

Does middle-school grouping work?

Crisis-level high school retention rates put middle schools in the spotlight

Bonds or no bonds, CMS is in an academic crisis: Students are getting to high school without the most basic of preparations. As the chart at right shows, more than a quarter of last spring's ninth-graders were retained for a variety of reasons.

And the failure rate has ballooned over the last six years, from a low of 14.4% in 1996-97 to this past year's 25.3%.

Last week, school board members pointed to one small victory: After data has shown for years that some high school students could not read, the first reading instructors are now being assigned to high schools.

Ninth-grade failures – it takes only an F in English to be retained – suggest, as one high school principal told *Educate!* two weeks ago, that middle schoolers are not being prepared for being “held accountable at a different level” that high school work requires. Clearly, the retention problem has roots in the middle schools and how those programs intervene to bring students up to grade level.

CMS has focused tremendous resources on under-achieving kids in the last decade. Is a quarter of the ninth grade being retained the proper outcome?

It's easier to identify problems than to identify solutions, of course. And educators have been putting middle schools under the microscope for years. In the following pages is material about reforms

CMS 9th-grade retentions '97-'02

School year	9th-grade enrollment	Total retained*	Percent
'96-'97	6,866	989	14.4
'97-'98	10,358	1,668	16.1
'98-'99	11,332	2,041	18.0
'99-'00	8,280	1,798	21.7
'00-'01	8,618	1,531	17.8
'01-'02	8,954	2,261	25.3

Source: CMS. *Based on revised Promotion/Retention Report

that have deeply affected schools nationwide and have altered CMS policy and practice.

Today, more underachievers than ever are isolated at a few schools. And within all schools, policy and practice is pushing more and more of them into classes by themselves – shorn of more advanced peers from whom they could learn, easily labeled and stigmatized, at risk of concluding that they are not valued.

And while lip service is paid to leaving “No Child” behind, large numbers of certain kinds of children are clearly being left behind.

While CMS has not identified the 2,261 retained students by demographics, the state has released statistics that show that of the 2,402 CMS students taking English 1 last spring who got below-grade-

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Bonds at work

Tuesday's gray skies and muddy lots didn't halt work inside the replacement First Ward Elementary downtown. As of Sept. 30, construction was under way at 23 schools.

Another 13 projects are being designed, 39 are complete or substantially complete, 8 new schools have been built, 14 additions or renovations completed. And when all the current work is completed, and when all the work that would be paid for with bonds on next week's ballot is completed, even then only about the schools will be up to current standards. More on the bond issue, other news, page 2.

School bonds on ballot during voting Tuesday

Tuesday's off-year election ballot includes one school-related issue: a voter referendum on authorizing the county to issue up to \$224 million in bonds to finance school capital projects.

Details of how the money would be spent was published in the Sept. 12 edition of *Educate!*, which remains available in the archives at www.educateclt.org.

More information is available at www.voteeyesforbonds.com.

Early voting continues, 11 a.m.-7 p.m. daily and 10-1 Saturday at 10 library branches. Polls are open 6:30 a.m.-7:30 p.m. Tuesday.

What kids fear

The class project was a biopem, an autobiographical exercise plumbing issues of relationship, skills, ambitions, likes, dislikes, hopes... and fears.

Children of the Cold War might have addressed their fear of Soviet missiles. Today's kids mostly have different concerns. But amid the fears of rattlesnakes and theme-park rides, there's plenty of reality, too. Let's read the hallway wall of one elementary school for some of what's been posted in biopoems under the category, "Who fears":

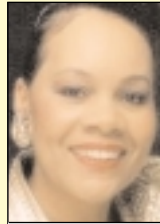
Who fears death, mean dogs, and losing family and friends,

Who fears when my mom starts to yell,

Who fears roller coasters, death, and flunking a grade,

The meeting focused on parent conferences: what to expect, how to stay focused on the child, how to be sure that if there's a problem, that the conference end with all the adults sharing the work to solve it.

But there were only eight souls at this meeting at a westside community center. A convenient location wasn't a sufficiently enticing draw.



