

Budget haze

After absorbing last-minute N.C. cuts, CMS begins tough job of explaining a good budget in an inscrutable format

“We’re caught in a box of reduced revenue projections and the largest growth in Mecklenburg County history,” Supt. Eric Smith told the Education Budget Advisory Committee Wednesday.

As county commissioners contend with lower revenues and election-year jitters over the tax rate, the schools last week began discussion of a budget proposal from Supt. Eric Smith that slices and dices, but still comes in \$9.6 million larger than last year.

And amid explanations of unpopular cuts, Smith made a pitch for his only new program: a ramping up of training for principals.

“We are at a crisis point in teacher turnover and teacher retention. The leading edge of that is how principals do what they do.... We have a crisis of leadership at our schoolhouse level. We don’t have any bench strength right now.” Six or seven high school principals will be eligible to retire this June, he noted. Smith wants \$400,000 to pay for out-



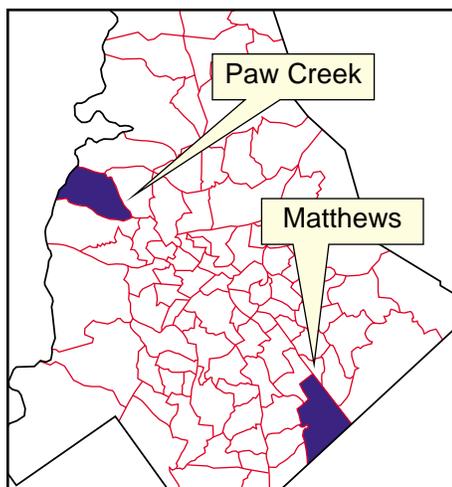
Cameras rolled Tuesday as parents pleaded for school board action to open up space at overcrowded schools. TV crews chased that story out into the Education Center hallways after the parents spoke, and did not return for board discussion of next year’s budget. Coverage of the assignment issues begins on page 3.

sourced principal training.

“This budget will allow us to continue to make academic gains... preserve all the primary core academic areas... maintain security and safety... and continue equity.

“Where there is harm in this budget, all of it is on the back-room side,” Smith said, pointing to maintenance cuts, business management systems delay and cuts to central office staff.

Continued on Page 5



Some choice lottery data for each school, grade-by-grade, was released last week, and is available at www.cms.k12.nc.us. A look at two schools on opposite edges of the county, page 4.

Schools will scramble to add more field tests to an already-busy end-of-year calendar

Short-staffed state education offices got behind in their work; children will pay the price.

At its March 7 meeting, the N.C. Board of Education approved field testing this spring of questions for future state tests – despite the late notice given to local school districts.

Lou Fabrizio, state director of accountability, said Friday that there could be “15 to 20 schools at a shot” involved in the field tests in a district as big as CMS. And with so many tests involved, half or more of all CMS schools may be adding tests to their spring schedule.

Fabrizio said the timing of the testing was left to local districts, but that writing tests would generally be given in the next few weeks, with most others being conducted nearer the end of school.

Susan Agruso, CMS assistant superintendent for instructional accountability, says she is negotiating with the state to minimize the impact, particularly to prevent any school from having to conduct more than two field tests.

Samples of students are being identified. The tests involved include writing at grades 4, 7 and

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Educate!

a community journal on
public education in
Charlotte-Mecklenburg

Welcome to this week's edition. Our aim is to supply information useful to you in your role as student, parent or citizen interested in the welfare of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

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Educate! is published by The Swann Fellowship, 1510 E. 7th St., Charlotte, NC 28204. Voice: 704-342-4330 Fax: 704-342-4550. E-mail: SwannFello@aol.com Lucy Bush, president; B.B. DeLaine, vice president; Steve Johnston, executive director. Published since September 2000; 6-week average circulation through last issue: 2,193.

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. 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.

