

# Vote Tuesday

## The push for small

**Gates to aid high schools training youth for jobs, those cutting dropout rate; foundation seeks alternates to big-box schools that must be fixed some other way**

By **STEVE JOHNSTON**

RALEIGH – Since the August news that Gates Foundation money would come to North Carolina, there's been anticipation that the "answer" to academic malaise at the state's high schools was on its way.

The reality will fall short of the expectations by a country mile.

The Gates Foundation has put hundreds of millions behind its conviction that many students now failing in high school will reach higher academic levels and continue their education after graduation if they are served in smaller groups, either at small programs in existing large schools or in new, much smaller facilities.

North Carolina superintendents meeting in Raleigh Oct. 16 got a close look at Tom Vander Ark, the Gates Foundation's point person for education. The educators were singularly attentive, but had few questions in public – a sign, perhaps, that they know they will be competing with one another for limited grant dollars.

Some of the talk in Raleigh was of interest chiefly to the superintendents. But taxpayers and parents of high school students might be interested in a number of threads that ran through the dis-

cussion in Raleigh:

– Many of the students failing in big schools have intense interests that small schools can build a full education around. This is the heart of the rationale for the small-schools movement.



Vander Ark

– Big schools' cultures are owned by students, and can be thoroughly anti-intellectual. For wise adults to be authoritative, they must own the culture.

– Big schools work for most N.C. students, and it's vital to keep them working: Small-school reforms will leave most of them untouched.

– Schools large and small need to get better at supporting all students. That will take a great deal of new money, and no states are doing well at it.

– Today's high school offers too many courses, and students (with few adult advisers to help them) are making bad choices.

For his part, N.C. Supt. Mike Ward called dropouts "one symptom of a greater problem in a system that is at least in part broken in some places."

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## Assignment: More changes are scrubbed

Johnny Cash sang 'em. Kenny Rogers sang 'em. And Tuesday night, after hours of public hearings and a board meeting, Jim "The Gambler" Pughsley had the very same Don Schlitz lyrics on his mind:

"You got to know when to hold 'em; know when to fold 'em. Know when to walk away; know when to run."

Pughsley on Tuesday walked away from several of his proposed changes to the student assignment plan.

A proposal to combine open education with International Baccalaureate was scrapped. The West Charlotte High IB program will go countywide.

The superintendent backed off a plan to pull K-2 classes out of high-achieving Villa Heights to make room for more 3-5 Talent Development classes.

And parents in the language immersion program got some of the stability they sought as Oaklawn opens as an expansion site.

Parents spoke up for Piedmont Middle and Chantilly, for First Ward and West Charlotte and Highland

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## 'You got to know... when to fold 'em'

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Mill Montessori. Others spoke for their neighborhoods of Highland Creek and Plaza-Midwood.

But citizens also spoke up for what they called the Charlotte neighborhood or Mecklenburg neighborhood. They pressed the board to assure that all children irrespective of neighborhood or race or economic condition have access to good schools.

"If you're gonna play the game, boy, you better learn to play it right."

Pughsley acknowledged that it might appear that he's backed off whenever parents or board members objected. But that may be an inaccurate assessment.

There was no indication CMS would change its plan to use all of First Ward as a magnet, pushing neighborhood children to underutilized Byers. This despite pleas from nonprofit Seigle Avenue Partners not to add to the disruption in the lives of Belmont neighborhood children, who've been moved three times in four years and some of whom may be forced to move during redevelopment of the 1940 Piedmont Courts housing project.

And it appeared that Pughsley would insist that siblings of current students now to be grandfathered into Smith and Collinswood would have to enter the immersion magnet assigned to their choice zone.

"There'll be time enough for countin' when the dealin' is done."

The changes announced Tuesday may not be the last, but the plan may not resurface publicly until the board votes on the plan Nov. 11.

That's the week after Tuesday's election, but weeks before new at-large school board members take office.

And it's impossible to know how much the election has been a fac-

tor in this assignment review.

The assignment review process began with a clear indication that only minor changes would be made. This despite the superintendent's statement midway through the process that the assignment plan had created schools that were so dominated by high-needs children that they threatened the academic achievement of all children assigned to them.

North Mecklenburg parents spoke out Oct. 14, and again Tuesday night, against caps at their overcrowded schools. And Pughsley has at least temporarily pulled off the table his plans to bus children from overcrowded suburban north end schools toward the center city where there are empty seats.

The issues addressed Tuesday, and the speakers:

Expand sibling priority outside choice zone: Teresa Hermanson.

Hold to promises to deliver equal facilities in the central city: Terry Belk.

Retain right to assign students and teachers: Richard McElrath.

Keep North Mecklenburg assignments stable despite overcrowding, build more schools: Rhonda Lennon, Marianne Inserra, Linda Giler, Kim Phillips, Carson Cato, Bill Russell, Willie Jefferson, Gary Knox, Jim Bensman.

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## This journal has only 4

more issues to publish, based on the funds on hand at the beginning of this month. A community journal must have the support of its readers. Can you help?