Manning

But what would happen, asked consultant Glenda Manning, if future meetings were held in parents' homes? And what if the hostess received a gift for her trouble, and what if there was a thank-you gift for each guest, too? Rich people who serve on boards of directors don't do it for free: They get paid for coming to meetings. Shouldn't we recognize the value of poor people's time, too? she asked.

Send us your story. For addresses, see below.

I fear to do math and spelling,
Who fears rollercoasters dieing
and the world ending,

Who fears my parents, tigers in
the jungle, my sister when she's
mad,

Who fears death, work, teachers,
Who fears spiders, bees, ants
and dad's belt,

Who fears the dark, bugs, and
some reptiles,

Who fears, getting lost in big
places, Death, and losing a family,

Who fears the Wicked Twister at
Cedar Point and getting bitten by
snakes or sharks,

Who fears rats, racoons, spiders,
bees,

Who fears robbers, slaloming,
rollerblading,

Who fears death, getting hit with
a baseball and losing a tooth, and
being shot,

Who fears bees, big water slides
and ghosts,

Who fears bills, mail, and my talk,
Who fears when my dad mad,

spiders, rattle snake,

My fear is bees, grils and dogs,
Who fears bees, failing the fifth

grade and getting shot.

United Way report

At last week's school board meeting, Supt Jim Pughsley announced that CMS had raised \$410,179, surpassing its \$384,000 goal. "Charlotte-Meck has demonstrated that it is a community partner," Pughsley said.

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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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level scores of Level 1 or Level 2, 1,871 or 78% were nonwhite, 1,586 or 66% of them were black, and that 151 or 6% of them were Hispanic. No information was available on the percentage on subsidized lunch, an indicator of family poverty.

Separated at the core

Look at the class rolls as CMS teachers do, and you'll find some patterns.

At some middle schools, students are grouped in key classes by their end-of-grade ABCs score from the previous spring. Such homogeneous grouping leaves some classes full of the Level 3 kids or Level 4 kids who tested at or above grade level. Other classes will have the Level 1 and Level 2 kids.

Other middle schools follow heterogeneous grouping, mixing up the kids by achievement, while focusing additional intervention on the below-grade-level kids.

One middle school reportedly groups its kids in all four core courses – language arts, math, science and social studies. At others, the homogeneous grouping applies only to language arts and math.

Grouping is as old as American education, and nearly as controversial. Education experts say the habit dies hard.

“We do it here kind of lightly,” says school board chair Arthur Griffin. “We can group for skills, but not for any other reason.”

“There’s been some argument put forth that grouping is not important if everybody’s getting the same curriculum,” says Anne Wheelock, a research associate for Boston College’s Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation and Education Policy.

“I think that’s really misguided, and I don’t think it’s true. I’ve visited schools that have operated on that assumption.... They would

To group by ability – or not

“During the 1990s, the middle school movement has admirably been in the forefront of advocating a shift away from rigid ability grouping and tracking. In doing so, many schools have implemented challenging learning for all students in heterogeneous classrooms. Many have also encountered resistance of parents and teachers who assume that ‘untracking’ will mean a watering down of curriculum. In particular, parents of students labeled ‘gifted’ often hold out for segregated ‘top level’ classrooms in the belief that such settings represent their only guarantee that their children will experience challenging academic learning opportunities. In short, they do not trust the heterogeneous ‘mainstream’ to foster high achievement.

“Heterogeneous classes can benefit students of all performance levels when schools apply the expectations and learning opportunities available to ‘top level’ students to all students in multi-ability classrooms. However, analysis of NAEP results suggests that teaching in mixed-ability classrooms may match high-ability classrooms on only some of the standards recommended for powerful mathematics learning.

“On one hand, teachers of mixed-ability eighth-grade math classes matched teachers of high-ability classes in their emphasis on mathematics facts and concepts and on skills and procedures to solve problems. However, while 72 percent of students in high-ability classes received instruction that emphasized developing reasoning skills to solve unique problems, only 38 percent of students in mixed-ability classes received this emphasis. In addition, only about one-third of the eighth graders in mixed-ability classes experienced strong emphasis on communicating math ideas effectively compared to about one-half of their peers in high-ability classes.

