

Cease-fire in the funding war

No truce, just a resupply & holiday standdown between county, new school board

Awaiting the seating of a new school board, the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners Tuesday temporarily shelved its push to rein in local contributions to a school district being overwhelmed by growth and a rising

number of high-cost students.

All was amiable Tuesday as commissioners Chairman Tom Cox offered up carefully worded resolutions that at once didn't undercut County Manager Harry Jones and did put the school board on notice of changes ahead.

One resolution cleared the way for a January sale of enough bonds to keep some school construction under way.

But the second invited the school board to be at a January county board retreat. By Feb. 29 – a Sunday – the commissioners want a new understanding of school funding in place.

Amid the amiability, it was left to house radical Bill James to make the threats plain. In a mes-

sage to two newly elected school board members, James wrote, "...if you choose to start numerous [construction] projects you may have to cancel them for lack of funding in 2005."

Parents throughout the county have children caught in the middle of this duel. Suburban as well as center-city schools need renovation. And the schools where additional seats are to be added through construction are, likewise, countywide.

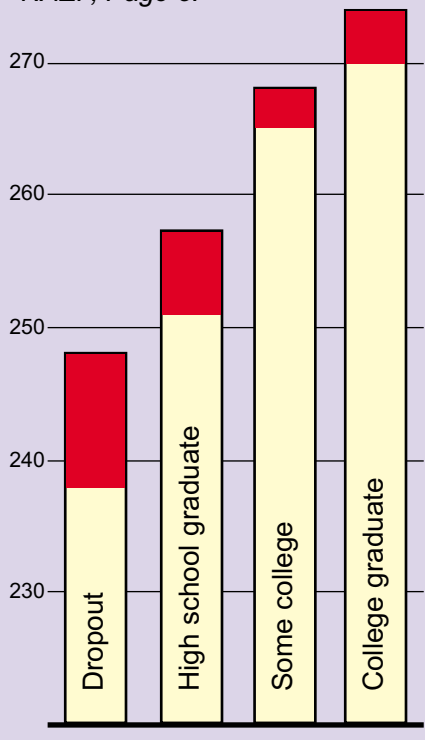
The dueling over school funding was set off by business executives, and it will probably fall to them to settle it.

Business leaders several years ago demanded to know what it

Continued on Page 3

Stay in school, kids, for YOUR kids' sake

Last week's release of NAEP scale scores (down left edge below) was a reminder that children's achievement, in most cases, mirrors the number of years their parents stayed in school. In each category of parental educational attainment, the red bar shows the range of test results between 1992 and 2003. More on NAEP, Page 5.



Percentages

Should set share of (how many?) county dollars be earmarked for education?

One of the possible elements of a new school funding strategy debuted Tuesday night in a prepared speech by District 5 commissioner Ruth Samuelson.

The plan would set local education support at a fixed percentage of the county's total annual spending.

If overall county spending went up, parents would see money flow into classrooms. If the politicians cut taxes and slashed the overall budget, school funds would be curtailed, irrespective of growth or students' needs.

Samuelson mentioned setting



Samuelson



Helms

the percentage at 50%, which would represent a slight increase over the county's current combined allocation to CMS and Central Piedmont Community College. Commissioner Parks Helms opposed the plan.

Here's how Samuelson explained her proposal:

"The education budget will grow from year to year as the county budget grows, and CMS and CPCC will have to decide whether additional money goes to operat-

Continued on Page 4



Advance mourning

Students at Myers Park High Monday conducted mock New Orleans style funerals during lunch breaks to raise awareness of cancers that students can prevent through life choices. Today's event to mark the Great American Smokeout was to be a butt-kicking contest using cigarette-shaped pillows.

Photo by Donna Bise

Museum collecting info on *Brown v Board* events

The writer is staff historian for The Levine Museum of the New South.

The 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court's landmark desegregation decision, *Brown v Board of Education*, is May 17, 2004.

From Readers

Many universities and organizations in the Charlotte area are planning commemorative events during the coming months.

Let's get together and share information / ideas / schedules. With leadership from Shirley Farrar of UNC Charlotte's Education Department, the Levine Museum and UNCC are convening an informal meeting tomorrow, Friday, Nov. 21, at 3 p.m. at the Levine Museum of the New South, 200 E. 7th St. in uptown Charlotte. Free parking for 90 minutes is available in the Reid's 7th Street Station deck next door.