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## ‘I don’t know where else I would go to school’

*The following oration was delivered Tuesday afternoon in front of the school board at a packed public hearing on reassignment proposals.*

*Afterward, Chairperson Wilhelmenia Rembert noted that board members do not usually respond to comments during hearings but said, “John, you have set a new standard.”*

*The speaker wrote his own speech, is in the fifth grade and is 10 years old.*

**H**i. I’m John DeKemper. Um, I go to Irwin Avenue Open IB School. I’ve been going since I’ve been in kindergarten.

I’m glad I can learn in an open environment because it has so many advantages.

Some examples of these advantages:

**Centers:** We can explore literature, science, math and more at interactive stations or centers.

**Grouping:** In many activities we can work in self-selected or teacher-selected groups that usually have the choice to work independently.

**Thought process:** Different people work at different paces, and in the open program that’s respected. Any one of us that needs help with our education receives it, through tutors, mentors, lunch buddies, and the Irwin Avenue afterschool tutoring group, formally known as Panda Pride.

**Choices:** We have choices in almost every situation, and learn in a wide variety of learning styles.

**Clubs:** On Wednesdays, second-, third-, fourth- and fifth-graders have no special-area classes. Instead, we go to other classrooms, with other teachers, teaching other things. We can learn things from cooking, to cross-stitching, to even scrapbooking. No desks. It’s great to sit at tables. You can sit with friends while you work, rather than being isolated.

**Teachers:** At Irwin, the teachers are not the sole source of information, but rather the facilitators of learning.

**Contracts:** With the open program we have contracts, so that we can work on homework at our own pace.

Irwin’s open environment feeds me as an artist and a free spirit. I believe I would be in a principal’s office a lot, and washing desks – and washing desks after school, if it hadn’t been for Irwin. Instead, I am a straight-A student in a Talent Development program reading at a 12th-grade level. I don’t know where else I would go to school that would better meet my needs.

Thank you so much, Dr. Pughsley, to deciding to keep the open program for kids like me.

## ‘You got to know... when to fold ‘em’

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Socioeconomically balanced schools are wise educational, social and fiscal policy: Beth Kinny.

Cap overcrowded schools, expand choice zones to fill seats: Dwayne Collins.

Strengthen language immersion

at Collinswood, Oaklawn and Smith Language Academy: Kathy Hill, Bevin Jett, Odette Valder, Jeanne Beilleux.

Retain open program at Irwin, Piedmont and West Charlotte, with feed from Montessori: Rosalyn Allison Jacobs, Carolyn Allred, Tonya Allen, Lynn Friedham, John DeKemper, Tom Politte, Jeff Passe, Tonya Wiley.

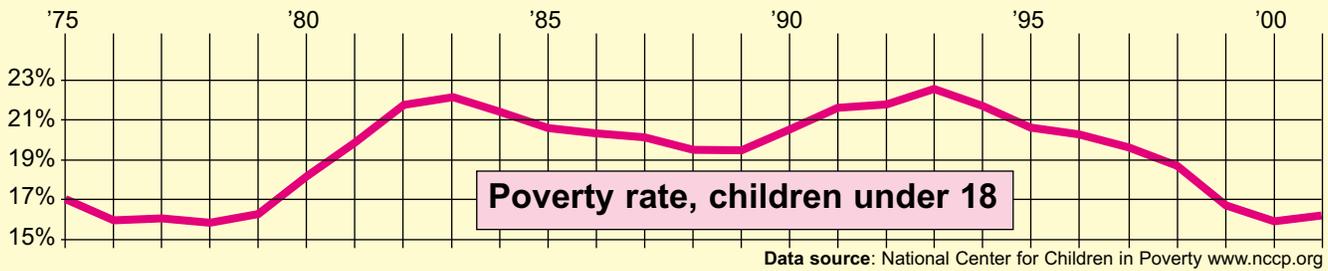
Keep Villa Heights a K-5 school: Susan Harden, Allan Kathman. Reassign Old Farm with Old

Salem and Meredith to avoid unsafe Providence Road: Dee Dee Hoffler, Carol Hall, Ronnie Flehan.

Expand Chantilly walk zone: Kevin Tully.

Keep First Ward as neighborhood school: Susan Harden, Julian Wright.

Continue to allow middle-class parents to opt out of high-poverty schools, specifically Shamrock Gardens: Marty Griffin, Laura Williams-Tracy, John Merrick.



## Addressing poverty – Readers comment

Poverty is often cited as a key determinant of academic outcomes for American schoolchildren. Last week's *Educate!* included an article suggesting that instead of shifting students around to eliminate high concentrations of poverty, Charlotte-Mecklenburg had a choice instead to put its energies into lifting children out of poverty. The article did not offer any details on how that goal could be achieved.

Perhaps there would have been more reader reaction if we had suggested mandatory sterilization of house pets. Or a ban on passenger vehicles that get less than 30 mpg. It was, after all, only a call to fundamentally reorder how we live and provide for one another in human society.

*Educate!*, however, gratefully acknowledges the comments that were received, and is happy to share them below.