“Standards-based reform could strengthen the implementation of heterogeneous classrooms in middle schools. In schools where special constituencies challenge mixed-ability grouping, standards can offer reassurance that middle schools take the schooling of all students seriously. Moreover, attention to standards for what all students should know and be able to do can provide guidance for curriculum and instruction in multi-ability classrooms and afford protection against the watering-down of curriculum in those classrooms. Within a context of standards-based reform, heterogeneous classrooms can offer high expectations for exemplary work and opportunities to learn equal to that of ‘high ability’ classrooms.”

– Anne Wheelock in 1995 article, “Standards-based reform: What does it mean for the middle grades?”

really try hard to make that low-level class work.

“They would make sure that they had the best teachers, that the class size was smaller, that the content was the same.

“But they could not overcome the message that that kind of class gives kids, which is that you are different and somehow not

worthy of participation in a regular class.”

A CMS teacher says his Level 2 kids get a different book from Level 3 kids, and the book stays in their locker or at home. That’s because to be seen with the book is to be identified as a “2,” as a dummy.

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Data driving decisions

North Carolina's ABCs testing program "is driving some decisions," acknowledges Terri Mozingo, CMS assistant superintendent for middle school curriculum and instruction. "We do have an expectation to use data to drive decisions."

Students land in the classes they do because of a "master schedule" for each school. State law leaves decisions on placement of students to the principal, but that doesn't mean there aren't systemwide criteria in place.

Mozingo says principals start with state curriculum standards. What courses does the child need to take? for example. Then a principal "uses a lot of different information to schedule kids." Factors include age, retention in past years, social adjustment and developmental factors. Advice from teachers and counselors should be part of the mix.

But Mozingo says that "the bottom line is the decision should be decided by some data point."

So a principal creates a class of students. And that decision may be shaped chiefly by the students' end-of-grade score. But once the class is in operation, Mozingo said, the class will offer "opportunities for reteaching or acceleration" depending on each student's needs.

"The notion that they are just tracked throughout the day, I don't think you would find that."

Homogeneous classes "are instructing kids at the appropriate level," Mozingo says. "Once they've mastered that," then the goal is to push student learning beyond that level.

"We have some of our courses that lend themselves more to homogeneity."

Mozingo says CMS has "so many support systems in place to ensure that teachers get the right

Staying focused on academics

"On one hand, the middle school movement has argued strongly for education that is 'developmentally appropriate.' Advocates for middle schools have rightly insisted on school structures that foster a sense of belonging, confidence, and self-esteem in their young adolescent students, and that support multi-faceted learning, meaningful participation in school life, and positive social interaction with adults and peers.

"Yet, in the attempt to create schools that attend to these needs, middle school rhetoric often includes references to students as being 'a little brain dead.' In the absence of information to the contrary, those who work most closely with young adolescents may come to see them as students who 'struggle more with their grades, because physically their bodies are concentrating on puberty and not allowing enough brain power for studying.'

"As one teacher asserts, 'Eighth-grade students, in particular, are driven by hormones; anyone who doesn't realize this has not dealt with them.'" When these views prevail, young adolescent students may find themselves in schools with an unnecessarily narrow vision of what they can accomplish academically."

— Anne Wheelock in 1995 article, "Standards-based reform: What does it mean for the middle grades?"

access to the right information to provide a rich and engaging classroom. Middle schools are making progress."

Within many classes there is a level of diversity when it comes to experiences, background, attitude and study habits, Mozingo says. "What a good school has to do is recognize that and provide small-group activities" that meet individual needs.

Within a class, she said, teachers are learning to make use of fluid regrouping, placing children in pairs or small groups to work on specific skills those children need to develop. Curriculum and AVID tutors help support this effort.

Mozingo calls this "a high level of differentiation with a strong level of support."

Mozingo calls grouping an "old argument."

"What people want is what's best for children. They want to know that, regardless of the setting, all of my child's needs will be met" in a safe, disciplined school. "That's the core."

"This system is doing a tremendous amount, far beyond a lot of

other systems."