We'll also preview the Museum's upcoming exhibit, *COURAGE: The Carolina Story That Changed America*, exploring the saga of South Carolina preacher Rev. J.A. DeLaine and his neighbors who

filed the first of the five lawsuits that became *Brown*.

The exhibit opens Jan. 30-31 with an address by NPR's Juan Williams (biographer of Thurgood Marshall) plus a daylong symposium featuring the esteemed his-

torian Dr. John Hope Franklin.

Hope to see you at the meeting. If you can't make it, please e-mail us information about any *Brown* events you know of and we'll spread the word.

Tom Hanchett

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New board gets a 10-week reprieve

Continued from Page 1

would cost the schools to close achievement gaps and give all children a quality education. For decades, CMS superintendents had sidestepped the issue, knowing that many in the community didn't really want to know the answer. Instead, the schools scraped by, robbed from maintenance to hire staff and left teachers to buy their own classroom supplies.

But this past year, Supt. Jim Pughsley obliged the business-dominated Education Budget Advisory Committee with a three-year financial projection for the schools' operating budget that would "overcome the most significant challenges our district faces."

The additional county cost, just for next year: \$96 million.

Business leaders have fallen silent. James still calls the number "absurd." But teachers are still buying classroom supplies, and achievement gaps are still horrendous (charts, Page 9).

The debate over the operating budget still lies ahead, and will be a large part of the January retreat discussions. But Tuesday

"Some people have said that I'm too subtle sometimes, so let me speak just as candidly as I can speak: I hope that the Board of County Commissioners and Board of Education will, over the next 90 days, come together on this issue of funding, so we can get out of this kind of perpetual politics mode we are always in... I'm personally open to anything that solves the problem of educating young people in this community."

– Commissioners Chairman Tom Cox



night, the focus was on bonds.

The public discussion of school operating budgets has regularly been separated from discussion of capital needs and the voter referendums that authorize bonds. And two separate pots of money resulted: Schools got operating funds from one pot, and the county paid off the bond debt from another pot in its own budget.

Some commissioners say that allowed the school board to avoid responsibility to the voters for its decisions on building projects. So now there is discussion (story, Page 1) of combining the pots and letting the school board decide, in effect, whether to use each dollar for teachers or for buildings.

Historically, school boards have always chosen to first put teachers in front of children – which is why campuses are rife with deferred maintenance issues.

Historically, even North Carolina's largest urban county did not have a huge tax base and, like many rural N.C. counties today, could not raise the money for quality education. But yesterday's inability to raise the money may be giving way to a disinclination to raise the money.

Parents throughout the county have children caught in the middle of this duel. There does not appear to be any discussion of moving taxing authority, and therefore responsibility to the voters, to the school board.

The new school board begins its new high-stakes test on Dec. 9. Three new at-large members will be installed: Chamber of Commerce vice president Kit Cramer; business owner and CPCC trustee Kaye McGarry, and former City Council member and high school coach Joe White.

Helping youth link school learning to the real world

"At East Hartford High School in East Hartford, Conn., students come from more than 70 countries and speak 40 languages. Mobility is high and 60% of students come from low-income families. 'Students need to see a connection to the real world,' says former principal Steve Edwards.

"East Hartford has built a curriculum around connected learning experiences by working with multiple community partners. Young people gain real-life training and skills through a variety of community-based and entrepreneurial learning activities. For example, selected students operate a branch office of a local bank located at the school, managing accounts for their peers and teachers. Partners also have developed programs targeted to the needs of the student population. These pro-

grams include a student assistance center that offers comprehensive social and behavioral services, a primary care health center, a wellness center that promotes integrated physical well-being, and after-school programming.

"Combined effects of these strategies are heartening. Over the last six years, the dropout rate has decreased from 22% to less than 2% annually. Eighty percent of the graduates go on to at least a two-year college — a 20% increase over the last seven years."

– "Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools," a report from the Coalition for Community Schools on how to use community resources in support of student learning, www.communityschools.org/mtdhomepage.html

Should set share go to local education?

Continued from Page 1

ing expenses or capital projects.

“What I am asking is for us to set aside a certain amount of our budget, by internal policy, to give to CMS and CPCC every year based on amounts that we are giving you now. And actually the amount I would propose is a tad above what we are giving you now.

“Then you would decide each year what portion of that you want to go to a mortgage, and what portion you want to go to operating – based on decisions you have made in terms of bond issuance.

