

Big issues calling

Schools may be about to close, but difficult challenges lie ahead needing focus, attention

By STEVE JOHNSTON

School's nearly out. Summer beckons. It's time to take a rest from school and PTA and policy debates, right?

Only, there are storms gathering on the horizon that we ignore at our peril.

Such times offer not only fearsome choices, but unparalleled opportunities. How will Charlotte-Mecklenburg respond? How, gentle reader, will you respond?

Below are some of the issues that await us. Your thoughtful participation will help make Charlotte-Mecklenburg a better place.

Assignment

You may have thought that the choice plan was settled, and in most major elements it probably is. But a school board committee will begin to review the plan soon, and as early as next month.

Supt. Jim Pughsley wants any changes to be in place for the August 2004 school opening. He says two years of experience has shown that some changes are needed.

But that means making deci-

sions by mid-fall – for by December, parents will begin making choices for August 2004.

Public controversy over choice has been focused chiefly on overcrowding and underutilization.

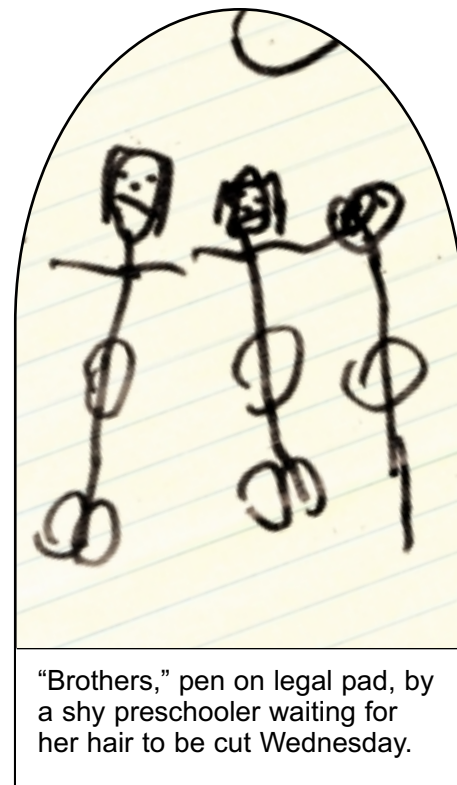
Pughsley has now put a handful of schools off-limits to student reassignments and transfers, though he's not used all the tools at his disposal. Last spring, for example, the choice plan allowed him, regarding students whose parents did not make any choice, to assign those children wherever seats were available. Instead, those children went to their home schools, some of which were already overcrowded.

And while CMS has never provided an accounting, it appears that administration-approved and board-approved transfers and reassignments have exacerbated the crowding at some schools.

But aside from overcrowding, choice has left the system with numerous other challenges, even if they don't universally engage the public's attention:

– There's been a 20-plus percent increase in busing mileage. Some of that mileage will disappear as students age out of distant schools that they were allowed to keep attending when the choice plan started last fall. But clearly choice means more bus routes, and that's a price that parents happy with their choices appear to be delighted to pay.

– But the "choices" available to some parents aren't nearly as attractive as those available to other parents. Thousands of the



"Brothers," pen on legal pad, by a shy preschooler waiting for her hair to be cut Wednesday.

parents associated with the district's most challenged schools did not choose those schools. If the parent involvement so critical to school excellence is missing at those schools, should anyone be surprised?

If those schools tend to be identifiable by race or socioeconomic status, should anyone be surprised by future lawsuits?

– The plan creates numerous sites where high student mobility, limited family resources and an overwhelming number of high-needs children may be leading to high teacher turnover. If turnover remains high, the achievement gains expected by No Child Left Behind will be far more unlikely.

Pughsley has not indicated what issues he wants to address before the lottery next January.

Nor is it clear how open the review will be, and whether CMS will make any effort to invite public participation in that process.

But the work of CMS board

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Educate! schedule

Educate! will publish next Thursday, then suspend weekly publication for the summer.

E-mail updates or full editions of Educate! will be published as news warrants.

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committees must be held in open session. Parents have only to ask CMS, or Educate!, to know when to attend such sessions.

Budget

The schools' budget remains up in the air, and will remain so for several weeks.

