

'Our children have truly benefited'

Speakers press school board members to keep programs in '02-'03 budget

Tuesday's public hearing was a show, a heartfelt plea, and a huge test of the school board's ability to meet rising expectations in a stagnant economy.

Much Spanish was spoken by children who have learned their lessons well. They have learned in programs that would be axed under the proposed budget.

But it was the children from alternative schools, who possibly were taking their first steps into the public limelight, who showed both what those programs have accomplished, and what is at risk by their planned shutdown.

The children were eloquent speakers, and Chairman Arthur Griffin told the board at one point, "Colleagues, you can rest assured that we will win the national forensic debates."

Parents quoted from CMS promotional brochures and the guide to the choice process to point out that what was to be cut had been promised to parents. Supt. Eric Smith's open letter to the community about the value of academic programs was highlighted. For those who could not hear the irony, there was enough dripping off the walls to taste.

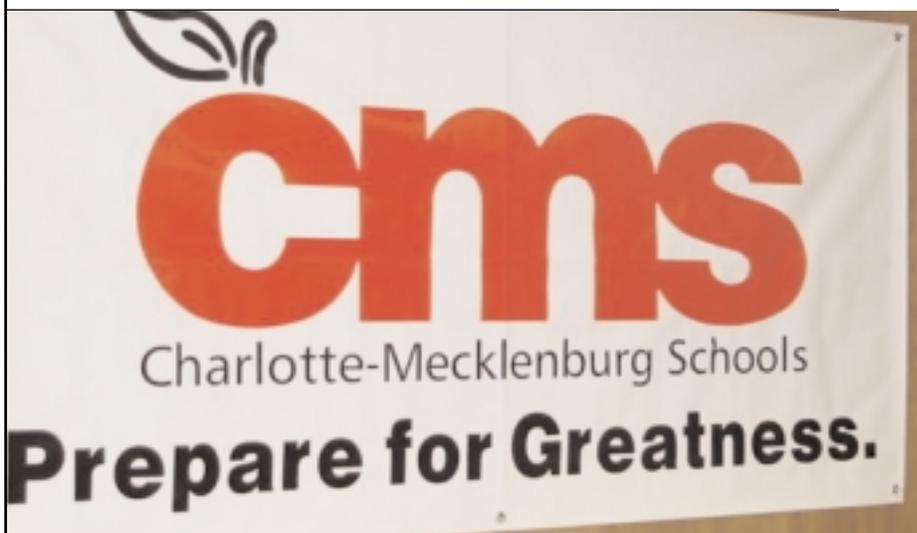
Alternative schools

Mayfield student Sydney Temple said, "kids who want to learn have a place to go at Mayfield. If you shut the doors to Mayfield it's like closing the door

Next edition April 7

The next regular edition of Educate! will be published Sunday, April 7.

Prepare only for tests?



"When are politicians and educators going to wake up and realize that school is about more than taking tests?" band teacher Richard Waterman asked during Tuesday night's public hearing on proposed budget cuts. "Behind you is a banner that reads, 'Prepare for Greatness.' It doesn't read, 'Prepare for End-of-Grade Tests.' "

on some kids' future. No matter what anyone says, regular schools don't have what Mayfield has. If they did, why did my whole life change when I went to Mayfield? I used to be made fun of and came home crying every day. Now at Mayfield it's like a big family."

Kelly Stevens, Sydney's mother, said Sydney's teachers in regular school "were short with her, when she would interrupt and ask a question because she didn't understand, because [teachers] are under so much pressure to just plough through it and get it done before the end of the year, and I understand that. But kids like her get lost when that happens...."

Looking for way out of the annual wars over the budget

Tuesday night's crowd at the school board hearing was frustrated with the budget items selected to be cut. A committee looking over the budget – and the process that creates it – is frustrated at the way this community establishes its school budget.

Members of the Education Budget Advisory Committee want Supt. Eric Smith to create a multi-year budget plan that lays out what it will cost to improve education for all children, so the

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“These schools are absolutely not obsolete. They are needed. More of them are needed. And if it weren’t for money, we wouldn’t be having this discussion now.”

Edward Underwood is an 8th-grader at Mayfield Memorial.

“I messed up at Smith when I was a 7th-grader and did not get promoted. Mayfield gave me the opportunity and others like me another chance of success.... I had lost interest in school. I did not consider myself a bad kid, but I wanted to play.... But at Mayfield the teachers give me individual attention....”