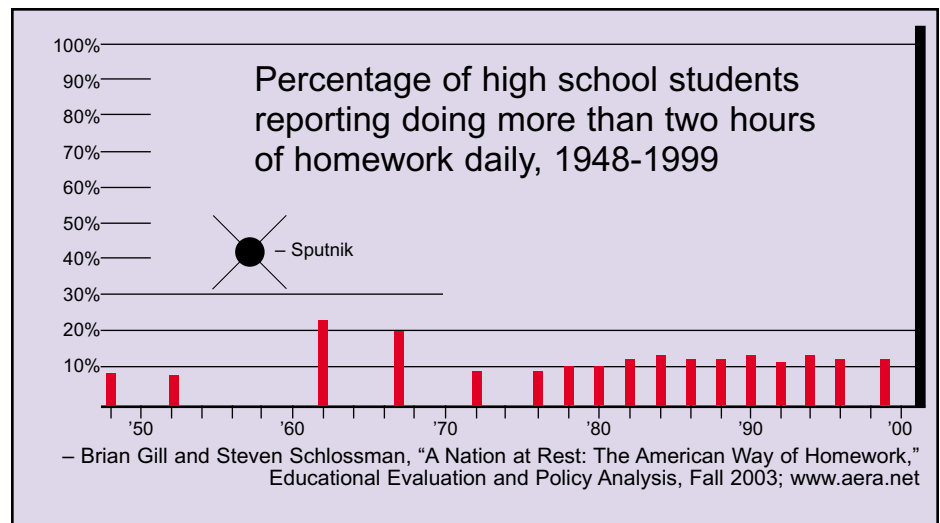
“In other words, if you asked us to issue bonds of a certain amount, you need to be prepared to pay the mortgage on those the next year out of the same pot of money.

“In essence, this happens already. It’s just that now you come to us and ask us in two separate pots. We’re just saying – I’d say – give you the pot of beans and you decide how to allocate that pot of beans....

“The question still remains, however, as to whether this community can afford the additional bonds. Economic recovery will pass Mecklenburg County by if we insist on raising taxes on the people who fuel our economic engine and the businesses that employ them.

“I am convinced that we are spending enough to properly educate our children, when you combine our capital and our operating expenses. The citizens of this county have given the school board the responsibility to educate all our children. By giving them greater budget flexibility, we are giving them the ability to achieve that goal.

“This proposal would allow the county to use available resources



to achieve the maximum impact without taxing our citizens into neighboring counties....”

Samuelson said that, with the plan in effect, “we wouldn’t have to have these debates and these times when you come and try to educate me about something that, had I wanted to know, I would have run for the school board.”

Helms objected, saying that the plan would mean “we are essentially going to set a limit on how much money will be available to the schools, and then they can decide how they allocate that sum, whatever it may be.”

Samuelson “also suggests that if we raise taxes that we’re going to see economic opportunity pass us by. I would suggest, to the contrary, if we don’t educate our children, economic [opportunity] will pass us by....

“My view is that we should determine what the need is – what is the demonstrated need for school buildings, teachers, what is the need for facilities, resources – and then we ought to balance that against our ability to pay at the time.

“And if we continue to be in a recession it may very well be that we will moderate that. And everyone will join in that.

“I simply do not want to send a message to the new Board of Education that you’re coming up on a time where you’re going to be

maxed out on your credit card. ‘You just can’t spend any more. We don’t care if you get another 40,000 students.’

“I think we need to say, ‘We’re going to work with you. We’re going to find a way to make equity work, to deal with growth.

“This is not an either-or situation. We need to find a way that is fair and consistent and I believe that we can do that.

“I just think that the messages we send may, I think, create an environment where we are dealing out of fear. We’re fearful that something is going to cost somebody some money. Let’s don’t let that interfere with our ability to be the great community that we have always been and can continue to be.”

Responding to Helms, Samuelson told educators in the audience, “It’s just a starting point. Think about it. It’s not a threat, it’s not a cap. It’s simply a new way to let you do what you’re supposed to do.”

“When we start talking about percentages of our operating budget,” replied Helms, “that is an arbitrary number that WE set.”

Samuelson and Helms agreed to continue the debate in January, when the Board of County Commissioners has invited the CMS board to attend its annual retreat.

NAEP: 11 years of data, minuscule advances

“The Nation’s Report Card” is in, and the nation flunked.

CMS must wait a few more weeks for its first-ever system scores. It is hoping for far better news than what last week’s scores showed for the nation.