Queueing up

Random lotteries for CMS parents still in the "wait pool" may be frustrating. There are other ways, though perhaps not better ones:

Last week in Corpus Christi, Texas, hundreds of parents spent a rainy night in line for student transfer forms, the Caller-Times reported. Most people in line sought seats in a single middle school. The applications will be processed on a first-come, first-served basis.

ww1.caller.com

Calendar

March

19 Bond Oversight Committee, 7:30 a.m., Building Services.

Personnel Policy Committee, 3 p.m., Board Conference Room.

Board budget work session, 6 p.m., Board Room.

20 "High Schools That Work," CMS Partners for School Reform, 8 a.m., Charlotte Chamber. Reservations: emcoll@charlottechamber.com.

21 Finance, Capital & Facilities Committee, 4 p.m., Room 414, Education Center.

26 School Board, 6 p.m., Board Room. Includes budget work session and public hearing on 2002-2003 budget.

27 Education Budget Advisory Committee, 7:30 a.m., Government Center, possibly in room 270.

Board budget work session, 5 p.m., Board Room.

April

9 School board scheduled to complete work on budget, 6 p.m., Board Room.

May

30 Commissioners hold public hearing on county budget, which includes money for schools.

June

18 Commissioners to vote on county budget, which includes money for schools.

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Policy tinkered for lottery priorities; new pre-K sites?

Facing protests from parents at a number of schools, the school board Tuesday authorized giving students who wish to return to their current school, and their siblings, a priority for seats that come open by August.

"We've got a lot of parents who are passionately committed to their children's current school," member Molly Griffin said. "Everything we can do to help those parents and those children have stability would certainly be great (but) we do not want to do anything that is educationally unsound."

The administration also committed to look at the proposed location of pre-kindergarten classes to open up seats at schools that could not accommodate all parents.

Pre-K classes have been spread geographically throughout the county. Supt. Eric Smith now plans to move classes initially scheduled for Derita to Amay James, where a departing Montessori magnet program left behind some of the plumbing and other physical assets needed for the 4-year-olds.

Parents at Reedy Creek protested placing nine pre-K classrooms at their school when it was turning away parents who sought assignment there.

Despite the policy change on the wait pool, students moving into Mecklenburg before school will still be guaranteed a seat at their home school. Smith said the board's vote Tuesday would allow time to program the lottery computer to identify the returning students for priority treatment.

"Physically it is impossible to grandfather everybody that is already there and at the same time give a home school guarantee to everybody and expect to

N.C. budget cuts come home

It is too soon to know how much CMS will be able to expand capacity to allow more parents to get their first-choice assignment – or just to avoid holding class in utility rooms. But Supt. Eric Smith said last week that a state-mandated cut in current-year spending has made that search for capacity more difficult:

"This last week we had to return \$2.9 million in county funding," Smith told the school board Tuesday. "That would have gone a long way toward helping [assistant superintendent] Greg Clemmer, who comes to my office almost hourly saying it sure would be helpful to get a few more trailers out there. The \$2.9 million would have helped the purchase of trailers and buses for the coming school year extraordinarily. So we've missed that opportunity."

have both populations fit within the building of a school," Smith said. "You can't do both. You can do one or the other, and, as we ended up with, you can guarantee one and give the other a priority.

"We did put a gate on grade-level capacities or we could be seeing many more juniors being squeezed out because of an over-inflated 9th-grade class at a given school. It could have been seniors, No. 1 priority.... We do have the ability now to re-evaluate the remaining space.... We can probably lift some of those gates on grade-level configuration."

Smith said he would consider three-way switches: Some students assigned to school A want B, while some at B want C, and some at C want A.

"We're not going to, as suggested by some, open up an eBay process for getting to the end game on this," Smith said smiling, "but I would say that the creation of a small amount of capacity can in fact create some movement back and forth.... Properly run, perhaps we can bring some additional solutions to some of these families.