### Actions, not words, show where business is on poverty issues

Long have business and government been in collusion to control the price of labor. Welfare laws, unemployment and Social Security laws all have in common influencing the price of labor to be lower.

For example, note welfare-to-work programs were designed to push people into the labor market, thus increasing the labor supply and decreasing the price.

You will hear nothing from business leaders about doing something about poverty because that would require a change in the way they pay their employees. Does anyone think bankers want to pay tellers a real wage? The list goes on.

Don't misunderstand, I believe firmly in capitalism, but not when businesses are in collusion with government to use the force of government to control the price of labor and to transfer taxes to themselves. The NBA is but one example.

An associated issue is stock and

layoffs. Layoffs occur, not because the people aren't needed but to maintain profit margins so stock prices go up.

As layoffs occur the ability to consume deteriorates and businesses have less people to sell to. But layoffs will continue to occur because the top officers are obligated to the stockholders – and rightfully so – but the stockholders can't see past their quarterly report and don't care about the employees and so neither do the top layers of management.

Layoffs also help control the price of labor by flooding the market with people who will generally work for lower wages.

I don't advocate socialism – but the greed of our society and the associated meanness which pays top executive hundreds of times what the lowest make is detrimental to the health of our society.

A concurrent issue are drugs laws and low wages, which put so many young people in jail who are just trying to achieve the materialistic American dream.

What is quaint is the avowed concern of these top-level people, saying they want children to do well in school so they can become

good worker bees, but doing nothing which would change the structure of the relationship of business and government which would actually help those in the lower rungs of our society achieve those goals.

So what is the answer?

We should treat people as equals, as we are all in this together. But our leaders, business and otherwise, don't. They lack the morals they push on the rest of us – you know, the ones who say "Be honest – pay your debts," all the while pushing credit cards with attractive low interest rates so those desiring to live the American materialistic dream will be suckered into long-term debt at high interest rates because the lenders know full well the credit card holders will never pay off the new debt before the higher interest rates go into effect.

And these leaders are the ones who know poverty is a major cause of educational problems. But by their actions, not their words, they show they have no intention of doing anything more than talk about improving education.

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# Actions, not words, tell the tale

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One need only look at whose children attend private schools so they learn early on they are better than those who don't and thus the cycle perpetuates itself – and how these leaders pay themselves and their employees.

Lewis Guignard

# 'We only have them for 6-8 hours'

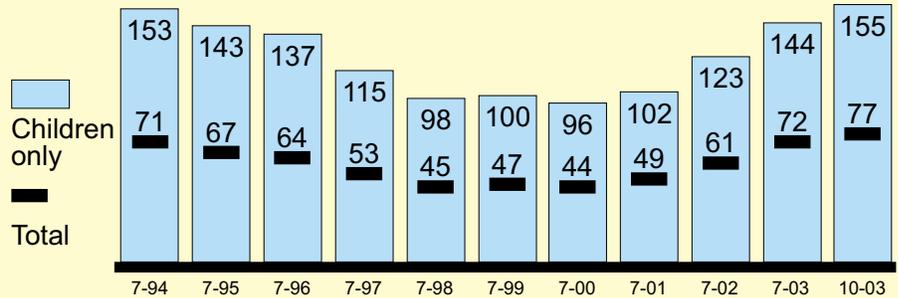
The writer represents District 6 on the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education.

I liked your emphasis on changing the family environment. The Cherokee experience was particularly interesting. No matter how much we do at school, it will always be an uphill battle until the community supports and reinforces the lessons, and it becomes cool to be smart and succeed academically.

We only have them for 6-8 hours per day, 180 days per year. It really does take a whole village – and it's the future of our village.

Lee Kindberg

## Mecklenburg food stamp recipients per 1,000 pop.



The writer works in the Mecklenburg County Health and Human Services Department's office of planning and evaluation.

We noticed that information prepared by our office appeared on pages 6 and 7 the Oct. 23 edition of *Educate!*. Attached is data to fill in the missing years. In other versions of the graph we omitted certain years in order to minimize the clutter on the graph but still convey an accurate picture of events: namely, that the rate of receiving Food Stamps for children declined from 1994 (with 1997 being a convenient midpoint for reference between 1994 and 2000), and then began rising after 2000.

Readers will also notice on the graph above that as of October 2003, the rate is 155 children out of every 1,000 in Mecklenburg County. In the past four months (from July to October) there has been a 7% rise in the number of Food Stamp cases in Mecklenburg County (from 54,418 to 58,453).

Herb Petro

# DidYaHear?

Reports from Educate! readers:

✓ Our neighbors to the east are setting their sights on formidable academic achievement. In Wake County, the most recent draft of an academic goal for 2008 says 95% of students in grades 3 through 12 should be at or above grade level as measured by EOG or EOC tests and that all disaggregated student groups should show high growth on those state tests.