Carla Leaf from Covenant Presbyterian’s division of mission, said the the academy’s 52.1% on-grade level test scores last year were “absolutely extraordinary considering many of our students

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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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entered at a first, or an average third-grade level, and they reached a sixth-grade level in one year.... We have to remember that they come to us below grade level with their needs not being served in traditional settings.... If disbanded, 70% of these students will return to Equity Plus II schools, where we know there are still unanswered concerns.”

Parks department employee Diana Monroe said she’d partnered with Mayfield for five years, and seen children “by the end of the school year ... develop into a strong academically, emotionally and socially well-rounded individual.”

Mayfield PTA President Eloise Ferguson said closing the alternative schools would let children “fall through the cracks,” children who must “take the time, concentrate a little harder than the next student... the student that has the fear of saying something out loud so the teacher can help them.... Think twice... we will have more dropouts if the school is closed and our children in the future will not have a chance at being a student that can go off to college and be proud of himself.”

Teacher assistants

“Teacher assistants are an integral part of the school family,” said Gail Matthews, president of the CMS chapter of N.C. Association of Teacher Assistants. “We work with individual children, small groups and whole classes, teaching them the state curriculum... in many cases are instrumental in bringing them up to grade level so they can be successful on their EOGs.... In most classrooms you will find it difficult to tell who is the teacher and who is the teacher assistant.”

Lisa Fisher, northwest area president of the teacher assistants association:

“When you consider that the annual starting salary... is just under \$15,000, less than a custodian, bus driver or secretary, you have to realize we are not in this for the money.... Each teacher

assistant position left vacant has a direct impact on teachers that are already overburdened, but more importantly on our students.... We cannot afford to cut the front line.”

Band, orchestra

Retired music teacher Evelyn Fortson said “many of our children cannot afford a private teacher so this is their only access to learning a musical instrument. Sixth grade is too late. Let’s not go backwards. Let’s go forward and continue to put beauty into the lives of our children.”

“The performing arts are all part of a ‘world class’ education,” offered student Colleen Wheelahan. “Not all students can afford private lessons for themselves. The lowest readily available lesson price is \$17 per session and the most expensive is \$70 per session. When some students are on free and reduced price lunch plans, how can they involve themselves in programs like the performing arts without programs like 5th-grade band and orchestra. This is not equity.”

“I have enjoyed being in band and orchestra,” said student Lucy Marshman, “and I want the kids that are younger than me to have this same kind of experience.”

Ashley Dowser, a sophomore representing East Meck High’s orchestra, estimated that 50% of East’s International Baccalaureate students are involved in one of the school’s music programs.

Bruce Becker, a 5th-grade orchestra teacher, quipped: “Please stop me if this will jeopardize my job.” He recalled that before joining an orchestra in the 10th grade, “I was a failure and a potential dropout.... One sad note: That district in Florida that gave me life has now removed orchestra from all levels, mainly because they first removed it from elementary feeders, and then as time went by, the upper levels were also removed....”

“These students need discipline,

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self-esteem, self-expression, teamwork and more before leaving elementary school. And band and orchestra is the best place to learn it.”

Band teacher Richard Waterman said “comments have been made about how elementary band and orchestra take away valuable time from preparing students for end-of-grade tests, and that it presents a scheduling nightmare for students. I suspect that these comments suggest the real reason that fifth-grade band and orchestra are in jeopardy.”

Daryl Rice said she learned to hear foreign language through music. “We can take care of the home front by not making our kids ignorant any more by denying them the ability to learn a foreign language at an early age. It should be earlier than fifth grade. Music should be earlier than fifth grade, because it will teach them to sit for the rest of the classes that are boring, sometimes, as hell.”

Carolyn Hart, president of the Mecklenburg County Medical Society speaking for 1,400 physicians, urged that the music programs continue “for the health and mental development of the children of this community.”

“Music is not the thing to cut. It improves test scores... language scores... reading ... teamwork and it improves the sense of self-confidence. This has all been well-proven for music. It has not been proven for sports.”

Hart recalled some exceptional children who did well in music. “Sometimes music is the only thing they have, the only thing they can excel in, the reason they go to school.”