"But I don't want to overstate the case.... With 6,700 students for this coming school year, space is simply at a premium.... I don't want to have classrooms on the stage and in the cafeterias and inappropriate places as we continue to fill up over the summer."

Left unclear was whether the

board would hear appeals from parents who sought a magnet seat for the first time but did not get it. In the past, such appeals have not been heard.

Board chairman Arthur Griffin said the administration would work on protocols for school board members to use when hearing appeals in the coming weeks "so that we are consistent.... We need to resolve that real quickly."

During discussion, board member Larry Gauvreau made this comment:

"What I sense is that we are going into Charlotte's sickness, which is a new round of 'let's make these schools balance everything.' While I don't think this alone would do it as written, even though none of us have the facts as to how many students are in the wait pool or what the capacities are, I just don't want this to be the beginning of a sleigh ride again, and I can see it coming... controlled choice.

"I would like not to see that happen in this school district. It does matter to me and, I think, incoming parents into Mecklenburg County in the future, that they have a guarantee and a good gut feel that they can go to a school close to home in a neighborhood. And if we're going to continue down this slope, which I'm nervous about – I hope I'm proved wrong – we're opening up a can of worms that Mecklenburg County has never seen."

Choice application numbers listed by grade, by school

CMS officials last week posted at www.cms.k12.nc.us, a list of all programs at all schools, with how many first, second and third choices were received during the January lottery for each program.

While an interesting list, it's not very helpful by itself. The list does not include, for example, how many of the first, second and third choices were admitted.

One day, perhaps, enough data will be available – and collected in one place – for parents and policymakers to assess not just the lottery results, but the overall situation at each school.

At right is a small sampling of the information that should be readily available to all parents and policymakers. Matthews and Paw Creek were chosen for this example because they are roughly the same size right now, and because they are on opposite sides of the county.

The Oct. 29 projections at right, which were not broken down by grade, include not only those guaranteed a seat, but also the number of additional students expected in the home school area by next August. That said, the last column suggests that a major portion of the Matthews home area chose Matthews, while a smaller portion of the Paw Creek home area chose Paw Creek. Some of the data listed for the two schools might help explain those decisions.

But for data on the lottery to be most useful, the community needs to know far more about choices made, and how the schools responded. A number of committees have advised the schools to create and maintain in one place a full, routinely updated list of data on every school. Current budget constraints make it unlikely the schools will achieve that goal any time soon.

Choice data for 2 schools

There are many blanks in these charts. As more information becomes readily available to parents and policymakers, it will be easier to see how the lottery actually worked, and why parents made the choices they did. Parents learned last week, for example, that caps were placed by grade level at each school (story, page 3).

Matthews Elementary

	Actual enrollment '00-'01	Actual enrollment '01-'02	10-29-01 projection for '02-'03	2-21-02 lottery placements	Lottery one, 1st choices	Lottery one, 2nd choices	Lottery one, 3rd choices	Applicants with home guarantee
K	127				103	133	54	34
1	146				151	76	37	131
2	137				144	55	37	121
3	166				150	62	33	132
4	144				148	59	38	123
5	169				180	45	37	160
Total	889		811	931	906	351	216	770

Paw Creek Elementary (includes IB magnet, EC classes)

K	109				88	74	39	24
1	123				111	88	52	28
2	112				103	70	42	32
3	120				122	77	47	37
4	121				105	79	42	35
5	124				114	75	60	37
Total	709		874	833	643	463	282	193

*Paw Creek IB will serve elementaries in Harding, Olympic and West Meck areas. None of those applying had a home school guarantee of getting in.

From a variety of CMS documents, data about the two schools from 2000-2001 might explain some of the choices made.