✓ John Dornan led the N.C. delegation that went shopping in Denmark for new educational ideas. He's back, convinced that "you can't look

at their schools in isolation." The Danes believe, he says, that every person has a niche in society "and that government has an obligation to help them find it." So the government pays tuition and stipends to students, and supports the indigent. While being careful to say he's not advocating the Danes' brand of socialism, Dornan does say he's struck by the difference between the two countries. The U.S. proclaims No Child Left Behind, but Denmark "is putting it into effect. They would not tolerate the levels of poverty and lack of education we do."

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# Focus to be on jobs, preventing dropouts

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And Ward embraced the move to narrow curricular choice.

“We ought to be thinking of changing that notion of a high school as a buffet,” and that whether students “make healthy choices at the serving table is between them and their parents.” Educators, he said, must see “that all are well fed.”

Vander Ark says neither he nor the Gates Foundation has a formula easily applied to North Carolina districts. He

recalls his days after taking on a superintendency in a Washington State district. He quickly put together a 90-day plan to reform high schools. “After five years they weren’t any better. They’re still about the same. I come to you more as a humble failure than as a foundation executive with all the answers.”

But Vander Ark insists that failures at high school are “the most difficult, challenging issue of our time. We’ve got to get it right.”

And Gates-funded initiatives have produced “progress that we can point to that may show the way.”

## N.C. must find its way

Most of those initiatives “may be more relevant in New York and Chicago,” where 50% to 70% of students fail to graduate.

But Vander Ark believes a common set of terms should guide all reforms. The terms include “rigor,” “relationship,” “relevance” and “coherence,” but he tends not to define the terms.

“In some fashion you and your community will need to come to some agreement” on what each

# Trouble for college education

Part of the critique of high schools rests on their patchy record of successfully moving students on to a college education. Vander Ark uses trend lines for two indices in his presentations to describe the trouble brewing for colleges.

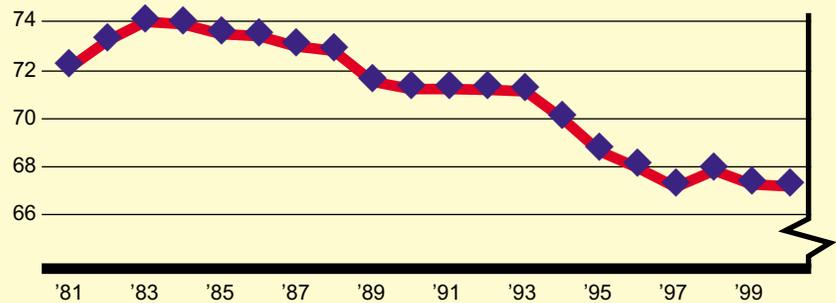
The first index, in the first chart below, tracks the high school graduation rate, which has been falling.

The second index, in the lower chart, tracks the percentage of high school graduates who continue their education in college.

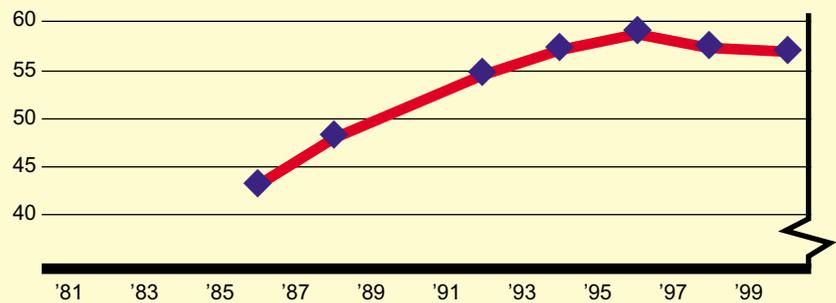
Vander Ark makes these points:

- With a 66% graduation rate and a 57% continuation rate, only about 38% of high school students experience a college education.
- Yet with only about 4 in 10 high school students entering college, half of those take remedial courses.
- Six years after high school graduation, only about 2 in 10 high school students have graduated from college.

U.S. high school graduation rate, in percent



Continuation by U.S. graduates to college, in percent



Data source: The Mortenson Research Center on Public Policy, cited in “Toward Success at Scale” by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

means, he told the superintendents.

But all districts face the same questions:

“How are we going to engage students, regardless of race, income or ZIP code?...”

“Every kid ought to leave an American high school with strong life options.”

To succeed, educators “have to

build thick relationships and support systems.... The higher the level of challenge in your community, the more you need to think about this.”

What does “thick” mean? In practice, it may mean personalizing education, and establishing personal relationships with every student “in five or six different

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ways.”

Nationwide, Vander Ark says, two-thirds of high school systems “don’t get what they need or deserve.” About 30% drop out, and a third leave high school prepared neither for work nor for college.

And less than a fifth of the nation’s African-Americans and Hispanics leave high school ready for college.

### Easley’s objectives

In an August statement announcing the \$11 million grant from the Gates Foundation, N.C. Gov. Mike Easley said this:

“Smaller, more focused high schools that provide personal attention and rigorous course-work are better suited to helping all types of students succeed.

“The New High School Project will start approximately 40 new and redesigned high schools across the state over the next five years....