The board asked the county for an amount \$14.9 million higher than the current year's budget. The county manager recommended \$5 million. Four Democrats want \$10 million. Four Republicans agreed last weekend on a zero increase, though two of the four came into the meeting wanting to cut \$5 million.

That leave commissioners Chairman Tom Cox, who has apparently been keeping his own counsel.

With that scenario, CMS is liable to receive less than it sought. If the state budget sours further, the cuts could get much larger, and more painful.

That's the short-term outlook. But last week's three-year financial forecast indicates that next year, instead of asking for \$14.9 million, CMS may be asking for \$96 million. Reaching such a goal will take a quantum leap in public support for the ever-increasing needs of this school system. The work to build that support, like resolving assignment plan issues, should begin immediately.

Equity

Thus far, Pughsley has been able to work around smaller-than-needed revenues without touching the so-called equity programs: staff incentives to teach in high-poverty schools, additional resources for those schools, repairs of those mostly older facilities, and so forth.

But over the next months as real budget numbers become available, be watching for

whether class sizes are inching up at Equity Plus II schools. Or if they are not, are class sizes inching up at schools in the wealthier suburbs? In either event, seeds of future disaster might be being planted – at the Equity Plus II schools because promises have been broken, at suburban schools because parents with financial resources may simply abandon the public school system, and in doing so erode one of the keys to promoting a healthy civic environment.

Test results

Next week brings preliminary data from this spring's end-of-grade testing in grades 3-8. Supt. Pughsley hinted last week that there might be some pleasant surprises.

For schools essentially reconstituted by last year's assignment changes, comparisons to last year will be of limited value. Another possibility suggested by early reports of huge one-year increases is that state-set pass rates may have been too low, as clearly occurred with math scores several years ago.

Whatever the details, the overall results will be taken as a key assessment of whether CMS can help all children move from where they were toward academic proficiency.

Three items to watch: Do schools have all children on or above grade level? Are students at all achievement levels making a year's progress? And are achievement gaps among demographic groups being eliminated?

It may take until the end of the summer for all the appropriate data to be released. And CMS officials have promised a new round of data not required by the state that should make it quite clear, school by school, where a year's progress is being made by students at all levels. Such information is not just for audit and accountability purposes: In a system now dominated by school choice, such data could be a pow-

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When this journal resumes in August, it may be for only 6

more issues, based on the funds on hand at the beginning of this month. We offer our thanks to the

8%

of people now regularly receiving *Educate!* who have ever helped defray the cost of its publication, and for \$930 in contributions received during May toward the \$3,850 monthly expense budget. A community journal must have the support of its readers. Are you doing your part? To make a tax-deductible donation, send your check to The Swann Fellowship, 1510 E.7th St., Charlotte, NC 28204-2410.

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erful basis for shopping: Is a school doing well by children like mine?

Much of the attention of the press may be on No Child Left Behind's new "needs improvement" label. Well over half of all N.C. schools are expected to receive the pejorative label, which often gets translated as "failing."

Initial test results at elementary and middle school levels will be out in time to cast a glow, or a pall, over commissioners' final budget decisions. Results for high schools, which may be in deepest trouble, won't be released until after the county budget is set.

Substitutes

At Equity Plus II schools, the high-poverty schools that are the only ones covered by sanctions under No Child Left Behind, the district is under federal mandate not to hire teachers unless they are "highly qualified."

Perhaps in a weak economy there will be loads of teacher prospects this fall. But if there aren't, parents at E+II schools need to be watchful of substitutes being used to cover classes for which there are no full-time hires.

Individuals who substitute may be gifted teachers. But they by definition cannot assure a school the stability in instruction that is a mainstay of student success.

To alleviate such concerns, CMS should be ready from Day One to track use of substitutes, and promptly disseminate the information weekly.

The superintendent

Jim Pughsley had barely served nine months when the questions began: Is this the leader we need at CMS?

The questions seemed to mark a change, but they are certainly not inappropriate: The CMS superintendency is a tough position, and

Charlotte's challenge is to make every school a school that every parent would consider choosing.

the Eric Smith years got many people accustomed to the notion that the job requires an omnipresent, high-energy, quick-response leader.