Reforms already in place, Mozingo said, make CMS schools "a whole different model and we are on the right track. To change the path would do a disservice to a lot of our kids."

Hard to catch up

Jack Piel, a UNCC education professor and co-author of the C.A.M.M.P. math curriculum, says the fundamental problem with grouping is that children in low-level classes never catch up. If kids are taught where they are and at a slower pace, "next year you're going to have these missing pieces." Or as a CMS teacher puts it, if a student must have completed the EOG level 3 general math book to move on to algebra, none of the kids with the 2 book will ever get to algebra. And without that gateway course to graduation, dropping out is guaranteed.

But for Piel and others, grouping is at least partly explained by the logic of teacher seniority. If kids are grouped by EOG scores and you're a senior teacher able to pick your classes, "you never

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have to see those ones and twos,” Piel said.

A former CMS official says there’s one more factor to consider. The youth now repeating ninth grade were in fourth grade when former Supt. Eric Smith arrived. Smith’s focus was on improving academic rigor of lower grades, and adding pre-kindergarten. These ninth-graders are the last not touched by those reforms.

The good news, the ex-official says, is that future ninth-graders will be better prepared.

The bad news is that the kids just held back have been set up to drop out.

Project Acceleration

Last fall, in the middle of the semester, about 500 middle schoolers were pushed into higher-level math so they would be ready for the higher-level high school courses that are required for college.

The students to be pushed ahead were identified chiefly through EOG scores. That is, they had performed well enough in the spring to be placed in advanced classes, but somehow were not assigned to those classes.

“It smacked us in the face,” says CMS diversity coordinator Rahman Khan. The name makes the program “sound better than it is. It actually is a failure” by staff to place students correctly.

Most of the roughly 500 students moved last fall were African American. Most moves involved math, though some involved reading.

The only change from Project Acceleration, says curriculum expert Mozingo, “is to schedule kids appropriately.”

But Khan acknowledges that when the brighter kids moved up, those left behind had few peers to help them learn. But he’d recommend doing it again.

“I don’t want those students

The perils of retention

“I absolutely agree that kids who later drop out begin to disconnect in the middle grades. Lots of these kids are poor, but regardless of their income level or social background, the way schools respond to income or social background contributes in a huge way to what happens to the kids.

“Holding kids back in grade, closing tardy kids out of school, suspending kids (sometimes for truancy) are all some of the practices that undermine school commitment.... Being overage for grade (say, 13 in 7th grade, 14 or over in 8th, etc.) is more powerful a factor in dropping out than low basic skills.”

– Ann Wheelock in a response during a chat room conversation on www.middleweb.com

with the opportunity to move up to be held back. For the others, there is still some variety in the [lower-level] classes and if you have smaller classes, the teacher doesn’t have to worry about it as much” because instruction can be tailored to the lower-level students’ needs.

And yet the evidence of culture problems mounts. On Monday, Khan got a call from a middle school staffer worried that the bright black kids are holding back academically so they “can play in the cool crowd,” Khan says. He may end up addressing the entire eighth grade.

Khan knows the pressures. An African American who went to D.C. schools, Khan says he was esteemed because he played basketball, so he didn’t pay as big a price for his good academics. But he knows the taunts kids throw. “One of the worst insults is ‘You’re acting white.’ Or gay.... Or nerdy.” Under such pressure, kids stop raising their hands in class.

“We’ve got to get to the point,” says Khan, “where there are enough African Americans in higher-level courses where they won’t make it a big deal.”

Shortchanged at bottom

In a September 2001 study, the Southern Regional Education Board reported on a year 2000 survey of 5,000 eighth-graders and 1,800 teachers at 60 schools in 14 states. The student respons-

es were split by demographics, then by performance. Such sorting showed that low-performing students, regardless of race, had starkly different education experiences.

Asked if they agreed that teachers made clear the amount and quality of work needed to earn an A or a B, the answers were:

	White	Black
High-performer	63%	66%
Low-performer	38%	38%

Asked if they agreed that their teachers knew their subjects and could make them interesting and useful, the answers were:

	White	Black
High-performer	43%	31%
Low-performer	36%	33%

The SREB reported that “in one interview during a school visit, a student described teachers who knew their subject as ‘always asking about the “hows” and “whys.” They ask us to compare and contrast, and they challenge us to think.”