“The schools will include innovative models that offer accelerated learning and tie education to workplace knowledge and skills. The project will focus on both rural and urban areas and create innovative new opportunities in each of the state’s economic development regions.”

The politician made it clear that the money would be spread around. Vander Ark told the Raleigh News & Observer a slightly different story:

“The target,” he said, “is schools struggling in needy communities. Our goal is that the least advantaged have access to the same kind of programs as the most advantaged students.”

Ultimately, the project may spend \$32 million, less than the brick-and-mortar cost of one new CMS high school. No more than 40 of the state’s 338 high schools will be affected.



www.tribnet.com

Tacoma School of the Arts renovated these retail buildings for studios, classrooms and practice areas. About 350 10th- to 12th-graders attend classes in visual art, music, dance and theater at eight cultural arts and university buildings in downtown Tacoma. The school opened in 2001 after receiving a \$450,000 Gates Foundation grant.

### A different kind of choice

Choice as now defined – “thin and politicized” – is not the answer, Vander Ark said. “In some ways ... we have too many choices in your high schools today.” With one guidance counselor per 500 kids, students essentially pick their own courses. “And guess what, it doesn’t work for three-quarters of our kids.”

The Gates money is creating “different kinds of high schools,” with each providing a different but “constrained” curriculum on a theme of interest to students.

### Not magnets

Thirty years ago, Charlotte-Mecklenburg was beginning to discuss “different” kinds of schools. They became known as magnets, and they provided thematic education.

John Dornan, who heads the Raleigh-based Public School Forum that with administer the Gates money, sees the current initiative as very different from magnets.

Gates money, he says, will be focused not just on small schools,

but on programs that promise “acceleration of pathways to higher education” or career tracks that lead to real jobs that the community needs to have filled.

The goal, Dornan says, “isn’t simply an array of options.”

And although the Gates effort appears to place value on equal access and diversity, its programs will not, as did the desegregation-era magnets, directly promote integration.

Instead, Vander Ark says, schools require “a deep community engagement built around a personalized view of learning for every child.”

To do that in large schools is “exponentially more dangerous the larger your system gets. If you’re Charlotte-Mecklenburg it’s tougher. If you’re New York or Chicago, it’s impossible.”

### Tale of 2 high schools

In a speech July 25 to the National Conference of State Legislatures, Melinda Gates, a Duke University computer science graduate and wife of Microsoft chairman Bill Gates, said this:

“In cities, suburbs, and rural areas, too often we see a tale of two high schools: One system for children whose parents live near good public schools or can afford to pay for private schools. And the other for the students stuck in large struggling high schools. Their classes aren’t challenging or relevant. Their teachers are less qualified.

“Their schools – which need the most, often have the very least. And the students – most of them from low-income and minority families – rarely have the opportunity to ignite, much less begin to fulfill, their dreams.

“Our high school system is dangerously out of step with our values and our needs as a society. Our country promises our children they can go as far as their commitment to their education takes them – regardless of the color of their skin, regardless of their family’s resources.

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“Yet, our rhetoric doesn’t reflect reality. Instead of helping children defy the limitations they face at birth, our high schools usually perpetuate those limitations. And that’s a sad fact of the U.S. education system.”

### Getting there from here

Vander Ark had some advice for superintendents, some of which might have been unwelcome.

Among the comments:

- Top-down change doesn’t last.
- Installing some “best practice” from elsewhere won’t work unless trusting and respectful relationships at all levels have been built in advance.

(A 22-member delegation of N.C. educators, policymakers, foundation and business executives returned Monday from Denmark, where they were trying to “find ideas that could be imported back to North Carolina,” according to the organizer, the Public School Forum.)

- District-led efforts “are fragile and personality-based.” “I got that wrong about 50 times as a superintendent,” Vander Ark quipped.

- Superintendents overestimate the amount of autonomy they give their subordinates. A top-down culture is hard to change. “Even when you loosen the reins, they live where they grew up,” Vander Ark says.

- “You can’t do enough community.”

- And finally, “I suspect that there ain’t one single answer.”

Vander Ark’s list is a multilayered warning against experts from out of town – an ironic commentary coming from an executive who will spend about \$400 million in foundation money over several years prodding American school districts to change.

But Vander Ark is consistent. “What we’re doing [now] is not working. Let’s just admit that,” he

About 400 students enroll at the School of Environmental Studies at the Minnesota Zoo south of Minneapolis. The optional program lets students take courses, and play on athletic teams, at their home schools. Of 200 seats for entering sophomores, the first 100 go to students with demonstrated interest in environmental studies. The rest are filled by lottery.

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Right: Musk ox at Minnesota Zoo.

[www.mnzoo.com/animals](http://www.mnzoo.com/animals)



says. He claims Boston is the best urban school district in America because Supt. Tom Payzant has had political cover to take the time to make change work.

And he lauds Wake Schools Supt. Bill McNeal because he “has his community running through his blood.”

### What works

The heart of Vander Ark’s critique is that in most places, “the schools that work for poor kids are different.”

“The kids are different. They are motivated by different experiences.” Educators should be figuring out “what gets them out of bed in the morning.”