THE SCHOOLHOUSE	Matthews	Paw Creek
Total staff	90	79.7
Teachers	46.7	43.4
Student/teacher ratio	19.03	16.3
Teachers with master's	34.0%	14.8%
Teacher exp. 0-3 years	14%	27.7%
4-8 years	24%	27.7%
9-15 years	18%	8.5%
16+ years	44%	36.1%
THE STUDENTS		
Percent white	84.0%	47.3%
Percent gifted	17.1%	6.8%
Percent with disabilities	8.1%	12.1%
Percent on subsidized lunch	12.7%	46.1%
Average daily attendance	96.5%	95.2%
Absent 18 or more days	3.4%	9.8%
Recommended for retention	0.7%	1.5%
Grade 5 reading, whites at or above grade level	93.2%	76.6%
blacks	54.5%	60.4%
ABCs 5 reading +/- expected	+ 1.3	+ 0.5
ABCs 5 math +/- expected	- 0.5	- 0.9
THE FAMILIES		
Mother with college or more	87%	65%
Parent volunteers once/more	59.1%	45.1%
Grades given school by parents (district avg.=3.26)	3.28	2.88

Budget meetings full of questions

Continued from Page 1

Smith sees “a lot of opportunities missed” in the budget. Among them: No additional money to mentor lateral-entry teachers. “We know that’s what we’ve got to do to fix the high schools,” he said.

“We’re treading water in really demanding, critical areas.”

3 themes to watch

Below are notes about budget items that have already raised questions. But first, there are three themes to ponder.

Growth: Day-to-day operations for students now in the system are to be cut by about \$16.5 million. That’s a good portion of the \$21.4 million local share of the \$39 million that will be spent serving new students and opening new schools. Shouldn’t additional tax revenue from new taxpayers be paying for growth?

Equity: Inside a \$10.3 million pot of money for “sustaining operations” is \$3.2 million. The money would offset the loss of a federal grant that has paid for 55 to 60 teachers to lower class size at high-poverty schools. This will be the first of many tests of whether the community will actually put its money behind its commitment to provide the resources needed to be sure every child learns.

Protecting classrooms: Smith said that two-thirds of the cut-backs are not schoolhouse-related. Of course the one-third that are – foreign language classes, band and orchestra, fewer teacher assistants – will grab the public’s attention.

Details, details

In no particular order, here are a number of the budget items that have already raised discussion at school board budget work sessions and at the Education Budget Advisory Committee.

Textbooks: Perhaps the most

Why reinvesting in schools makes sense

“The average age of our schools is about 30 years. In 1972 we didn’t have any ESL programs. We didn’t have any federally mandated EC programs. We didn’t have pre-K – in fact, we didn’t have kindergarten. We didn’t have computers, and we clearly didn’t have the same graduation requirements that we have today.

“We have a lot of schools that, from a space standpoint, cannot deliver the elementary, middle and high school curriculum. Therefore, we have called for a lot of improvements that we call baseline standards.

“By the end of the currently funded program, 57 of 157 of our schools will meet the baseline standards. We still have 100 schools which will not.

“There’s a variation amongst those. Clearly the ones that are worst are those that we have recommended in this plan. Some that are towards the bottom need only minor renovation. And in 10 years we will get to all of them.”

– CMS Building Services Director Guy Chamberlain, explaining to school board Tuesday a capital improvements plan and outline for a \$215 million bond issue that CMS would like the county to place on the November ballot

argued-over piece of the budget, the fund to replace worn books, buy replacements and phase in new ones mandated by the state will be \$3.2 million, \$4.4 million less than last year’s \$7.6 million when the system was replacing all its reading books K-12. Why a textbooks controversy? Some folks understood the \$7.6 million last year to be a one-time request. In fact, it included annual replacement costs. (Note: Remember that \$3.2 million number for later.)

Bright Beginnings: When Smith started to remove projects from the budget, one identified was the \$1.8 million to be spent to prepare for a 2003-2004 expansion of the pre-K program. The \$5 million to \$8 million to operate an additional 1,000 seats was not in the budget and would have had to come from state or U.S. sources, but didn’t. Smith says he now wants the state or feds to pay the \$1.8 million as well.