Foreign language

Diana Faison from Elizabeth Traditional said “traditional schools have been teaching a for-

Advice on where to cut, where to go next

While most of the public comments were about what not to cut, the school board got some suggestions about how to save money, or improve the schools.

Jeff Joyce from the CMS chapter of the Classroom Teachers Association suggested some cuts: quarterly tests that “produce dubious data with relation to end-of-course tests,” contracts to set up computers, and excessive overtime targeted by the McKinsey report, and elimination of “meaningless brochures.” “It’s nice to recognize all the positives... but we must pay heed to an enormous amount of frustration among teachers. We need look no further than the numbers – 1,200 vacancies at the end of last year....”

Laura McKinney at Greenway Park, pressed the board to use unused seats at underutilized schools for some or all of the 10 pre-kindergarten classes slated for the school next fall. She said the school could be 90% filled just with first-choice requests.

Scott Bennett, an East Meck cello player who says he looks at music as “a sport – others play football, I play cello” – suggested students could pay for their first Advanced Placement exam, and a small fee to help support driver’s education.

John Tate, who was on the school board when the Covenant-Mayfield programs were established, turned the attention to county commissioners, “who are responsible for funding this school system.... Load them up... let them hear from you.”

Orchestra teacher Ellen Mindell said she couldn’t imagine that any board members want to make the proposed cuts. “You’ve got to come down from up there and join us.... Leave everything in. Don’t cut it at all, get together with us, and think outside the box. Do something different.... If we want those programs, we should get together and find a way.”

“There’s got to be other ways,” P.J. Isaac said. “It’s tax time and nobody wants to talk about budgets. And Easter’s coming up... you need to pull a rabbit out of the hat. There’s got to be another way. Thank you.”

eign language for 17 years. We are quite good at it.... Elizabeth Traditional is not a school of excellence by accident. We are truly a diverse school, both economically and racially. We have closed the achievement gap.... Spanish is the thread that pulls it together.”

Larry Wilson of Myers Park Traditional said his second-grader had been writing phrases in Spanish on posters during earlier presentations. “I believe that’s evidence that our children have truly

benefited from their Spanish teacher’s instruction. The teacher has been able to have dialogue with the children and assist them individually with their pronunciation. This would be impossible with a televised program.”

Jennifer Crutchfield, now taking International Baccalaureate Spanish at Myers Park High, credits the elementary program with starting her on her current path. “I feel I have become more of a global citizen, truly accepting

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Antidote to annual fights is sought

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community can reach consensus on it and stop fighting over details each year.

“There’s room for discussion,” Smith said. Asked if he wanted to continue to fight annually with county commissioners, Smith replied, “I’ve got to fight somebody.”

Committee member Howard Haworth envisions a behind-the-scenes, year-round effort to build community support for the budget in a way that’s “not as frantic and there’s more predictability.”

Members of the committee seemed to agree that the balanced scorecard, a management tool that sets specific school goals, should drive budget discussions.

Sue Breckenridge said the committee, and the community, need to know what the long-range plan for achieving excellent education is, and how much it would cost.

“What would it cost today to do this?” she asked. “I think it’s going to be enormous, but we’ve never defined that.... We’re here to solve an enormous issue we have every year.”

During Wednesday morning’s meeting, member Louis Guignard proposed three ways to nail down a base figure the schools could expect each year. One would be by using per-pupil cost from a previous year, then adding newly arrived students. Another would assign a percentage of the county’s property tax receipts. A third would assign a percentage of the county’s entire revenue base. In all cases, the cost of debt service should be included, he said. In the latter two cases, the figure would rise or fall with county rev-

enues.

With the base set, Guignard said, the schools could then petition the county for more or less in November or December based on new things they want to do.

Smith opposed all three suggestions. Formulas assume “that what you are doing is adequate.”

Today’s 11th-graders were at the 35th percentile in reading as 5th-graders and they’ve been “passed through a broken system that did not address their reading deficiencies,” Smith said.

Smith calls these kids “the bubble” and their plight the “baggage from the past.” He implied that those past failures are now holding down test scores in the high schools, and are probably in part responsible for declining but still-high dropout rates.

“We’ve got a very specific – underfunded – strategy” to teach these teens.... It’s a small-group instructive process and it’s expensive.... It requires some financial commitment....

“We have had the good fortune to have funding to deal with the first portion of the journey, but we have a long way to go,” he said.