The SREB study said that middle school teachers are asking for help, for professional development. The study found that it took at least 16 hours annually of professional development in a content area for teachers’ classroom activities to benefit. About 7% of teachers reported in the SREB survey that they had access to that many hours of professional development.

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Sorted and sorted

Anne Wheelock, the Boston College researcher, tells a story about one of her first research projects, which was designed to understand the root causes of persistent low achievement among African American and Hispanic children in Boston's 63,000-student school system.

After much study of programs and curriculum standards and school policies, "there came a sort of moment when I looked at a printout of course enrollments, and there, in black and white, it said that there was just one Latino student in a 12th-grade advanced class.

"It was the culmination of sorting. Kids all start out in the mainstream but they get siphoned off."

Wheelock recalls being sent by a judge into an Amherst, N.H., classroom in connection with a lawsuit over tracking. The day's subject in a low-level, homogeneously group classroom was Greek myth.

"They're a quite traditional class, with the teacher asking questions. The kids are going through the standard answers. Then at one point a girl says, 'You mean Mount Olympus is a real place?'"

"She connected that there was real geography behind this and that Mount Olympus was still there in Greece and it was like, wow.

"About three kids turned on her and said, 'You didn't know that? You are so stupid.'"

Says Wheelock, "You felt that this kid was never going to raise her hand again.... The kids in that class seemed much more concerned about who was smart and who was stupid" than in learning. That's a kind of culture and, Wheelock seems to be saying, it's a kind of culture that schools can

Reforming middle schools requires trust

Hayes Mizell, onetime Columbia, S.C. school board member and director of the Program for Student Achievement at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, writes and speaks widely on middle schools. In an address Oct. 16 in Nyack, N.Y., Mizell noted that middle school test scores have leveled off and that a recent Manhattan Institute study found that many eighth-grade teachers didn't have higher expectations for their students than fourth-grade teachers did.

"What do parents need to know about middle school reform?"

"They need to know it is necessary. They need to know it is possible. They need to know that in advocating and working for middle school reform it is okay for them to trust their better instincts about what is good for their children.

"They need to know that each day in middle schools across this country there are teachers and administrators working to reform their schools. They need to know that for schools and communities that are serious about reform, there is a wealth of experience, expertise, and information upon which they can draw.

"The real issue is whether people who complain about middle schools are willing to work together to create more effective schools. The tough regimen of reform is one that many people, both parents and educators, prefer to avoid because it can be inconvenient, long, and sometimes painful.

"It will be much less so if parents and educators work together, believing that reform is necessary and possible, sharing perspectives and information, forging bonds of respect and trust, and collaborating to create middle schools that serve all students well."

Mizell's speech is at www.middleweb.com/HMparents.html

cultivate through grouping.

Grouping "can be harmful to top kids, too," Wheelock adds. "They run risks when they admit they have questions about materials, when they make honest mistakes. This is how we learn. We learn by making mistakes."

In a later study, Wheelock identified 300 schools that were moving to heterogeneous grouping, had quality curriculum and instruction, and were reducing the labeling of children. While the methods used varied, Wheelock said all schools in the group "had set up this idea that any program that was good for top-level kids was something all kids could benefit from."

The schools had made curriculum less sequential, she said. That allowed children to proceed, even if they weren't high-flyers in, say, one field of math. In such classes, "kids would say, 'She's

really smart in this and this and this. And I need some extra help in this and this.' But that was acknowledged without an adult coming in and saying 'You're smart.' It had to do with assignments and kids watching one another and working with one another. So there were kids who were supersmart, but maybe they weren't good listeners, or smart at everything."

At schools that have avoided tracking, Wheelock says children are "not unaware of their and other kids' strengths and weakness. And they were not unaware that almost all of them needed help at various times.... But this awareness didn't lead them to dismiss one another or label one another or dissuade them from asking for extra help."

And in a school culture that values asking questions and knowing

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your stuff, there are fewer nerds, and maybe fewer Columbines.