Pughsley appears to be none of those things, but he has different strengths. And comparisons with Smith distract from far more important issues: Does the top manager have the system moving in the right direction? And is it moving at the proper speed?

Pughsley's end-of-first-year evaluation will begin soon among school board members, behind closed doors. His contract runs through June 2004.

That contract can be read in full at www.educateclt.org on the "Contact Us" page – the only place we could find on the site last year to park a big block of text.

In that contract, the board said it would likely not begin a search for a new superintendent before June 30, the end of Pughsley's first year.

But don't expect any search to begin until well after schools reopen. That's because candidates are not likely to make themselves available until then.

Whenever the search begins, Pughsley's contract promises that he will be a finalist.

The public interest

But perhaps the biggest question mark hanging over the schools is whether adults from all walks of life will enroll their children, then provide the money, sweat and other investment that is vital to any public institution's

success.

January's lottery results showed that parents are choosing to make white schools whiter and minority schools more minority. A review of the data this fall will probably also show that the district will, this fall, operate more high-poverty, more low-poverty schools, and fewer in the middle.

That this sorting-out of children is bad educational policy has been proven over and over again across the country.

Some would even call it evil. For underneath the rallying cry of choice can lurk a muffled appeal to fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of the other. Fear of the unfamiliar.

Schools that are building character and respect can be, indeed must be, places of peace, not chaos; of shared values, not factions; of high expectations, not common denominators.

Charlotte's challenge is to make every school a school that every parent would consider choosing.

Some school board members now acknowledge what many parents have been saying for two years: that THEY wouldn't send their kids to some CMS schools. If school board members saying that is not a wake-up call to the board and the larger community, what will it take?

On July 11, the UNC Center for Civil Rights will be in Charlotte with some outside experts, reviewing CMS's experience with choice.

Their goal in talking to local people appears to be chiefly to get their experts grounded in reality as they come up with regional and national responses to the forces that are resegregating schools across the country.

But if the press pays attention to the event, and the local people involved take what they learned and talk to their friends and associates about the issues, the July 11 event might spark the conversation Charlotte-Mecklenburg needs to have about its own schools, and the children who will shape the community's future.

Will we keep promise to children?

Government has an irreplaceable role aiding kids that adults fail to help

By **BOB SIMMONS**

My wife and I moved here from Houston in 1986. She's from Winston-Salem, and we both attended Carolina. We chose Charlotte in equal parts for its business opportunity, its quality of life and its culture of acceptance.

In particular, we were drawn by the prospect of sending our children to school in a public system that was known for its success in meshing desegregation and academic excellence.

The spirit which made Charlotte "the city that made desegregation work" was the spirit of a cooperative community which fostered commercial success and attracted new businesses and residents.

Our first child was born in 1987. That was the same year that I started volunteering with the Children's Law Center. I represented children in school discipline hearings and appeals.

Between that work and my wife's work as a teacher at Metro School, I learned that substantial obstacles stood in the paths of many of our children.

That's what Tommy Tomlinson was writing about in Observer columns on May 25 and May 28 – not just Alkia Rodgers, but all of our community's children who face every day obstacles that they should not face.

They face their obstacles for a whole host of reasons, but all of those reasons boil down to one: Some adult somewhere some time let them down, and no other adult stepped into the void for them.

All of my clients in that work had broken a school rule that could result in their suspension for more than 10 days or their expulsion. Most of them were poor. Most of them lived with one

parent or with another relative. Many of them had health problems that had not been adequately addressed, and many of them had learning problems that had either not been identified or not been adequately served.

The children who came to us were the lucky ones. Somehow, they had found their way to a door where there was help. Sometimes it was their parents who found us. Sometimes it was their teachers who found us. Sometimes it was their court counselors who found us. But they were the tips of the icebergs all around.

Most of our clients were also being served by the advocates of the Council for Children, by Communities in Schools or by one or more of a number of other private, nonprofit agencies in town which try to help our children in need.

All of the agencies were underfunded, understaffed and underappreciated – or even unknown – by most of the people in our community.

All were stretched to serve too many children who needed help now, while simultaneously trying to find ways to make the systemic changes that might stop the children from falling into need. Today they still are, but they have never stopped working for our children.