“My sense is that if you find that, you ought to run with it.”

The successful schools that result from that search, Vander Ark predicts, will fall in three categories:

- Academic schools with the “goal of engaging every student.” Examples include Harlem’s Frederick Douglass Academy, the KIPP academies – and traditional college-prep private schools like Cary Academy in the Raleigh suburbs, where the Class of 2002’s average combined SAT score was 1,242.

“Maybe a majority of schools ought to look like those,” Vander Ark said.

- Theme schools that latch on to the intense, narrowly focused interests of groups of students.

Examples include a math science school in San Diego, the Zoo School in Minneapolis and Tacoma Arts.

At Tacoma, “the first thing you get is a map” because classes are strung out along Pacific Avenue in storefronts, auditoriums and other spaces. A trolley is the school’s spine.

- Student-centered schools that are not just nurturing places but ones that “have the same challenges for all students.” An example is New Country in Minnesota.

A subset of the three above is the early college high school. Vander Ark says Gates money has funded 130 of these programs, which allow students graduating high school to leave with either an associate’s degree from a community college or two years of college credit.

Gates will continue to support such programs, but they will be located to be convenient to low-income students who traditionally have not had an easy path to college. They will not, he said, be in places like suburban Cary Academy. A Gates collaboration with the College Board will open six Advanced Placement grade 6-12 schools in the low-income boroughs of New York City. Grades 6-10 will have lots of student support and lots of diagnostic tools so teachers know what students need to master.

“Do you believe,” Vander Ark challenged the superintendents,

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“that poor kids, African-American kids, Hispanic kids, English as a Second Language kids, with the right supports ... can and should be doing serious intellectual work?”

“We will demonstrate that they should be part of every system in America.”

To make it happen, students need to begin high school with that in mind. “We ought to be having that conversation with every eighth-grader in America.”

And in North Carolina, every sixth-grader should be told that “algebra will dictate the life options you have as a senior.”

“We don’t have that conversation now,” Vander Ark said. And he chastised the superintendents for running racially discriminatory school districts.

“We don’t have that conversation with African-American families. It’s one of the ways how, so very subtly, we track kids by race.”

Vander Ark says he walks down math hallways and “you could tell what level [the class] is by looking in the window.

“We’ve got to have the courage of saying, Damn it, all of our kids can and should learn.”

If you start up new schools, Vander Ark advised, there is no detail that’s not vital to success.

Where the school is located is important. The program must be appealing. All parts of the school must be accountable for success, and all people involved must “know the rules of the road.” What courses students take must be closely monitored. And, of course, testing results must be positive.

### Success in big boxes

But the biggest challenge, Vander Ark believes, is not in building new small schools but “to improve the schools we’ve got.”

## Timing for Gates-funded N.C. project

Don’t expect Gates money to remake the N.C. high school experience, superintendents were warned last week. “It will be seed money at best,” said John Dornan, who heads the N.C. Public School Forum that will administer the Gates Foundation-funded New Schools Project.

“In this year of Pillowtex plant closings, we really are putting a premium on proposals that have links to jobs.”

The first phase of the project focuses very narrowly on high school programs directly tied into the health-care industry. A Pitt County proposal to feed high school grads into the Greenville regional health facilities will play guinea pig.

A second phase begins as early as December, focusing on 12-18 districts like CMS that have expressed interest in early college programs that will allow students to earn some college credits on their way to graduation.

A third phase will focus on state-identified rural districts, probably in Eastern North Carolina, with multi-year projects with a community component of some kind.

A final phase, now planned to begin by next summer, will be open to proposals from anywhere in the state.

Dornan says projects are likeliest to go to schools “serving students who likely will be dropouts.” The goal is “partnerships not in name but in fact.... We are very worried about sustainability, as is the [Gates] foundation.” About \$300,000 has been committed so far by other foundations.



Dornan

He thinks most North Carolina high schools work very well for most students. The state is not in the crisis found in New York City or Chicago, he says.

“But the mistake almost every state is making is they are not building in thick support” for students – additional counseling, closer monitoring by teachers, fewer kids falling through the cracks.

“Go into it knowing it will be tough, it will be expensive, and you’ve got to put the best people on it.”

Know also, he told his audience, that superintendents “more than anyone, can change the way a community thinks about its children and its future.

“You more than anyone in North Carolina hold the future, how the community thinks about the future, and how your communities value the disadvantaged.”

Speaking for the Gates Foundation, Vander Ark said, “we want to be a long-term partner here in North Carolina. We want to learn with you about how to create new options.”

### Limits of accountability

Vander Ark was asked if testing wouldn’t solve what ails high schools. Vander Ark is a cultivated, careful speaker – but the answer was no.

He praised the accountability systems in North Carolina and Texas that were models for the new federal No Child Left Behind legislation.

North Carolina has among the better elementary-level accountability improvement systems, he said. “You stick with that and things get better. The problem is that it doesn’t work at the secondary level.”

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## Focus to be on job, preventing dropouts

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Most attendance laws end at age 16, so high schools can – and do – legally push out the least able. That holds down the costs of counseling and other support.

