

Choice out of low-performing schools may begin in fall

As many as four CMS schools could be first-year guinea pigs in the federal "Leave No Child Behind" education reform effort.

Or there could be none. It all depends on results of state tests being taken in the next weeks.

About 105 N.C. schools are on a "watch list" because of failure last year to meet "adequate yearly progress." If those 105, including three elementaries in CMS, again do poorly this year, all must be provided state technical assis-

tance, and parents must be offered the choice of reassignment to a school with better scores, said Bill McGrady, Title I section chief for the Department of Public Instruction.

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Outward Bound program coordinator Jean Sullivan (in yellow sweater) chats with alumni of the program during a diversity summit Friday at West Charlotte High. Ahmad Daniels, who acted as historian on a recent heritage bus tour to Selma, Birmingham and other civil rights battlegrounds, addressed the 125 students. Daniels, 53, said those of his generation "knew what they were fighting for, and refused to let anyone turn them around." He urged the students to continue to work for diversity, to be aware of "pain on the other side of town, as well as the other side of the world" and to pursue the "civic responsibility to challenge policies you do not agree with." The event was sponsored by the National Conference for Community and Justice.

School budget off to county; bond rating worries rise

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education Tuesday adopted Supt. Eric Smith's proposed budget without amendment. The action signaled the end of the parent fight to retain band and orchestra at fifth grade, foreign language at some magnet schools, two programs for middle-schoolers, jobs for aides, and other programs that will now be cut.

But board members held out hope that unspecified programs might yet be saved, if grant funds or other monies are received, or if the economy changes enough to improve overall budget prospects.

The 8-1 vote appeared to be an effort to unify the board, and the community it represents, as the budget debate moves to the county manager's office, which has its own budget.

And its own problems.

For decades, Mecklenburg County has saved millions of dollars in annual interest costs by having an AAA bond rating, the best available.

County Manager Harry Jones said Wednesday morning that "one of my goals as manager is

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SPARTA: Student data goes online

School officials publicly showed off last week for the first time a database that will give teachers and administrators access to data on students as never before.

As students come and go, teachers will be able to download test data on the students actually in class.

Administrators will see virtual red flags over students running into their maximum allowed

absences.

A key to the system is firewalls keeping confidential information on students out of the wrong hands, and levels of access that control who can see what data.

And the data is not on the World Wide Web, but only on the internal CMS intranet.

Assistant Superintendent Susan Agruso, whose department built

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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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The Swann Fellowship, named for Darius and Vera Swann, was formed in 1997 out of several Charlotte religious congregations to be a witness to the value of diversity in public education and to educate 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.

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Students' testing, other data is online

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the system from scratch, told the school board that they too would soon have access to the system, but not to all of the data.

For parents and the public, the completion of this project may hasten the day when the so-called "dashboard" of numbers on each school will be available. The dashboard would give parents a wide range of data on their schools. Test data, separated by ethnic and economic groups, is a part of the larger effort. The full dashboard would also profile staff, resources and building conditions for every schoolhouse and become a key learning tool for parents using the choice assignment plan.

Leandro issue update

The N.C. Association of School Administrators last week urged

state officials not to appeal Judge Howard Manning's ruling ordering the state to assure all at-risk children their constitutional right of access to a sound basic education. The professional group said the state "has multiple roles... including using its authority and expertise related to the (1) system of education, (2) accountability, (3) assistance, and (4) sufficient funding.

"The state cannot simply blame local leadership for problems," the group said in a statement.

Manning's ruling (reprinted in the April 7 Educate!) found that test score data was sufficient to prove that low-performing students were being denied access to a sound basic education. He ordered reports every 90 days on how the state was responding.

Correction

The April 7th Educate! should have said the new school to ease Hawk Ridge Elementary crowding will be on Endhaven Lane.

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Annual report marks progress, cites 'thorny' issues

CMS has "come a very, very long way... We are showing that an urban system can work. But I think it's clear that excellence has been elusive."

That was the report Tuesday from UNCC Provost Denise Trauth, who heads the research committee of Charlotte Advocates for Education, formerly known as the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation.

She called Supt. Eric Smith's goals "extensive and appropriate" and encouraged continued focus on reading and math.