Back then, we worked with CMS through a Discipline Advisory Panel that was assembled by Supt. John Murphy. We revised the discipline regulations and trained hearing officers to follow due process. We devised alternatives to suspension and expulsion.

And then we changed our focus, starting at the Children's Law Center an Education Law Project

About the author

Bob Simmons represented District 1 on school board for a year ending December 2001, filling the unexpired term of Jim Puckett, who had moved on to the Board of County Commissioners.



Simmons

Simmons was a board member of the Children's Law Center from 1994 through 2002, and its president in 1999 and 2000. He is on boards of the Council for Children and of Children and Family Services Center, Inc., and is a real estate lawyer with Robinson, Bradshaw & Hinson.

recognized by the American Bar Association as a model.

We still represented some children in discipline hearings and appeals, but we represented more children in seeking earlier identification of special educational needs that gave them access to services under state or federal law. Or we helped them pursue those services.

And we began to work with CMS again in establishing policies and procedures to help their staff to identify and serve special needs before they led to frustration and discipline problems.

All of this was and is expensive, taking not only the time and money of nonprofit agencies – donors, volunteers and staff members, but also the time of CMS employees and the money of

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Mecklenburg County taxpayers. Every year there is a struggle for funding, both public and private, and every year there is just enough scraped together to chip away at the exposed tips of the icebergs.

But all we accomplish is to support the misperception that the icebergs aren't growing.

But they are growing. At the same time the absolute number of children in our community is growing and demanding more of the regular services of our educational and health systems, the number of children in need of special services is also growing.

Every year, more and more – not fewer and fewer – children are falling into need.

Who bears the responsibility for serving the needs of these children? Certainly, their parents bear that responsibility. But what if their parents can't or won't bear that responsibility? Should we say to those children, "We're sorry that you were born with needs that your parents can't or won't meet, but you're their problem, not ours?"

Too often, that's what we do say, or that's the effect of what we do - or don't do.

That's the effect of isolating needier children in schools unequipped to meet their greater needs. That's the effect of underfunding and understaffing public health and mental health services. That's the effect of underfunding and understaffing social services.

Private, nonprofit agencies, their donors, volunteers and staff can't possibly can't take up all of the slack left by our community's failure to meet its obligation to our neediest children through tax-funded government programs – the only programs with the scope and the backing to make any real, long-term difference. Without

Private, nonprofit agencies, their donors, volunteers and staff can't possibly can't take up all of the slack left by our community's failure to meet its obligation to our neediest children through tax-funded government programs – the only programs with the scope and the backing to make any real, long-term difference.

that support, all of the best efforts of the private, nonprofit agencies are a finger in the dike.

For example, there is no dispute that there is a strong correlation in our society between educational success and prosperity. And there is no dispute that children facing the challenges of poverty and other personal and social obstacles are substantially less likely to have educational success in our standard classrooms.

And there is no dispute that the most reliable way to insure that the neediest children have a greater likelihood of succeeding in school is to reduce class sizes. And there is no dispute that only the government can provide access to the education that all of our children need and deserve – from the poorest to the richest, from the most gifted to the most challenged. It's in the North Carolina Constitution. It's protected by federal law.

Reducing class sizes requires more classes, which in turn requires the construction of more classroom space, the hiring of more classroom teachers, assistants and other school staff and the purchase of more classroom materials.

Yet when our school superintendent, Dr. Jim Pughsley, lays the cost of those smaller classes in front of our representatives, they call it insane, as did School Board member Larry Gauvreau, or they state flat-out that they're not going to fund smaller class sizes, as did County

Commissioner Jim Puckett.

What is the point of the federal legislation promoted by President Bush and the Republicans in Congress as the "No Child Left Behind Act" if not to leave no children behind – especially those most likely to fall behind and currently being left behind?

Is the point not to test children to determine where they are failing, why they are failing and how to help them succeed? How can we fulfill the promise of the name of the Act if we are unwilling to follow through with the resources it requires?

We know which children are failing in school, and we know what is needed to help all of our children succeed in school, but we appear unwilling to pay the price to leave no children behind.

Education is but one of the eight Core Values that were identified by the community in an initiative led by the Council for Children two years ago, and adopted 8-1 by the County Commission recently.