This national exam based on national expectations found that two-thirds of the nation’s young readers are not proficient, and that scores are not rising.

Math scores were better, and N.C. officials were crowing about it. N.C. math proficiency averages are better than the nation’s. But it’s reading that is the foundation for achievement – and a key skill missing in youth who do not graduate from high school each year.

Last Thursday’s release of the NAEP scores generated some coverage nationally. Excerpts are below. Adjoining that text are graphs built from data on the National Center for Education Statistics Web site, which is at: nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/

The excerpts from coverage:

Charlotte Observer

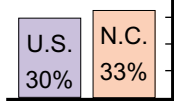
“Nationally, only one-third of the nation’s students can read and do math at or above grade level, according to the 2003 National Assessment for Educational Progress.”

“Nationally and in the Carolinas, math performance on the tests given last school year is up significantly

from 2000, the last year the exam was given. Reading performance, however, held steady or dipped slightly from 2002, when that test was last given.”

– www.charlotte.com

4 reading

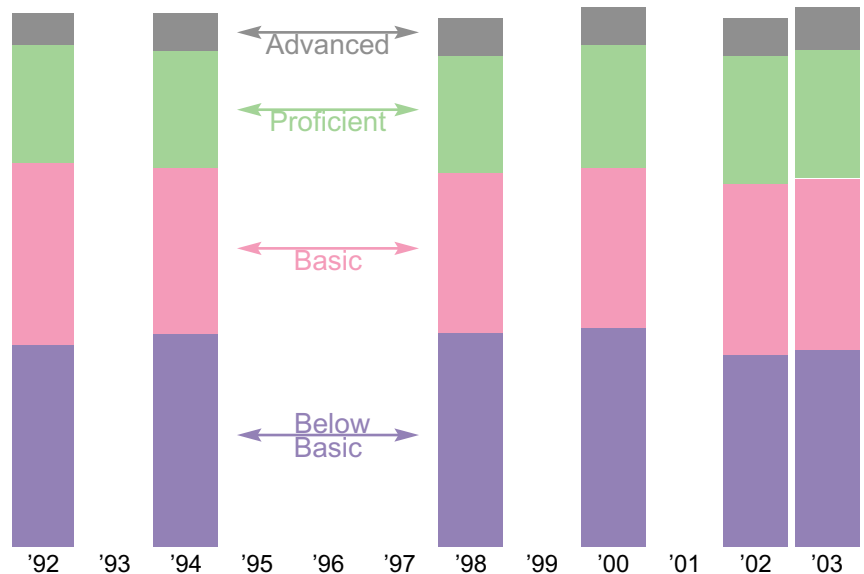


New York Times

“Zalman Usiskin, a professor of math education at the University of Chicago and a former member

Grade 4 reading achievement, by year

Since 1992, there has been startlingly little change in the percentages of fourth-graders testing at the four levels captured by NAEP.



Data source: National Center for Education Statistics. Bars not of same height due to rounding.

of the math council’s board, said, ‘The decade of the ’90’s – and it looks like it’s continuing in this decade – was a decade of great success in school mathematics: more kids taking math in high schools, scores up in fourth and eighth grade NAEP.’

“‘There really hasn’t been a decade like that since the time of Sputnik,’ Dr. Usiskin said (chart, Page 4).

“‘Still, the Education Trust, which represents urban schools, expressed concern because the math scores of white students in eighth grade rose more than those of Latinos and black students, meaning a widening achievement gap....”

– www.nytimes.com

Dept. of Public Instruction

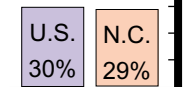
“North Carolina’s scale scores are numerically higher than the national average in every category and represent historical gains

in mathematics.

“‘For the first time, North Carolina is leading the country in student achievement in fourth-grade math,’ said Gov. Mike Easley. ‘And, North Carolina students continue to perform above the national and Southeastern averages. We must continue our investments in education to ensure that these trends continue. We must remain committed to eliminating the achievement gap, providing a high quality education for all children, and building a competitive workforce across the state.’...”

“While scores in mathematics went up for nearly every racial group and for students who are eligible for free and reduced-price

8 reading



NAEP reading gains lag those in math

Continued from Page 5

lunch, achievement gaps were similar to prior years.

“In grade 8 reading, the gap between male and female students widened. Females’ average scores are 11 points higher than males’ average scores in eighth grade reading.