And sending in a content coach or providing some resources is not enough. Vander Ark is looking for “fundamental change” to both structure and curriculum.

The successful district will bring in qualified outside advisers, commit to a multi-year change process, invest a “significant” amount of resources, install a learning network that quickly brings newly arriving staff up to speed during the change process, and have a long-range plan “so you’re not just making it up as you go.”

The process, he acknowledged, is “expensive, and there’s not a state in the country that’s doing it. We hope our partnership in North Carolina will be a model.”

### A crusader

Vander Ark, in his mid-40s, graduated from small, private Denver Christian High. After the Colorado School of Mines and a business degree from the University of Denver, Vander Ark worked for Pace Membership Warehouse, then was a marketing director for a consulting firm. He was in the first wave of school superintendents hired out of the business sector, and led the 36-school, 22,000-student Federal Way district in a city 20 miles south of Seattle.

With the high schools there overcrowded, he proposed a smaller school to prepare kids for high-tech jobs. The community instead chose to build another big school with full athletic facilities. Vander Ark was recruited to head the Gates Foundation education efforts at that point, and he’s been trying to build small schools ever since.



[www.mncs.k12.mn.us](http://www.mncs.k12.mn.us)

TacoMinnesota New Country School is a charter that opened in storefronts in LeSueur, Minn., later moving to this new building in Henderson. It has 150 or so students but no courses, no bells – and no principal. Its teachers are from a cooperative. A Gates Foundation-funded nonprofit is replicating the New Country model at 15 more sites.

### Controlling the culture

Perhaps the strongest argument Vander Ark makes for small schools is quite simple: “In a big school,” he says, “the kids own the culture.” Peer pressure is dominant.

“In a small school adults can be authoritative.”

Vander Ark recalled visiting Frederick Douglass Academy in New York City. “In the first 10 seconds of being there you know” that the whole school is committed to academic achievement.

Not everyone buys the argument that small schools are the right answer.

“Large high schools have traditionally been considered more economical and able to support a broader curriculum than smaller ones,” the National Center for Education noted in its “Condition of Education 2003” report this summer.

“In recent years, however, research has suggested that small and moderate size high schools foster more positive social and academic environments than large high schools, especially for economically disadvantaged students....

But is small universally best? The NCES report adds this:

“This research also suggests that students in very small high schools learn less than students in ‘moderate’ size (600-899 students) high schools....”

### Data on social impact

There is some evidence, as well, that some “different” students may find soulmates in a big school they would be less likely to find in a small school.

In the October issue of *Sociology of Education*, Texas State researcher Toni Terling Watt reviews the literature and a national survey of 13,000 students in grades 7-12, and makes the following observations:

“Overall, this study did not find support for the assertion that private schools and small schools are clearly beneficial to adolescents’ emotional adjustment.

Furthermore, the results suggest that private schools and small schools may actually be detrimental to adolescents’ mental health....

“Adolescents are in a unique period of identity development.... Perhaps adolescents’ struggle to construct an identity is more easily accomplished in large heterogeneous environments, specifically, large and/or public schools....

“In large, more diverse populations, individuals who do not fit in with one group, perhaps the dominant group, can find others like themselves who also do not fit in and who can offer them a source of support and identity validation....

“Feelings of anonymity, which are thought to be harmful for

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## Focus on jobs, dropouts

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adults, may be a welcome relief for adolescents who do not want to draw attention to themselves and their limitations....

"We researchers need to explore the mechanisms by which small schools and private schools produce emotional strain for students. Finally, we need to know whether choices that are conducive to emotional stability are at odds with those that promote academic achievement."

Ward, the North Carolina superintendent, closed the Raleigh meeting with Vander Ark by calling high schools "some of the most important and revered institutions in the state... they work really well for a lot of kids."

But he acknowledged that high schools can "make things difficult for those kids who don't make it, who don't see it through."

## Adults divided on high achievement

"In the first part of the last century, the major purpose of schools was to assimilate immigrant children ... then it became to help children make social adjustments (progressives). After 1950, the primary purpose became access, and since the 1980s it has been to educate all children to high achievement.



Graham

"That is an utterly radical idea.... It is particularly difficult to pull off because adults do not agree. In a single community, the children of the rich are not working in fast-food places 20 hours a week, but lots of other young people are. Communities that allow teen-agers to do that are not taking academic achievement seriously. Teachers who work in those communities are torn by competing ideas."