Showcase of Schools: Last December’s launch of the choice plan won’t be repeated in the same form. Savings: Approximately \$175,000.

Teacher assistants: A thinning-out of the assistant ranks by about 120 positions will save \$2.8 million. All schools will share the

pain. Deputy Supt. James Pughsley said Thursday that, despite cuts, “most if not all” of the employees will be needed to fill vacancies or new classrooms.

5th-grade band, orchestra: The \$1.2 million to be saved comes from salaries. Transfers to other music positions will be available where employees are certified. “I understand the value of the arts,” Smith said Wednesday. “Fifth grade, however, might not be the best time to jump on that bandwagon, so to speak.” He cited the pressure during 5th grade for instructional time to help children with tests they must pass to be promoted.

Consolidations: Temporary closing during renovations of Billingsville and Oaklawn, and permanent removal of Amay James’ students to Reid Park, will save \$729,400. Another \$2.2 million will be saved by consolidating management and learning academy sites at Derita, housing pre-kindergarten classes at Amay James and closing the programs in the paragraph below.

Alternate 6th grade: Board members have already raised objections to closing small programs that serve troubled 6th-

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Budget meetings full of questions

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graders at Covenant Presbyterian and Mayfield Memorial Baptist. The children are described as “emotionally fragile.” But Smith counters, “It’s not as if we have safe havens where these children are excelling. These are among the lowest-performing schools in North Carolina.... We think we can deal with these kids in our regular schools.” Much more will be said about these programs.

Central office: About \$3.8 million is to be saved by maintaining a current hiring freeze to implement a 2% cut in central administration staffing. Smith called the cuts “a compromise that is not going to be healthy for Mecklenburg in the long term.” He predicted “longer turnaround for test scores that everyone wants to see.”

Foreign language: A small program, cut several years ago to a couple of days a week at some magnet schools, would end, at a savings of \$675,500, with Smith promising a more effective program via Channel 21.

Suspension: Certified teachers will be pulled from in-school suspension programs, to be replaced with cheaper nonteacher staff who will monitor lesson plans sent to ISS by the students’ regular teachers. Cost savings: \$1.2 million. For struggling students, this may be the meanest cut of all, but Smith promises no reduction in level of service.

Property insurance: The \$531,000 sought for coverage of buildings represents a 43% increase from last year. “We’re all in the wrong business,” Smith joked with the businesspeople on the education budget advisory committee Wednesday.

Nutrition: The operating subsidy for breakfast and lunch programs has been cut by \$500,000 as the system tries to move the program to self-supporting basis.

No word on whether lunch prices will rise. Chairman Arthur Griffin, skeptical that the goal will be met, said, “Find a child nutrition program in America that does not get some indirect support from the school district.”

Outside contracts: Smith has targeted for elimination some small contracts for the 6th grade alternate schools, and will end others as the management schools, now in leased space, move to Derita. Board member Wilhelmenia Rembert asked for a list of all nonconstruction contracts, including partner agencies such as Junior Achievement and the Arts & Science Council, outside professionals, and vendors – all by size and length of contract.

An inscrutable document

“You’ve got to help me with what the real number is,” John Lassiter said at one point Thursday. Budget documents do not allow a comparison between what is proposed for next year and what will be spent this year. The only good comparison is to actual spending two years ago, and in a growing school system, lots can happen in two years.

The schools have improved their budgeting process in the last few years. Yet the document that becomes public continues to be inscrutable, even to board members.

Remember that \$3.2 million mentioned above? That’s an estimate of what the schools will actually spend on textbooks next year. But as best we can tell, the number itself does not appear in the superintendent’s budget. Such costs must be parceled out in separate departmental budgets and are not identified as textbook purchases. Much is made of removing \$4.4 million from the current budget for textbooks, but neither the total to be spent this year, nor the proposed spending for next year, is listed.