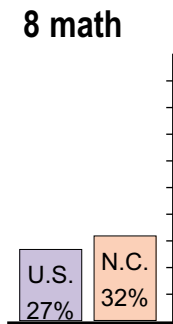
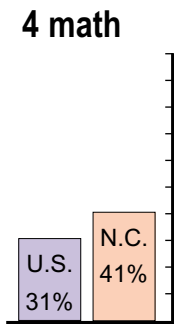
“State Board of Education Chairman Howard Lee noted, ‘Although we have been paying significant attention to achievement gaps in recent years, this is a reminder that our work needs to continue and at a much faster pace.’

“The NAEP assesses mathematics in five content areas: number sense, properties and operations; measurement; geometry and spatial sense; data analysis, statistics and probability; and algebra and functions. The NAEP assesses reading in three contexts: literary experience, to gain information and to perform a task. The NAEP scale is 0-500 in mathematics and reading.

“The 2003 NAEP release covers mathematics and reading at grades 4 and 8 and covers tests given in the spring of 2003 to samples of students in 53 states and jurisdictions. In North Carolina approximately 5,000 fourth graders were assessed for each subject and approximately 4,000 eighth graders were assessed.

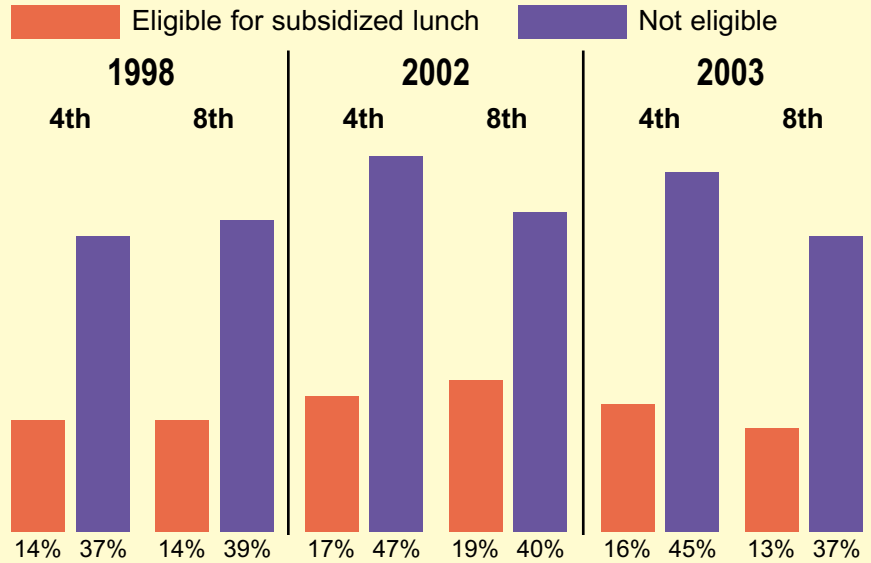
“NAEP is given to a statewide sample of students; therefore, local scores are not available.

However, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools participated in NAEP’s Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) in 2003 along with nine other large urban school districts in the nation. The results for TUDA will be released by the



Poverty reflected in academic achievement

Percentage of students in the national NAEP sample who tested proficient or above in reading for three recent testing years, by grade and socioeconomic status:



Data source: National Center for Education Statistics

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) at a later date[within weeks].”

– www.ncpublicschools.org

Washington Post

“Some educators see the NAEP tests as a first step toward a nationwide standard for education tests. Individual states now have widely differing measures of academic achievement, making it difficult to compare their progress toward meeting national education goals.

“The results suggest that educational progress has been faster in the fourth grade than in eighth grade, and was more pronounced in math than in reading, a finding in line with historical trends.

“One explanation for the discrepancy between math and reading results, said John Stevens, a member of the NAEP governing

board, is that math skills are taught in the classroom while reading abilities are influenced by a much broader range of experiences, including ‘what students do with their friends when they aren’t in school or at home.’ ...

“The most obvious example of... disparities is Texas, which the Bush administration has touted as a model for the high-stakes testing movement that is now part of the No Child Left Behind law. According to the state’s own testing system, 91% of eighth-graders in Texas are ‘proficient’ in math. By the standards set by NAEP, only 25% of Texan eighth-graders have achieved proficiency.”

Education Week

“Reading achievement has proved more stubborn, with scores settling back to about the same level as in 1992, when the current version of the test in that subject was first given. But federal education officials said they were encouraged that the reading num-

Continued on Page 7

NAEP reading gains lag those in math

Continued from Page 6

bers have held steady, despite large increases in the number of Hispanic test-takers, many of whom are still learning English....