Tying the budget to a percentage of the property tax “changes the focus. The priority then becomes a goal of managing the dollars of the tax rate, not the quality of education.”

Smith called tying debt service directly to the operating budget “a kiss of death” because it would divide the community because current residents would be asked to curtail services for their children to finance the schools for newcomers.

Smith also argued that formulas would be too rigid. Most of the growth for next year, he said, was in the K-3 age group, which is the costliest to teach. Costs don’t always grow on a straight line.

Smith told the committee that teacher turnover has been stabilized at West Charlotte, Olympic and West Meck. “We are still working on some issues at Garinger,” he said.

“The problem with the high schools is you will have entire faculties that have not more than two or three years experience, 30% of a department that is lateral entry.” He said CMS was working on grants to bolster its mentoring programs, which continue at a small level in the proposed budget, but will not be expanded.

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of diversity that exists between all of us, and this can be traced back to the first lessons at Myers Park.”

Reynard Moore recalled how his family, including his middle-school daughter Lindsey, came upon an accident involving injuries. One victim couldn’t speak English. “Lindsey was able to put them at ease, to help them relax, and even to smile. The accident victim felt connected; someone was trying to help. Friends, that’s what foreign language is all about. This is what we’re asking you to keep.”

“I’m afraid this is a big credibility issue for CMS, a serious one,” said traditional school parent Mary Beaver. “Foreign language is clearly marketed in this (choice plan) guide.... I honestly believe the board, parents out there, civic leaders, community leaders have not had time to process what the implications to our community of losing such great programs. Once a core academic program is lost, we know it will be next to impossible to get it back.”

Schools approve MWBE study, begin talks on financing it

The schools have joined city and county government in agreeing in principle to pursue a revised minority women business enterprise program. What's up in the air is how area governmental units will share the costs of reviving the program.

The board of education late Tuesday night voted to support, in concept, participation with the city, county and possibly other governmental agencies in a new disparity study, the first step that could lead to a renewed MWBE program. The board directed the staff to report back with additional information after negotiations are held with participating groups over how the study's cost will be shared. The motion was approved 7-2, with John Lassiter and Larry Gauvreau voted no.

Board members said they would look for other area agencies, including UNCC, to join in sponsoring the disparity study, which could cost several millions of dollars. The board's struggle to find help with the study's costs came after the board's public hearing on its budget.

About 40 speakers addressed the board, most of them protesting proposed cuts in a \$675,500 foreign language program at some elementaries, the \$1.2 million 5th-grade band and orchestra program, and the \$1 million alternative program for middle-schoolers at Covenant Presbyterian and Mayfield Baptist.

The existing MWBE program, run in conjunction with city and county governments, was the subject of a threatened lawsuit in December. Despite protests from the black community, the city council quickly voted to suspend a key part of the program until the entire program could be revised.

A disparity study tracks areas in which minority companies have been disproportionately unsuccessful in competing for government contracts. The city's program was built on a disparity

study, conducted in the early 1990s, that tracked large categories of construction work. Since then, courts have ruled that the studies must look at much narrower categories. For example, if an earlier study looked simply at building construction, a study to meet current court test would have to look at electrical con-

tracts, plumbing contracts and others separately.

The city suspended the program to avoid approving any contracts potentially tainted by the old program. Such tainted contracts could lead to lawsuits and liability damages paid to unsuccessful contractors.

Legislative priorities approved

At its meeting Tuesday night, the school board by routine vote approved its legislative priorities for the upcoming legislative session. The top priorities:

1. Increase teacher compensation through the adoption of multi-year teacher salary schedule and by aggressively increasing the beginning teacher salary; also increase compensation of other personnel.

2. Remove barriers in the teacher licensure process by doing the following: Eliminate the performance-based licensure program requirement for initially licensed teachers; provide true license reciprocity; permit Central Piedmont Community College to develop a model for provide all necessary instruction for CMS teachers obtaining alternative licenses; and continue legislation that will allow continued flexibility for granting initial alternative licensure.

3. Implement program for retired teachers to return to work immediately with no limitations being placed on their retirement benefits.