"Decisions that are made with regard to reading and mathematics for children and the achievements that they make early in their lives can have a profound influence both on their progress later and their choices later, even playing out in their choices in college," Trauth said.

At the high school level, she pointed out that only 53% of students are on grade level in U.S. history, one of the "thorny problems" all systems face in improving high school achievement. "These percentages are something we need to pay attention to."

Trauth encouraged "community ownership" of CMS's goals.

"Until the whole community embraces CMS goals, this is going to be a pipedream for the school system."

The group's annual State of Public Education Report, 12 pages compared to last year's 48, is available by download at the group's Web site: www.cmfef.org.

The report may have been hampered by the January departure of former president and director of research Tom Bradbury. The text was not updated to reflect recent budget decisions. Example:

Here is the report's commentary on how the schools responded to its 2001 recommendations. In italic are some updates. The report says CMEF made "seven

"... look at achievement. Without substantial improvement, the future for massive numbers of community children is bleak at best, lethal at worst."

Commentary in the 2002 State of Public Education Report. A copy can be downloaded from www.cmfef.org

recommendations, all have been addressed, most to a significant degree."

Expand Bright Beginnings: The Bright Beginnings preschool program has gone from 2,000 students to 3,000, with a goal of 4,000. For 2002, expansion ought to be central to discussion of CMS needs and state funding.

No expansion is budgeted, and board member Larry Gauvreau wants to cut back to 2,000 seats.

Budget reform: This is well underway, with the appointment of a new Education Budget Advisory Committee for the county commissioners. CMS is in midstream on a new computer project that will give it far more flexibility.

EBAC struggles to find a voice, and the computer project has been shelved.

Extend ABCs: The pilot ABC program, with disaggregated goals for growth in student achievement, made its first run in CMS and four other school systems. And the 2001 General Assembly directed that a "closing the achievement gap" component be built into the regular ABCs.

The teacher crisis: Improving the recruitment, training and retention of teachers is at the top of the superintendent's list. CMS has done a number of things, but there is still a long way to go.

No money has been added for

teacher mentoring, a program Smith calls vital to fixing high schools.

Student mobility: CMS has reported on school-by-school student mobility and has a uniform reading adoption at all schools.

Equity report: A school-by-school equity report will be partly dealt with in the superintendent's new Balanced Scorecard and the Equity and Student Success status report. A new Equity Committee is to be appointed.

Political split: The school board struggled with politics, the law, educational goals and simple reality as it finally adopted a new pupil assignment plan for next year and accepted an appeals court decision that CMS was "unitary." The split on the vote for chair and vice chair, however, indicated that the gulf remains.

No move to Portland

On Friday, Supt. Eric Smith withdrew as a candidate for the superintendency in Portland, Oregon. The Charlotte Observer reported that the city's teacher's union threw its support behind another candidate a day before Smith announced his decision.

In a statement, Smith said local response "has really made an impact as I consider the work I want to focus on for the next several years."

School budget will now go to county

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that Mecklenburg maintain its AAA bond rating.”

But he said that “for the first time I’m fearful we’re potentially going to lose it.”

Informally addressing the Education Budget Advisory Committee with Schools Supt. Eric Smith present, Jones said his current budget proposals for next year, including school money, would depend on taking \$10 million from fund balances for next year’s operations. To maintain the credit rating, he said, most experts would advise maintaining 8% of the annual budget in fund balance. “The use of the \$10 million gets it down to 7.4%,” he said.

Current-year growth, originally projected at 4%, has come in at about 5%. But for next year, Jones said, he is reluctant to project more than 4% growth in revenues, which come in large measure from property taxes and the county’s portion of the sales tax.

“The board (of county commissioners) didn’t tell me I couldn’t recommend a tax increase,” and he did last year. “I don’t know if I’ve got the guts to do it this year.”

“I know (the schools’) problems are very real. Our needs in the health area are very real.... My job this fiscal year is to part the Red Sea without disturbing the fish.”

At the school board Tuesday night, several board members explained why they were voting to approve a budget that many parents had vigorously opposed.

“It’s a difficult decision,” said John Lassiter, “that all of us have wrestled with, issue by issue and program by program, trying to come up with ways to make things happen.