— *Harvard Professor Patricia Albjerg-Graham in a roundtable discussion on the changing role of public schools, led by Anne C. Lewis, in the September edition of The School Administrator, www.asa.org*

## Briefs

**Making the grade:** High school scores are up in California, the Los Angeles Times reported. The number of schools making their state goals doubled this year, to more than two-thirds of California's high schools. For the first time, last spring's tests were directly tied to the state's curriculum. Making the state targets, however, leaves work to be done: Just 33% of 10th-graders were actually deemed proficient in English.

www.latimes.com

**Cell cheats:** Cell phones that take and transmit pictures create the potential for photographing tests and passing them to friends, the Minneapolis Star reported. It's a new high-tech nuisance for educators that are fighting a losing battle against sending instant messages during class. Educators also worry that students will misuse pictures of students.

www.star-tribune.com

**Keeping spirits up:** Boston schools are broadening their mission by pressing students to stay interested in finishing school, even after multiple failures on the state's exit exam, the Boston Globe reported. More than 20 counselors track down students who didn't make it after each administration of the test, and if they are unemployed, push them to accept part-time jobs with employers who have agreed to take the students while they study for the next exam.

www.boston.com

**Self-esteem:** A new survey of 500 teens claims that young people actively using the Internet and other electronic media gain self-esteem from mastering the challenges of online activities, Education Week reported. The survey contradicted an earlier report characterizing teen Internet users as lonely types who don't feel good about themselves.

www.edweek.org

**Laptop overload:** At Gundersun High in San Jose, vir-

tually all students were issued iBook laptops this fall, the Mercury News reported. The distribution went well, and teachers are delighted with the excitement students exhibit as they experience the new learning opportunities the computers offer. But most of the use has been after school hours: Electricians are rushing to complete a wiring upgrade of the schoolhouse to handle the amperage load.

www.bayarea.com

**No driving:** Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty suggested pulling driver's licenses for any student dropping out of school and for students absent more than 20% of the time, the Star-Tribune reported. A similar bill failed in the legislature in 1997.

www.star-tribune.com

**Bar the door:** No Child Left Behind's provision that parents in underperforming schools should be able transfer into an adjoining district isn't working in the Philadelphia area, the Inquirer reported. The provision is volun-

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## Briefs *continued*

tary, and districts that asked neighboring districts to take students were turned down. Officials said districts reject all transfers so they won't have to accept special education students, whose educations cost many times the average.

[www.philly.com](http://www.philly.com)

**Charter opposition:** This year's crop of applications for Massachusetts charters is half of last year's, the Boston Herald reported. Officials said the charter movement faces opposition from public school parents who see their children's schools losing both students and per-pupil state funding each time a charter opens.

[www.bostonherald.com](http://www.bostonherald.com)

**Achievement gains:** At Union City (N.J.) High, a cross-section of students were chosen to receive laptops. A followup study found in the laptop-equipped students a sense of "reciprocal belonging. For students, ownership of a laptop quickly evolved into a sense of ownership within the school and their own learning – which, in turn, gave them a sense of belonging to the school." Among the other findings: General-track 11th-graders with laptops outscored honors students without laptops in writing and math.

<http://main.edc.org/Mosaic/Mosaic8/hiller.asp>

## Calendar

### OCTOBER

**30, 31** Meet in the Middle

## Taking responsibility for professional learning

"Finally, help teachers and principals recognize their power to shape and provide their own professional learning. Educators learn a lot from one another, but they too seldom take the initiative to create venues for this purpose. Even with no resources for professional development, there is nothing to prevent teachers and principals from voluntarily coming together – in school, after school, or in each other's homes if necessary – for a book study group, or to analyze and discuss student work, or to share effective practices.



Mizell

"If educators can set aside their pride and fear, they can create professional learning communities that are results-oriented and personally fulfilling. Your job, then, is to help your colleagues understand that they have more control over their professional learning than they believe is possible, and to show them how, even under difficult circumstances, they can work together to improve their performance and that of their students."

– *Hayes Mizell of the National Staff Development Council, addressing educators Oct. 24 in Topeka, Kansas*

Conference, IBM Center at University Research Park off I-85 at Harris Boulevard.

Registration and fee required.

**31, Nov. 1, 2** Faith and Literacy Weekend, a project of the Charlotte Reads Literacy Coalition to encourage faith groups to partner with schools in improving reading.

### NOVEMBER

- 1** District 6 parent leaders meeting, 9 a.m., Presbyterian Hospital Matthews Community Room.
- 2** Nonpartisan rally for voter turnout, 5 p.m. Mount Moriah Primitive Baptist Church, 727 W. Trade St.
- 6** Education Budget Advisory Committee, 7:30 a.m., Government Center.
- 7** Equity Committee, 8 a.m., Board Room.
- 8** Education Fair, exhibits by area

nonpublic, charter and public schools, 9 a.m.-4 p.m., Merchandise Mart. Free admission.

- 11** School board meets, 6 p.m., Board Room, Education Center.
- 18** Bond Oversight Committee, 7:30 a.m., Building Services, 3301 Stafford Drive.
- 18** Policy Committee, 3:15 a.m., Room 414, Education Center.
- 19** "Getting to know a Community Partner: UNC Charlotte's Efforts to Prepare a Highly Qualified Teaching Force," 8 a.m., UNCC Cone Center Room 111. Sponsor: CMS Partners for School Reform. Call 704-378-1301 for free reservation.
- 20** Finance, Capital & Facilities Committee, 4 p.m., Board Conference Room.
- 25** Curriculum Committee, 3 p.m., Board Conference Room.
- 25** School board meets, 6 p.m., Board Room, Education Center.