“Because the tests will now be conducted every two years, as required under the No Child Left Behind law, and results are to be released within six months of giving the test, officials said the printed report cards that had been the standard format for the results would likely take longer to be published.”

– www.edweek.org

The Associated Press

“Just as with math, more than two-thirds of students tested in reading did not achieve at the level test organizers say is the goal – ‘proficient,’ which means having a demonstrated ability to understand challenging subject matter and apply it to real-world situations.

“This round of scores marks the first time all 50 states were required to take part in the test as a condition of receiving federal money. Now, every two years, new national scores will come out in grades four and eight for reading and math. If students do well on state tests but not on the national assessment, states will probably face greater pressure to explain why.

“That’s the kind of second opinion – some call it a shaming

Parent education: Is there a pattern here?

Grade 8 students’ reading achievement for 2003, by level of education attained by the student’s parents:

	Below Basic	At Basic	At Proficient	At Advanced
Less than high school	45%	42%	13%	1%
Graduated high school	34%	46%	19%	1%
Some after high school	21%	46%	31%	2%
Graduated college	17%	39%	38%	5%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

device – that federal officials want as they try to shake up public education. Under federal law, every student is to be ‘proficient’ in math and reading by 2013-14, but the states define what that means.”

– Posted at www.cnn.com

USA Today

“Bob Schaeffer of the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, or FairTest, a watchdog group, says NAEP now becomes a sort of ‘truth serum’ for states.

“Bruce Hunter, director of public policy for the American Association of School Administrators, says it’s widely recognized that NAEP’s standards are higher than most states’ standards but that critics will use them to blast public schools anyway.

“The fact that most students score basic rather than proficient is going to be held out as evidence of how awful public schools are,’ he says.”

Characteristics of NAEP 2003 student sample

Subsidized lunch: 51% not eligible; 8% reduced-price; 33% free.

Types of schools: 90% public; 3% Other Private; 1% Catholic; 1% Lutheran; 2% Conservative Christian.

Race/ethnicity: 60% white; 17% black; 17% Hispanic; 4% Asian/ Pacific Islander; 1% American Indian/ Alaska Native; 1% Unclassified.

– National Center for Education Statistics



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High time for change

Charts track high school disparities in enrollment, academic achievement

No Child Left Behind is going to give parents more information than they can shake a calculator at. The key will be finding in the mounds of data the trends – and that’s always a challenge.

Below is an example of the high school charts on the following pages – this one for all high schools listed in this report. The charts combine enrollment data for three years (one year before choice, two with choice) and two years of achievement data in English I and biology.

The percentage of Hispanics at each school on or above grade level is shown in a magenta bar. Scores for blacks are in black. White scores are in green. For people without color printers, the order of the bars for each year is Hispanic, black and white.

Where there are not enough students in a demographic group to report test scores, the bar is omitted. Poverty data (the percentage of children eligible for subsidized lunches) is in a yellow oval.

Fall 2001 enrollment is broken down only by percentage black because CMS data prior to 2002 followed the 1960s court orders to track black children and nonblack children. A few comments:

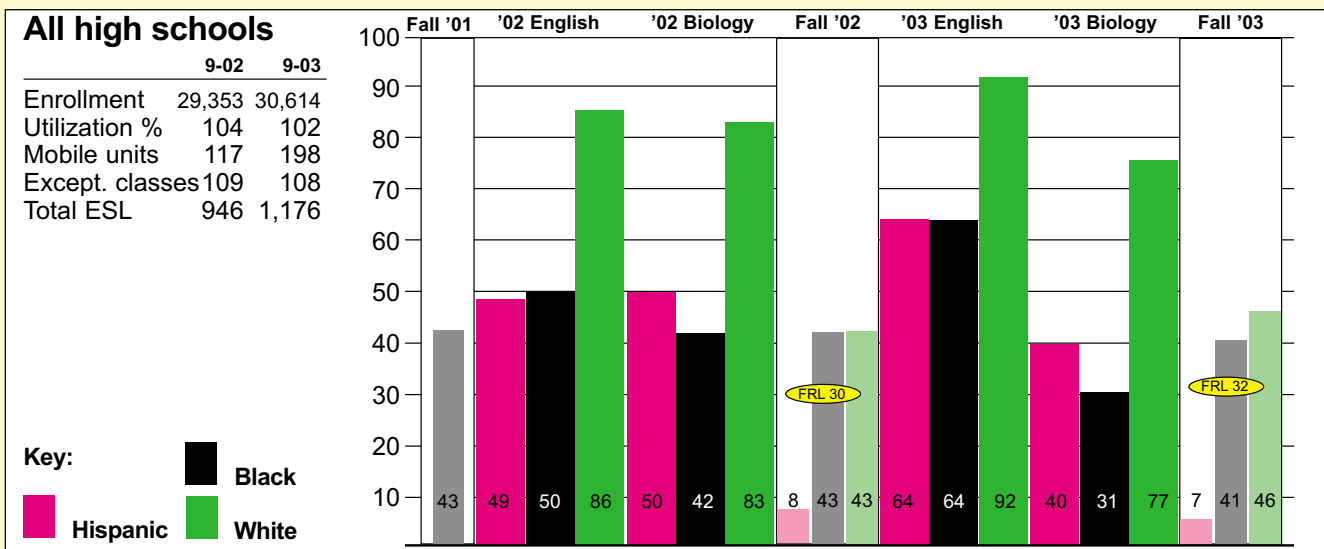
– While poverty in the district is reasonably stable, things are not stable at every school. As Berry