Pressure to improve test scores is reshaping schools nationally. Gone is the time for long-term projects, Socratic discussions and other deep learning. Wheelock says a school near her has ended its long tradition of eighth-graders writing and producing a play. She's seen another middle school begin to group incoming sixth-graders exclusively on the basis of their fourth-grade test scores. Nothing lifts the shadow of a bad fourth-grade score – because the research shows that kids behind at fourth grade are at risk of failing the eighth-grade tests.

What's to be done?

National data suggests that low-level classes have more substitutes. They produce more discipline headaches. And not surprisingly, teachers burn out in them more easily.

Some of these attributes could move with the kids if they are dispersed into heterogenous classrooms. But some researchers insist that kids are bored and act out because the slow-track classes are themselves the problem.

That said, it is unlikely that any one solution is going to solve a failure rate that touches more than 25% of CMS's ninth-graders. There may not be 2,000 problems to be solved before the retention rate gets back under control, but there will be lots more than one. Among them:

Know thy children: Wheelock tells of a middle school that sends representatives each spring to the elementaries from which it draws and tells the fifth-graders to be ready to say in what ways they're smart in each area of the curriculum. Then each fifth-grader, during a visit to the middle school, is interviewed and the students get

The goals for a culture change

“What does school culture have to do with ‘standards-based reform’ of schools? For many years, close observers of school reform have underscored the futility of any attempt to improve student learning without changing the culture and ‘regularities’ of schooling. The rhetoric of ‘all students achieving’ is little more than empty promise without a school culture, including the norms, values, routines, and beliefs about learning that define school practices, that nurtures that vision. If reformers fail to address the culture of schooling, the goals of the ‘standards movement’ will remain unrealized.

“What does such a culture look like? What assumptions and beliefs, school routines, classroom practices, and organizational arrangements contribute to sustaining a culture of high standards? As they work toward improved achievement of all students, standards-oriented practitioners assert that a school culture of high standards weaves together a set of norms and beliefs, practices and routines so that:

- “Teachers put student work, supported by rich pedagogy, at the center of teaching and learning;
- “Teachers shape their relationships with students and among students to nurture student motivation, effort, and investment in schoolwork;
- “Teachers develop their practice in the context of a professional community focused on improving the work all students do, coupling a ‘press for achievement’ with standards of care.

“Developing each of these aspects of school culture requires multiple changes in schools’ standard operating procedures and structures. It means developing positive relationships among adults and between teachers and students. It means structuring support for students into the school day so that they will exert the effort necessary to do work that ‘meets standards.’”

– Anne Wheelock in *“Safe To Be Smart: Building a Culture for Standards-Based Reform in the Middle Grades”*

to explain the ways in which they're smart. Wheelock says teachers end up knowing more about their incoming sixth-graders than they know about their departing eighth-graders. And the information helps shape how the children can be most effectively taught.

The whole story: Teachers need to know how students really feel about aspects of their work. Wheelock speaks about teachers who asked students to draw portraits of themselves during specific activities, such as taking a high-stakes test. Some of the pictures show blood oozing. Others show bored faces, or work going

on in thought bubbles drawn off to the side. “These are ways to get data is is not so score-based,” Wheelock says.

Careful with the books: In 2000, a unit of the American Association for the Advancement of Science rated seven of 12 algebra books adequate, but rated none of them highly.

Said study director George Nelson, “...where most books are the weakest are those [skills] that are most critical in helping all students achieve, such as building on the knowledge that students may already have and dealing with their misconceptions.”

– Steve Johnston

Don't water down 'No Child' standards, U.S. official warns

Last week, U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige wrote state education officials warning against lowering standards to minimize the schools "in need of improvement." Excerpts:

"...To confront our nation's education challenges we must be bold and we must be honest. Only by openly discussing our schools' weaknesses can we begin to enact reform and build new strengths.

"In many instances, we have seen principals and districts embrace the new spirit of accountability and achievement, embodied by No Child Left Behind.... Unfortunately, some states have lowered the bar of expectations to hide the low performance of their schools. And a few others are discussing how they can ratchet down their standards in order to remove schools from their lists of low performers. Sadly, a small number of persons have suggested reducing standards for defining 'proficiency' in order to artificially present the facts. This is not worthy of a great country....