During a Thursday work session, Lassiter cited at least 10 budget pages that showed big increases, or decreases, in costs

Budget meetings

Tuesday: School board work session, 6 p.m., Education Center.

March 26: School board public hearing on budget.

March 27: Education Budget Advisory Committee, 7:30 a.m., Government Center.

March 27: School board budget work session, 5 p.m. at the Education Center.

April 9: School board to complete work on the budget.

May 30: County commissioners hold hearing on their budget, which includes school money.

June 18: County commissioners to approve budget.

but no explanation of what had changed. Louise Woods added several more pages. Smith asked if board members wanted to go through the book page by page. Lassiter said he’d rather just deal with the pages that leave questions in members’ minds. “I’m bullet-proofing the document,” he said. “County commissioners are going to ask exactly the same questions.”

Perhaps there’s a larger point: Any taxpayer looking at the schools’ budget should be able to understand it without a personal tour by the superintendent.

It is ironic, in a year in which the inadequacy of the budget document is as big an issue as the numbers it contains, that \$1.4 million has to be cut for business computer systems conversion, delaying a nearly decade-long effort to modernize the schools’ internal budgeting capacity. The delay “will limit our ability to continue to improve the budget reports we bring to you,” Smith said last week. “It will need to be revisited very soon.”

And when Lawson is revisited, Smith said it would cost \$500,000 just to get the project caught up.

Looking for a deal to assure Metro a future downtown

The school board controls 18 acres in the heart of downtown. Renewal advocates want the land for high-rise residential development. The board has committed to keeping Metro School in the central area to serve its countywide clientele, but doesn't have enough money to rebuild Metro on a smaller site.

One proposal being pursued is to borrow money for a new Metro against the money to be had from the sale of some of the schools' land.

But Tuesday, board member John Lassiter warned against assuming that a land sale would help rebuild Metro. He said state

Board Notes

law would force the board to give the county first refusal on the land, and the county wouldn't even have to pay for it.

Supt. Eric Smith responded that he was "looking for a deal" that would guarantee payment.

Money was in earlier bond issues for renovation of Metro, but not for a wholesale rebuilding that would free up land for redevelopment.

On another matter tied to redevelopment of the site, building services director Guy Chamberlain said the plans would move forward on the assumption that reconstruction of Metro would leave intact Metro's gym, which is the only remnant on the site of all-black Second Ward High School, which was closed in the '60s.

Principal to Rama

Hugh Talbert, who had been hired to be principal at Billingsville, instead began

Quotable

"The best way to reform schools is to move forward with programs that raise expectations, invest in students and teachers, and measure how much our kids are learning. We must recognize our progress and build on it."

- Louis Gerstner, chairman of IBM, in "The Tests We Know We Need," www.mytimes.com

Thursday at Rama Road Elementary. Billingsville, which had few choice applicants, will meet at Chantilly next year. Smith said Thursday he was committed to returning Billingsville to its own campus after renovations are complete.

Schools to schedule more tests for spring

Continued from Page 1

10; reading in grades 3-8; middle school math; and high school algebra I and II, geometry, physics and English.

Agruso said the testing would involve students at all high schools, two-thirds of middle schools and, thus far, 40% of elementaries. She said she expected the number of elementaries to rise as more requests arrive from Raleigh.

No one questions the need to field test questions for upcoming tests, Agruso said Friday. "It's the only way to get good data."

"Our big concern is not to lose instruction time, and not to stress out the children, because they spend so much time on testing."

Agruso said CMS was considering cutting back on its own tests, and principals were considering

other measures to reduce the load.

For students, the field tests don't "count" in the way the real tests do.

At elementary and middle schools, the field tests may be scheduled after the real tests are out of the way. But at high schools, where the end-of-course tests are given in the last five or

so days of school, the field tests will have to be scheduled before the real ones.