The initial vote was 9-0, but County Commissioner Ruth Samuelson later changed her vote because the resolution stated that the children of Mecklenburg County have a "right" to family support, education, health care, emotional well-being, safety, community support, economic security and community activities.

Commissioner Samuelson was concerned that the use of the word "right" might create the expectation that the community would fund adequate services to insure these Core Values for all of our children, regardless of the ability of their parents to provide for them independently.

County Commissioner Bill James shared Commissioner Samuelson's concern about the use of the word "right," but he didn't change his vote. As quoted in an article about the vote, Commissioner James said, "Like any number of things we do, it's meaningless. If anything, they're goals. It's a laundry list of things

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you'd want for the community's kids, but it doesn't legally require us to fund anything. It's one thing if you have a belief about what children should have, it doesn't mean you obligate the county to pay for it."

Commissioner James is correct when he says that all of our best efforts and best intentions are meaningless if we are not willing to pay the price to keep our promise to our children.

Core Values bears a striking similarity to a national program adopted locally by CMS under the direction of then-superintendent Dr. Eric Smith on Sept. 13, 2001.

In the immediate shadow of 9/11/01, the Charlotte Convention Center rang with the commitment of a united community in a united nation to keep America's Promise.

Symbolized by a red wagon, the program was created under the leadership of Secretary of State Colin Powell during the period between his service on the Joint Chiefs of Staff and his service in the Bush Administration. As does Core Values, it called on communities across the country to keep the promise to our children to provide them all with safety, education, physical and mental health and opportunity.

Every day, there is a story in the newspaper about a child in our community whom we have left behind or to whom we have failed to keep America's promise. Every day we read about another child paying the price for our failure to supply Core Values.

Sometimes, as with the death of Alkia Rodgers, it leaps off the pages at us and will not be ignored. Sometimes, as with Tommy Tomlinson's columns about this tragedy, the specter of our failure is held up before us and we are not afforded the luxury of turning away.

Yet still we try to disclaim our

responsibility. It was her killer's fault, not our fault. Yet still we try to disconnect the inextricably intertwined reality of our existence, separating education from mental health from social services from legal services.

Instead of joining Commissioners Samuelson, Puckett and James in trying to figure out how we can avoid creating in our society the expectation that we will all provide for all of our children the right to Core Values in their lives, we should be proudly proclaiming that right and diligently striving to fulfill our obligation to honor it.

In honor of Alkia, and in honor of all of the other children who are in danger or failing or alone or sick or afraid or confused or hungry or homeless, we must look a tight budget and a questionable economy in the eye and say, "Yes, we will make it right."

Yes, we will pay the price because there is nothing so dear

as the future.

We won't be bound by foolish anti-tax pledges made in the throes of seeking office; instead we will be bound by the promise we make to each child born in this land: the promise that they will all be provided by all of us every day with equal justice, equal freedom and equal opportunity regardless of the misfortune of the time, place or circumstances of their birth. We are too strong to break that overriding promise. We are too good for our will to fail when it is most needed.

As Tommy Tomlinson said, it is now time for all of us to show that we have the guts to do the hard, costly and lifelong work it takes to keep the promise of providing Core Values to every child in America every day.

If not, every day another child will pay the price for our lack of will, and that's the price that we truly cannot afford.

Another reference to diversity about to go

In another possible bow to current holdings of the courts, CMS is about to write "workplace diversity" out of one of its guiding policies.

Time was when CMS was under court order to maintain a racial balance in its faculty that was roughly proportional to the population. No more.

Policy GCQA, "Reduction in Force for Career Employees," was first adopted in 1991. The policy said the board, in choosing which employees would be laid off and which would not during a layoff, could consider "workplace diversity" – in addition to individuals' performance ratings, degrees, recommendations from supervisors, extra duty and so forth.

Says CMS General Counsel Mo Green, "The term 'workforce diversity' is proposed to be eliminated as a criteria to avoid any misunderstanding about the meaning of that term in the context of a reduction in force.

"Specifically, race, color, sex, religion, national origin, age and disability are generally not factors that can be taken into consideration in selecting personnel for reductions."