Tech fills out, it is becoming less white. And the sorting out continues at other schools. Two schools saw black percentages rise by 5 or more percentage points. Two saw them fall by 50 or more points.

– This fall Supt. Jim Pughsley asserted that schools with more than 55% of students in poverty must be considered places that threaten the academic achievement of all children, both rich and poor, who are assigned there. CMS now has in that category three high schools serving more than 3,900 students.

– The main purpose of these charts is to remind readers in a very graphic way of the huge achievement gaps that remain at CMS high schools. The percentage of students meeting a mediocre state standard of being on or above grade level is disappointing. And the gaps between white and black students is routinely 20, 30, even 40 points.

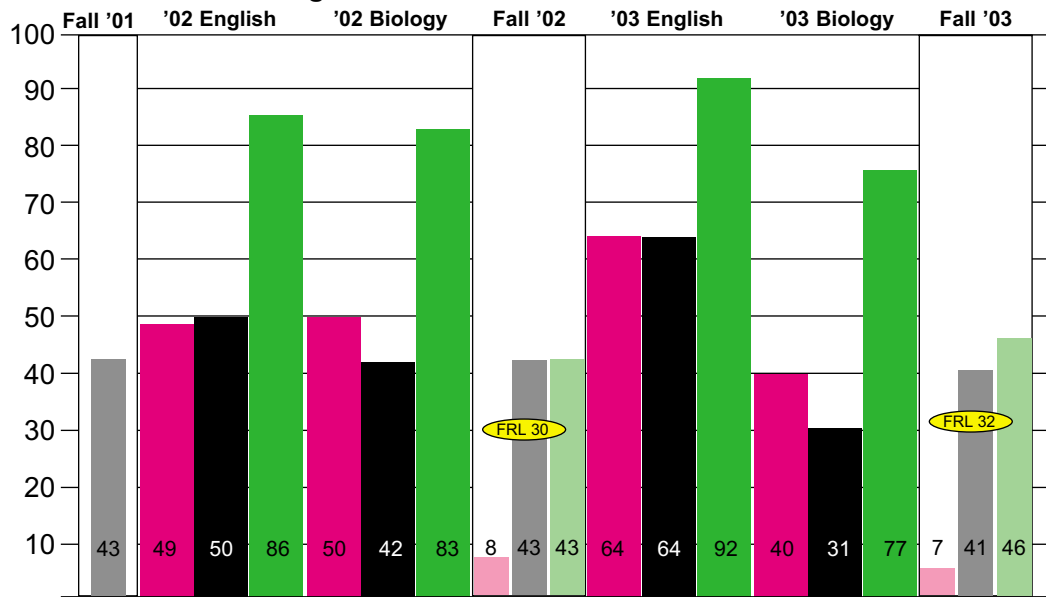
– One advisory about the academic percentage. When the total number of Hispanics, blacks or whites in a school is very low, the percentage on or above grade level may reflect a small number of students. Full details are available at the CMS Web site, www.cms.k12.nc.us, or the N.C. Dept. of Public Instruction site, www.ncpublicschools.org