"The law is meant to spur improvement, encourage reform, and inspire new initiatives so that every boy and girl learns. Thus, it is nothing less than shameful that some defenders of the status quo are trying to hide the performance of underachieving schools in order to shield parents from reality.

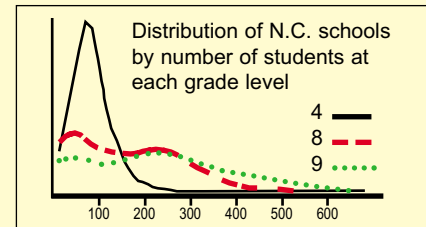
"Not only is this political tactic an embarrassment, it undermines the public's trust in education as a cornerstone of freedom. Those who play semantic games or try to tinker with state numbers to lock out parents and the public, stand in the way of progress and reform. They are the enemies of equal justice and equal opportunity. They are apologists for failure. And they will not succeed."

North Carolina is to set its "No Child" rules in January.

The limits of school test data

A study of N.C. data suggests that, as current published, annual testing doesn't reliably tell the public which schools are succeeding. Three excerpts from a 2001 study by Thomas Kane and Douglas Staiger entitled, "Improving School Accountability Measures":

Why results are imprecise: "The imprecision of test score measures arises from two sources. The first is sampling variation, which is a particularly striking problem in elementary schools. With the average elementary school containing only 60 students per grade level, the amount of variation due to the idiosyncracies of the particular sample of students being tested is often large relative to the total amount of variation in student performance observed. A second source of imprecision arises from one-time factors that are not sensitive to the



size of the sample: a dog barking in the playground on the day of the test, a severe flu season, one particularly disruptive student in a class or favorable 'chemistry' between a group of students and their teacher...."

Rankings as lottery: "If there were 'good' and 'bad' schools which could be observed with certainty, we might expect to see 90 percent of schools never ranking in top 10 percent and 10 percent of schools always ranking at the top.

"At the opposite extreme, where schools were equal and the top 10 percent were chosen by lottery each year, we would expect 47 percent of schools ranking in the top 10 percent at least once over 6 years and only 1 in a million ranking in the top 10 percent all 6 years.

"The rankings generally resemble a lottery, particularly in gain scores. If math scores were the metric, between 31 and 36 percent of schools would have ranked in the top 10 percent at some point over the 6 years....No school ranked in the top 10 percent on 5th grade reading gains for all 6 years."

Chasing after what works: "When the 1998-99 MCAS test scores were released in Massachusetts in November of 1999, the Provincetown district showed the greatest improvement over the previous year. The Boston Globe published an extensive story describing the various ways in which Provincetown had changed educational strategies between 1998 and 1999, interviewing the high school principal and several teachers.

"As it turned out, they had changed a few policies at the school – decisions that seemed to be validated by the improvement in performance. One had to dig a bit deeper to note that the Provincetown high school had only 26 students taking the test in 10th grade.

"Given the wide distribution of test scores among students in Massachusetts, any grouping of 26 students is likely to yield dramatic swings in test scores from year to year, that is large relative to the distribution of between-school differences.

"In other words, if school-level test scores are the gauge, the Boston Globe and similar newspapers around the country will eventually write similar stories praising virtually every variant of educational practice. It is no wonder that the public and policymakers are only more confused about the way to proceed."

The full paper, © by Thomas J. Kane and Douglas O. Staiger, can be downloaded for \$5 from the National Bureau of Economic Research Web site at <http://papers.nber.org/papers/W8156>

Briefs

Catching up: A Connecticut study has found that 4-year olds from low-income families who are in preschool with children from more affluent families learn vocabulary six times faster than low-income peers in classrooms without that economic diversity, the Hartford Courant reported. Connecticut officials said the St. Joseph College study suggested the value of cross-class education. Research suggests that larger vocabularies lead to more success with reading, and that children without those large vocabularies by the age of 3 or 4 find it difficult to catch up when they enter kindergarten.

www.ctnow.com

KIPP gains: A group of schools serving low-income inner-city children continue to post big test-score gains, the Washington Post reported. KIPP, which stands for Knowledge is Power Program, operates as charter schools, and focuses on longer school days, Saturday sessions, tough discipline and rewards for performance. The high-flying test scores are based on comparison between fall tests and spring tests. Most schools compare test results from spring to spring.