The board held its mandatory public hearing on changes to GCQA on May 27 and there were no speakers. Final action on the policy changes is likely next week.

The new policy sets new criteria for the board to use. And it allows "such other criteria as determined by the Board..." Presumably, however, the lawyers will warn against using any strategy that would take into consideration the educational value of having a diverse faculty after the layoff was complete.

The change is part of what Green calls "a comprehensive review of and proposed revisions to Human Resources policies and regulations." A large number of policy changes were approved last December.

Briefs

Revolving door: Schools with transient students will have a difficult time reaching No Child Left Behind goals, the Arizona Republic reported. At Westwood Primary in Phoenix, two-thirds of the children are learning English. Nearly 40% of students who began the year will have moved on by the end. Of 1,069 children who began as kindergartners, only five were enrolled to complete third grade this spring.
www.azcentral.com

Budget boost: Philadelphia will boost school spending by 4.6%, the Inquirer reported. The money will cut class sizes, expand afterschool programs, buy K-9 curricula, overhaul high schools and add discipline schools.
www.philly.com

New license: Tennessee will probably stop issuing K-8 teacher licenses effective in August, The Tennessean reported. No Child requires proof for all middle school teachers of subject competency. New middle school teachers will probably need to qualify for 7-12 licenses.
http://tennessean.com

No impact: A new study says that the threat of fines against parents of up to £2,500 or prison sentences of up to three months have not curbed truancy in Britain, the BBC reported. Truancy has increased over the six years the fines have been used against parents.
http://news.bbc.co.uk

End of Rainbow: The children's TV show Reading Rainbow has shaky financing and could end its 20-year run, the Los Angeles Times reported. The show, aimed at 6- to 8-year-olds learning to read, has no merchandise licensing agreements.
www.latimes.com

Better teaching may mean retraining principals

From "Performance-Based Teacher Compensation: Learning from the Lessons of History," in the May issue of Best Practices and Policies, a publication of the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality:

"Research in the 1980s on career ladder programs revealed that their success hinged on whether teachers could continue to teach students regularly while still having expanded leadership roles. However, too few administrators know how to redesign their schools to make this happen.

"Perhaps, more than anything else, we need professional development for central office administrators and principals who must manage an organization that relies on effective teacher leaders with the knowledge and skills to help their peers."

www.teachingquality.org

No holding back: Hartford, Conn., schools have taken to heart the education research that asserts that, while it appears illogical to promote a child when grade-level work has not been mastered, it actually is worse to hold children back a year, the Courant reported. This year's ninth-grade class has as many students reading on third-grade level as it does reading on ninth-grade level. Gene Chasin, who heads the Accelerated Schools Project at the University of Connecticut, praised the Reading Recovery program in Durham, which provides tutoring and links teacher bonuses to students' reading success.
www.ctnow.com

Recruiting prospect: The Minneapolis school district, which faces a \$28.6 million deficit and 1,400 fewer students this fall, has laid off 9% of the district's teachers, the Star Tribune reported. Minority teachers are heavily represented among the least-experienced teachers targeted by the layoffs. The district has a 75% minority population, while 18% of its teachers are minorities.
www.startribune.com

Start at the top: All five administrators will be reassigned out of a Los Angeles County

school that failed to make growth targets on state tests, the Times reported.

Calendar

- 6 Equity Committee, 8 a.m., Board Room.
- 7 Kenneth Johnson of Carolina Association of Minority Contractors speaks at Metrolina Minority Contractors' Association meeting on issues and concerns of black and minority contractors-doing business in Charlotte and North Carolina, 9 a.m., 418 W. Trade St.
- 10 School Board, 6 p.m., Board Room.
- 11 Education Budget Advisory Committee, 7:30 a.m. 11th floor conference room, Government Center.
- 17 Bond Oversight Committee, 7:30 a.m., Building Services, Stafford Drive.
- 19 Finance, Capital & Facilities Committee, 4 p.m., Room 414, Education Center.
- 24 Curriculum Committee, 3 p.m., Board Conference Room.
- 24 School Board meets, 6 p.m., Board Room.
- 25 Education Budget Advisory Committee, 7:30 a.m., 11th floor conference room, Government Center.