“But all of us equally have come to the realization that this is a very very difficult budget year,

A citizen review

The Education Budget Advisory Committee last week tentatively decided to report to commissioners on three topics:

- Whether the schools acted on commitments made last year to fund specific school programs: Bright Beginnings, a computer upgrade, several others.

- The current budget plan, particularly the assumptions Supt. Eric Smith made in preparing it.

- Where the committee would like to see the schools go in the future.

“What needs to come out of this,” said member Sue Breckenridge, “is a very strong statement.... We have a community that is growing hugely, and we are not where we want to be academically with our students.”

and the consequence is that there are tough decisions to make.

“Communication from the county has been very clear about the availability of dollars and the limitations on what we can and cannot do. I heard a talk by the mayor this morning that the state’s budget now has a \$2 billion deficit, and the consequence may have additional impact on this county and this school board.

“In conversations each of us have had individually today, the understanding is that there may in fact be opportunities, should the economic climate change, and the goal would be to replace those programs that we’re having to deal with in terms of the current budget cycle, and... all of us share a common philosophy about... the importance of being able to bring those things back in the event that dollars do in fact present themselves to the Board of Education.”

Member Lee Kindberg said:

“I want to thank (Supt. Smith) for some of the initial thoughts you and some of your staff have had about community partner-

ships and other innovative ways we might explore enterprise opportunities or something to be able to continue some of these programs in the future.”

Later in the meeting, vice chair Wilhelmenia Rembert said she wanted to “echo Mr. Lassiter’s comments regarding the budget and say how important it is to me that we not adversely affect any of our classroom instruction and support for the classroom, and understanding that the superintendent had a very difficult job of trying to present the budget that would recognize the financial realities that we are facing today.

“I hope that at the earliest date possible that we know of perhaps the availability of any grant funds, support from any other source that we may not know about today, that we act expeditiously to reinstate whatever opportunities and programs that we can.”

“We all recognize how far we still have to go,” noted member Louise Woods. “But, gosh, we need to celebrate where we are, and we need to celebrate the funding that we have been given these last four or five years.

“And we need to come together to the county commission and say how important it is, even though there have been some things that perhaps have been cut that we’re uncomfortable with, how important it is to be able to receive what we are asking for now.

“It’s going to take the total community working together to make that happen. There could be a small tax increase even with that.

“More than ever now is a time to bring the community together around this budget and around our services for children....”

Woods had a word for volunteers who helped out at Covenant and Mayfield academies, the middle school programs that may close.

“More than ever we are going to need you, need you as advocates, as mentors, as support people for every child in our school system that has those particular needs.”

Choices out of worst schools may begin

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Two of the three CMS schools are in “pretty good shape,” but the third “will have to hustle” to avoid consequences under the new law, McGrady said. He declined to release the schools’ names because their status was still subject to appeal and possible revision.

A fourth CMS elementary, Thomasboro, is among about 17 N.C. schools that have already failed to meet the new adequate yearly progress or AYP standard for two years. If Thomasboro’s scores improve enough this spring, it will face no consequences under the new law.

But if Thomasboro’s scores don’t improve enough this spring, parents must not only be offered the choice of transportation to another school with better scores, but must also be offered tutoring services for their child from a contract provider.

Administrative procedures controlling choice and tutoring and many other provisions of the federal law have not been written yet, McGrady said.

There are about 17 schools in Thomasboro’s category statewide.

About 12 of the 17 are charter schools. McGrady said the state was seeking federal advice on how to address “choice” at the charters. N.C. law treats each charter as its own school district, so there would be no other school in the “district” that charter parents could choose.

Schools that fail to meet AYP for four years must take “corrective” action. A number of actions are listed in the law, and one such action “must” be taken. Earlier law said actions “may” be taken – and generally weren’t. Among the “must” actions, from which the district must choose, are replacing staff, implementing a new curriculum, reining in a principal’s autonomy, appointing an outside expert and extending the school day or year.

Ironically, Thomasboro was cited last year by the state for its “exemplary growth” in ABCs scores.

Thomasboro Principal Mildred Wright could not be reached late last week.

In the three years ending last year, the percentage of Thomasboro’s 5th-graders reading on grade level has risen from 36.7% to 63.5%. In math, the percentage on grade level has risen from 45% to 66.7%. Thomasboro has for several years had state assistance teams – the kind of

“technical assistance” now mandated by the federal law.