4. Provide CMS with more flexibility when it purchases supplies, equipment and materials valued at \$2,500 or less.

5. Provide CMS with more flexibility when purchasing textbooks.

6. Provide funding for the Bright Beginnings pre-K program expansion.

Other significant priorities:

1. Maintain or reduce current health insurance premiums and out-of-pocket expenses.

2. Provide full funding for state-adopted textbooks.

3. Provide funding to conduct a study on the feasibility of incorporating a testing program that would provide national-normed data.

4. Provide funding to lower the class size for students eligible to receive subsidized lunch and those performing below grade level.

Also Tuesday night, the board:

- Named a new middle school near Ballantyne for Dr. Jay M. Robinson, former CMS superintendent and head of the N.C. Board of Education.

- Named a new elementary Providence Springs Elementary.

- Honored Garret Nash of Derita, Jodi Tombouljian of Piedmont Open and Elizabeth Womack of North Meck as Wachovia Ben Craig Outstanding Educator award winners.

- Supt. Eric Smith announced that Denise Como will be principal of Metro School.

- Named the Newell Elementary media center for longtime custodian Thomas H. Davis.

- Named the Providence Springs Elementary media center for longtime teacher Minnie B. Downs.

- Approved construction of a new Metro School at the same downtown site.

Briefs

Fewer bonuses: Falling endowment income will mean only 50 new teachers instead of 100 will receive Massachusetts' bonuses of \$5,000 a year over four years, the Boston Globe reported. About 14% of earlier winners have already left teaching, forfeiting their remaining bonus money. A teachers group has suggested putting the money into certifying teacher aides, the Globe reported. www.boston.com

No ads: Turner Broadcasting won't, as planned, sell ads on its CNN Student News show that is used in 18,000 U.S. schools, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported. www.ajc.com

Report cards: In School Board News, professional trainer Dorothy Rich offers ways the federally mandated, test score-dominated report cards due this fall could be made more useful to parents. She would add dropout rates, percentage of college attendance, Advanced Placement courses offered, grades, teachers salaries and experience, class size, attendance statistics, disciplinary actions – and parent involvement rates. www.nsba.org

CARE: The Denver Post profiled a Core Academic REengagement program for at-risk 7th- and 8th-graders where subjects are covered, but through projects, not subject classes. The 63-student program focuses on alternative learning styles, and allows students who get low grades on projects to learn more and re-do work for a better grade. www.denverpost.com

Financial payoff: A California study of the state's afterschool program suggests that 8% of the funds committed to the program,

or a full 11% of the state's contribution, is "saved" by the reduced number of children who do not have to repeat grades. Education World reported that the three-year-old program serves K-9 students, and that those who were in the program at least 7.5 months last school year showed math score gains 2.5 times as large as all students statewide. www.educationworld.com

Higher expectations: Wake County schools says a survey of parents, students and staff found higher satisfaction rates for what goes on in the classroom, but more concern about school violence and lack of communication, the News and Observer reported. School officials said the actual rates of crime and violence have declined since the last survey. Participation rates among elementary parents was 61%, 54% among middle school parents and 50% among high school parents. www.newsobserver.com

Online testing: Utah will begin pilot programs to have students take state-mandated tests in math, reading and science via computer, the Salt Lake Tribune reported. There are concerns that computer-based tests will favor affluent children who have more practice on computers at home, and state officials say there also aren't enough computers in the schools yet to support the annual testing program. www.sltrib.com

Test follow-up: Among Hartford, Conn., inner-city schools serving poor children, Simpson-Waverly School had some of the highest Connecticut Mastery Test scores, the Courant reported. And when the scores come back, principal James Thompson says the scores are analyzed for weaknesses, then teachers are retrained in those areas. www.ctnow.com

Calendar

April

- 9** School board scheduled to complete work on budget, 6 p.m., Board Room.
- "The gap between rich and poor: Dives and Lazarus Today, an N.C. Council of Churches seminar in Greensboro. Registration due by April 2. For more information, contact Mecklenburg Ministries at 704-347-2404 or meckmin@meckmin.org
- 12-13** Seventh annual Neighborhood Symposium to build strength of neighborhood groups achieving the "model neighborhood." Co-sponsored by city and JCSU. Details: 704-336-2173
- 16** Joint lunch with city council, county commissioners, noon, Government Center, room 267.
- School presentation to commissioners on school budget, 3 p.m., Government Center, room 267.

May

- 20** Legislative breakfast, 7:30 a.m., board room.
- 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