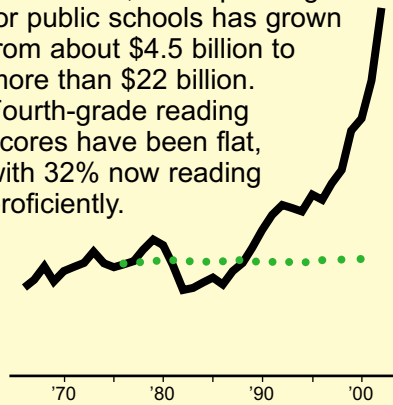
www.washingtonpost.com

Building trust: In a lengthy story about how schools are trying to involve parents in their children's education, the Raleigh News & Observer quoted a former teacher aide who now heads a Fayetteville parent-involvement program as saying, "It's surprising how many times neither group is really listening to the other. Parents don't understand the system because they aren't involved in the system. But I also think schools are going to have to step outside their comfort zone if they want to gain parents' trust."

www.newsobserver.com

Federal spending vs. NAEP reading scores

Since 1966, U.S. spending for public schools has grown from about \$4.5 billion to more than \$22 billion. Fourth-grade reading scores have been flat, with 32% now reading proficiently.



Source: U.S. Dept. of Education

PTA blues: The Los Angeles Times reported that only a third of L.A. schools now have a chapter of the PTA. Many immigrant families come from countries without a tradition of school volunteerism. Nationally, PTA membership peaked 40 years ago at 12 million, and now is 6.5 million.

www.latimes.com

Too much detail: New York City schools will abandon a new elementary report card that assesses student skills in more than 100 categories, the Times reported. Teachers say the form takes an hour to fill out per child. Officials said they would aim for a shorter, simpler report card. The complex report was keyed to state standards, and was designed in part to educate parents on the performance standards their children were expected to meet.

www.nytimes.com

No ban: The Miami-Dade school board declined to ban sales of all chocolate on school grounds as a protest over child slave labor in cocoa-producing nations of west Africa, the Herald reported.

www.miami.com

Parents on the watch: Philadelphia will spend \$2.5 million annually hiring parents part-time to round up and bring in truant students in their communities, the Inquirer reported.

www.philly.com

Calendar

November

- 2 District 6 meeting, 9 a.m., Presbyterian Hospital Matthews Community Room.
- 4 Task force on Endhaven Lane elementary boundaries, 6:30 p.m., Hawk Ridge Elementary.
- 5 No school; teacher workday.
- 5 Task force on southwest middle school boundaries, 6:30 p.m., Quail Hollow Middle.
- 7 School board retreat begins at 8:30 a.m., Berry Academy. Continues through Friday.
- 7 Task force on Mint Hill middle school boundaries, 6:30 p.m., Lebanon Road Elementary.
- 11 No school; Veterans Day; teacher workday.
- 11 Task force on Endhaven Lane elementary boundaries, 6:30 p.m., McAlpine Elementary.
- 12 Discussion of gang activity in Charlotte by panel of law enforcement and school officials, Tuesday Morning Forum, McDonald's Cafeteria, 2810 Beatties Ford Rd. (coffee, tea only).
- 12 School board meeting, 6 p.m., Board Room.
- 12 Task force on southwest middle boundaries, 6:30 p.m., Lake Wylie Elementary.
- 14 Task force on Mint Hill middle school boundaries, 6:30 p.m., Albemarle Road Middle.
- 14 Panel on arbitrary police profiling, 9 a.m., Police & Fire Training Academy.
- 16 Workshop on African-American Genealogy, \$5 per person, 8:30 a.m. registration, Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, 3301 Beatties Ford Rd. Bring bag lunch; drinks furnished. Sponsor: Comprehensive Genealogical Services.