% said they strongly oppose it.

– 82% indicated they strongly support raising teachers' salaries.

– 78% say they support creating equity in the county's schools.

The group initiated its community assessment in 1995. Results have routinely found 50% to 60% of respondents with high confidence in teachers, about 25% with high confidence in the school board, and about 15% highly confident in the commissioners or, before 2000, in "elected officials."

Smith to grads: It's about what you do now

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Supt. Eric Smith told the Queens College class of 2001 that they were mistaken if they thought the commencement they celebrated Saturday was about them.

Smith said he made that mistake when he graduated from Colorado State University in 1972.

"I had a misconception about my graduation," he said. "I thought it was about me, about my success, and my work, and my toil. I was wrong."

Smith said he has learned in the years since that "that graduation was not about me; it was about others."

He told the more than 350 graduates several stories about events in his daily life as superintendent of CMS since 1996 that made his point, including one about arriving for the first day of the system's first Bright Beginnings program.

Smith's 1997 institution of the pre-kindergarten program for four-year-olds in danger of not succeeding in school has brought him recognition from throughout the state and the nation.

On the day the program first opened at Double Oaks Elementary, Smith said he arrived at the school early that morning to help make sure things ran smoothly.

"Even as early as I arrived, the principal and the staff were already there. But there was also

a four-year-old girl there with her father, sitting on the front steps of the school."

"I said good morning to them and then said, 'You know school doesn't open for another hour and a half yet.'"

"The father replied, 'I know that, but she was in my room at 4 o'clock this morning telling me, 'Daddy, Daddy! School starts this morning! We've got to get ready!'"

Smith said, "I know now that

her eyes and her father's eyes were on me when I graduated from college in 1972," adding that the graduates should understand that others would also rely on their efforts in the future.

Smith also told the graduates that they had the choice "whether to play your lives as players or as spectators."

He urged them to choose the former, participating in their future communities.

Let's see education as the way to end the cycle of poverty

The writer is a plaintiff-intervenor in the lawsuit in which Judge Robert Potter in 1999 declared CMS unitary and ordered the schools to stop using race in determining pupil assignment. That ruling is now on appeal.

I have e-mailed you before wondering about how the mission of the Swann Fellowship might ought to change.

My belief is that education is the key to break the cycle of poverty. Once we turn around some attitudes in this community that would focus on the preparation of children for education (as noted in the recent Rockville, Ill. schools ruling in the 7th Circuit

Letters

Court of Appeals), the need for community support of at-risk students, and the availability of jobs for after high school or trade school, these students would realize they have a future in this community.

I think the Swann Fellowship could best muster the support network through the faith community that would make these students successful. I compare it to the support Rev. Barnett has finally gotten from the black ministers in his "Stop the Killing" campaign.

Mike Grant

Educate! a newsletter of The Swann Fellowship

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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.

Briefs

Eight Point Five: The New Orleans school district has mandatory remedial classes for low achievers on Louisiana's school performance test. Booker T. Washington High, for example, has 85 of its 600 students enrolled in the new grade 8.5. Most of the students are in both remedial English and remedial math. At elementaries, there is a similar grade 4.5 for remedial learners. Chief academic officer Ollie Tyler, daughter of poor Louisiana sharecroppers, told Education Week that her children's problems are not entirely driven by poverty. "What bothers her, Tyler says, is how parents set priorities for their time. She talks of mothers who work two or three jobs to earn enough money to buy a fancy car, but then spend hardly any time with their children. 'There's not a lot of direction,' she says. 'There isn't the supervision, and there isn't quality time with adults.'"

www.edweek.com

Arizona equality: Lisa Keegan is Arizona's elected schools superintendent. A person considered for nomination as President Bush's education secretary, Keegan is a rising star in Republican ranks. The Christian Science Monitor reports. Keegan was head of a legislative committee in the early '90s as the state launched its charter school program, which now has 800 schools. She believes in the free market. But she balks at leaving poor children out of that market. "Poor children in America are getting a raw deal, and anyone who says otherwise is lying. The fact that (the quality of public) education in this country has anything to do with wealth is absolutely despicable." Her goal seems to be equal funding that goes with the child. "I want money stuffed into the kid's backpack because I want that kid to

be so important that no school can afford to ignore him."

www.csmonitor.com

Out with the new: Philadelphia's interim superintendent has pulled the plug on a 1995 reform to break the city's 210,000-student district into 22 academic "clusters," which focused on raising parental involvement through more local decision making. Interim Supt. Philip Goldsmith told the Philadelphia Inquirer that "there are too many people doing too many things differently.... Not one student we teach is in a cluster office. Students are taught in classrooms...." The district, which before 1995 had six regions, will set up eight new academic offices. The move is projected to save \$60 million over five years and free up to 200 educators to return to the classroom, addressing a teacher shortage.

www.philly.com

Charter agenda: In the wake of CMS's adoption of a phonics-based reading program beginning in the fall, consider Princeton Charter, a New Jersey school that last year received admission applications from a quarter of that city's public schoolchildren. Princeton Charter, according to the New York Times, epitomizes a trend among parents for a return to basics of education: Not "drill and kill" but "drill and skill." Jeanne Allen at the charter school advocate Center for Education Reform in Washington says, "I don't think most parents start out wanting to start a new school; they just want the school to do what they thought the school was going to do."

www.nytimes.com

Cheaters: A Rutgers study of 4,500 students at 25 high schools nationwide found that 74 percent admitted major cheating (like copying another's work during an exam) and an additional 23 percent reported lesser infractions. Half reported plagiarism from Internet sources. About half said

they thought teachers ignored cheating. A third said cheating was due to laziness. Almost another third blamed pressure to get good grades. The Baltimore Sun said Donald McCabe's study found little gender difference in cheating rates, but said rates were lower at private schools than at public schools.

www.sunspot.net/news

Graduation rates: The U.S. Department of Education says the national high school completion rate for 18- to 24-year-olds is stable, but only because GED programs have grown. But for high schools, things look different, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported. In 1990, about 72% of 1986-87's ninth-graders graduated. By 1999, the number had fallen to 67%, with Georgia seeing nearly half its children fail to graduate. But Georgia Gov. Roy Barnes said solutions may not lie exclusively at high schools: "The fruits of the failures in the early years are dropouts," he said.

www.accessatlanta.com

Calendar

- 8** School board meeting, Board Room, 6 p.m.
- 10** Curriculum committee, Board Room, 9:30 a.m.
- 15** Bond Oversight Committee, 7:30 a.m., Building Services
- 15** Personnel/Policy Committee, 3 p.m., Board conference room.
- 15** 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.