To minimize the impact on children, Agruso believes the state should assign only one field test to any one school. This spring, some CMS schools were picked to conduct three. "It takes more work, but it can be done," she said.

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Briefs

Fewer distractions: A single-sex pilot program in Paducah Middle School in Kentucky gets good marks both from students and teachers, the Paducah Sun reported. Scores are up, discipline referrals are down, participation in class has improved and teachers appreciate the idea that instead of being sure always to call on an equal number of boys and girls, they can just teach.

www.paducahsun.com

Golden apples: Chicago's Golden Apple Foundation honored middle school teachers this year, the Chicago Tribune reported. A student said this about winner David Kayson, a language arts and drama teacher at Keller Jr. High: "Mr. Kayson likes to dance. He's always dancing. I've always been kind of shy. I have stage fright, but he gets me to open up. He makes everyone clap, and you feel good about yourself."

www.chicagotribune.com

Homework: In a review of how homework can undermine rather than build strong ties between home and school, the Washington Post highlighted parents who are too tired after work, who can't even understand the assignment, or who confuse their children by trying to explain a problem based on the way they learned decades earlier. Educators said parents still have responsibilities to ask their kids about homework, to make time for it, and to provide needed materials.

www.washingtonpost.com

Closing gap, I: The News and Observer in Raleigh reported that a Durham nonprofit has spent one year and \$500,000 in grant money trying to shape community consensus on closing the achievement gap between whites and minorities. The Durham Public Education Network's five recom-

mendations focus on parental support of their kids; high expectations for all kids; tutoring for kids; preschool and parent training; and recruitment and retention of quality teachers.

www.newsobserver.com

Closing gap, II: Howard County, Md. schools are no longer seeing scores rise, the Baltimore Sun reported. Principals who had free rein regardless of test scores will now face specific directives, including adding teaching time through before-, afterschool and summer programs; and new teacher training. The district wants the entire gap closed by 2007.

www.sunspot.net

Courts out: In a column for the New York Times, Adam Cohen, who helped file an equitable school funding suit in Alabama decades ago, declared that the state's top court appears determined to wipe out a settlement that called on the state to increase funding to poor school districts. The settlement was never fully funded, and on a recent visit to schools, Cohen found roofs leaking, just as they were when the suit was filed.

www.nytimes.com

Intermediate school: Indianapolis suburbs are filling with new schools serving just grades 5 and 6, the Star reported. Some think the schools a growth-mandated fad. Others say keeping those two grades together has educational benefits, and that sixth-graders don't need the pressure to conform by puberty-driven 8th-graders. A principal said the structure gives sixth-graders "a pause before they reach adolescence."

www.indystar.com

Bilingual ed: Massachusetts is noisily debating the future of the state's 1971 bilingual education law, the nation's first, the Boston Globe reported. Critics want children to leave bilingual classes in

WHAT YOU CAN DO

A list of little and big tasks waiting to be tackled:

Recycle used laser and inkjet cartridges into money supporting the Computer Access in the Neighborhood project. That all-volunteer effort places computers in neighborhoods where children need help passing the N.C. computer skills test. For information, call Dee Means at 704-378-1350 or dmeans@charlottechamber.com

one year, after intensive English instruction, and claim that children who do so earn better test scores. The program's defenders say students need the three years the law allows to be ready for English-only classes.

www.globe.com

Scopes redux: Ohio legislators and the governor may leave to the state board of education a fight over whether to add creationism, now dubbed "intelligent design," to science textbooks now devoted to evolution, the Plain Dealer reported. The drive is being headed by a Cleveland chemist.

www.cleveland.com

Teacher expertise: In a Hoover Institution study of the quality of teaching by Teach for America recruits in Houston's school district, there's a note about how teacher experience affects student performance: "The largest gains in teacher effectiveness occur early in a teaching career and diminish thereafter until flattening out at around 8 years for math and 11 years for reading."

www.educationnext.org