That law, which was President Bush’s top legislative priority and which was approved with bipartisan support in Congress, seeks to have all children learning at grade level within 12 years.

Adequate yearly progress is a term designed to reach that goal. How it will be defined is left to each state, and McGrady said it was not yet clear how North Carolina would have to change its current accountability program, called the ABCs, to mesh with the new federal mandate.

To meet the new federal AYP, however, schools must show AYP for every subgroup of students, not just the school overall. That is, all groups, including minorities, poor children, not-poor children and others must each meet the AYP.

Educators believe there is a risk that a majority of U.S. schools will ultimately not make their AYP goals because of one or more subgroups not making required improvement. Education Week reported that the Congressional Research Service estimated that if the law had been in effect in the two years ending in June 2000, states would see 17% to 64% of their schools failing. And the estimated 64% was for North Carolina.

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Briefs

Parents sought: The state's efforts this coming year to close the racial gap in test scores will focus on a PR campaign to encourage parental involvement in schools, the News and Observer reported. "If you don't see the moral imperative, there is at the least a practical argument that can be made for making sure all families understand the importance of being involved," said state Supt. Mike Ward.
www.newsobserver.com

High flunk rate: Louisiana expects 80% of its schools to fail new federal standards for "adequate yearly improvement" in test scores, Education Week reported. The Congressional Research Service estimated that if the law had been in effect in the two years ending in June 2000, 17% to 64% of schools would have failed. And the estimated 64% was in North Carolina.
www.edweek.org

Gender gap closing: In Canada, recent tests show that the math achievement gap between boys and girls has nearly closed, the National Post reported. And in problem-solving, girls outscored boys. Canada has had programs in place to close the achievement gap for 20 years.
www.nationalpost.com

Religion rules: A new education law for Florida clarifies that praying in schools is OK, students may hand out religious literature, and their artwork and homework may reflect their religious beliefs, the Florida Times-Union reported.
www.jacksonville.com

Charter meltdown: Severe problems among charter schools in California, Arizona and Texas have sapped the movement's momentum, the New York Times reported. Texas studies have

found that only about half of charter school students pass state tests, the number of low-performing charters has tripled in three years, and the dropout rates at the schools is more than three times the statewide rate.
www.nytimes.com

Advanced placement: Exploring Harvard's February decision to require a "5" rather than a "3" or better to receive college credit for an Advanced Placement high school course, The New York Times said that Harvard had found that in a "study of student performance in second-year chemistry and economics courses... students who had earned 4s on AP tests fared significantly worse in advanced courses in those subjects than those who had earned 5s. Overall, in fact, they did worse than classmates who had not taken AP classes in high school."
www.nytimes.com

Escalation: Reporting on a school training session for principals about harassment of gay and lesbian students, the Houston

Chronicle said a former Nevada student now working in California told the administrators, "If there's one thing I want you to leave with today, it's that these situations start with words. When it is not stopped, it escalates."
www.chron.com

Learning Latin: Classical studies, including the trivium or three-part progression of learning that moves through Latin grammar, logic and rhetoric, are giving students from the full spectrum of socioeconomic backgrounds what they need to excel, officials at small schools across the nation told the Philadelphia Inquirer.
www.phillynews.com

E-mentoring: Education Week reported on two startup Web sites where novice teachers, guaranteed anonymity, can post questions and get replies from experienced peers. University of Texas at Austin professor Judi Harris told the publication that "online mentoring should complement, not take the place of, in-person mentoring, and vice versa."
www.edweek.org

Calendar

April

- 16** School presentation to commissioners on school budget, 3 p.m., Government Center, room 267.
- 22** 10th annual UNCC environmental celebration marking Earth Day. School groups welcome. Free. 10 a.m.-2:30 p.m., Belk Tower quad.

May

- 18** Jump Start For Parents, UNCC Cone center, 10 a.m.- 2 p.m., sponsored by Winners Plus Agency. Topics include father's corner, parents speaking out, suspension, family resources, CMS EC programs and services, testing, working with your children's teacher, how to volunteer. Information: Blanche Penn 704-890-4101.
- 20** School board breakfast with legislators, 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 schools.