CMS High Schools

All high schools

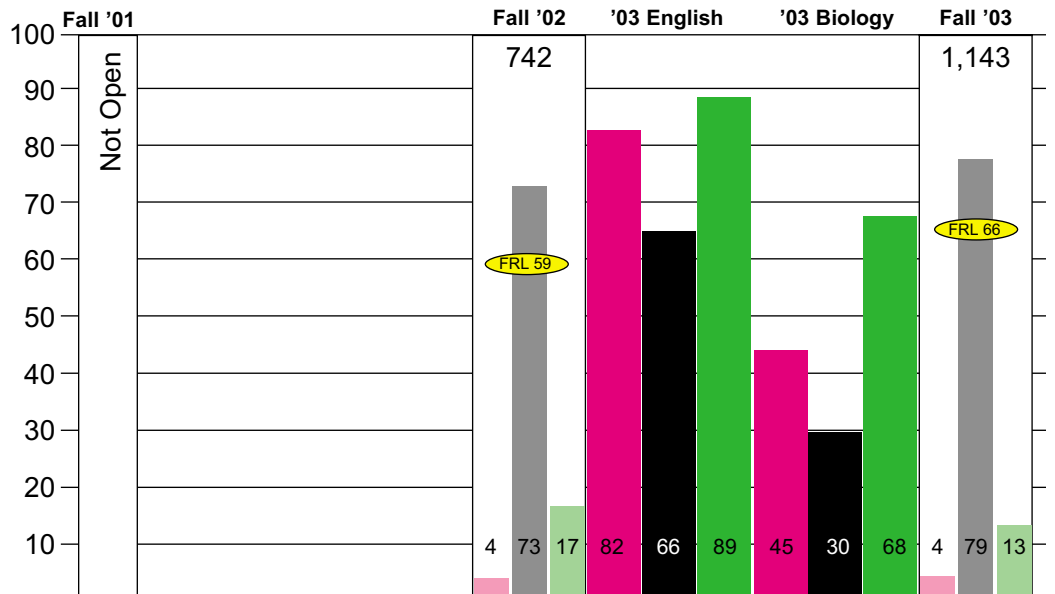
	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	29,353	30,614
Utilization %	104	102
Mobile units	117	198
Except. classes	109	108
Total ESL	946	1,176



Berry Tech

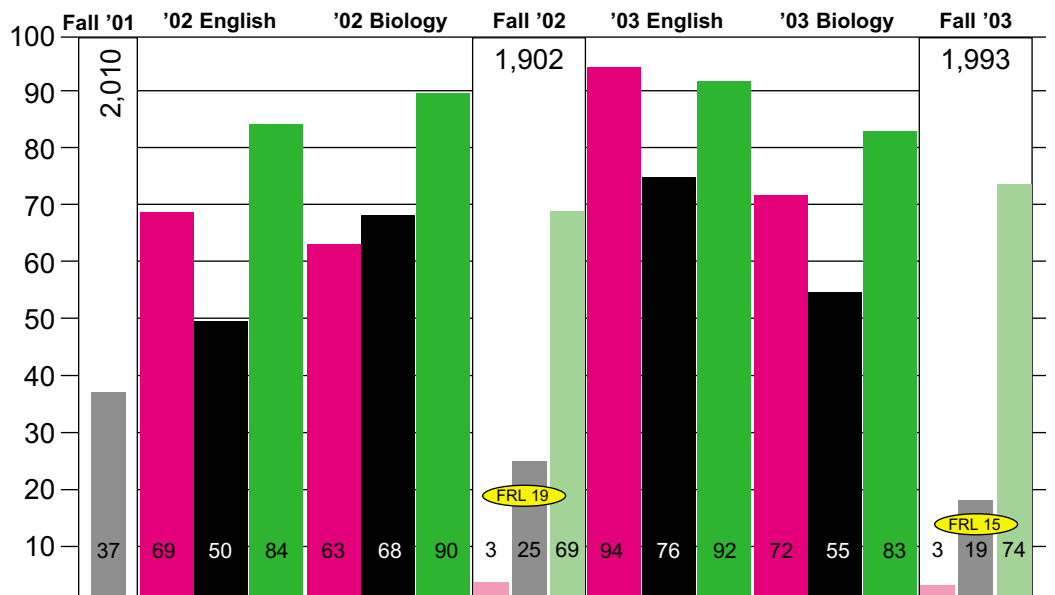
	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	742	1,143
Utilization %	46*	71
Mobile units	0	0
Except. classes	0	0
Total ESL	8	11

*Phased opening of new school in '02 with 9th- and 10th-graders.



Butler

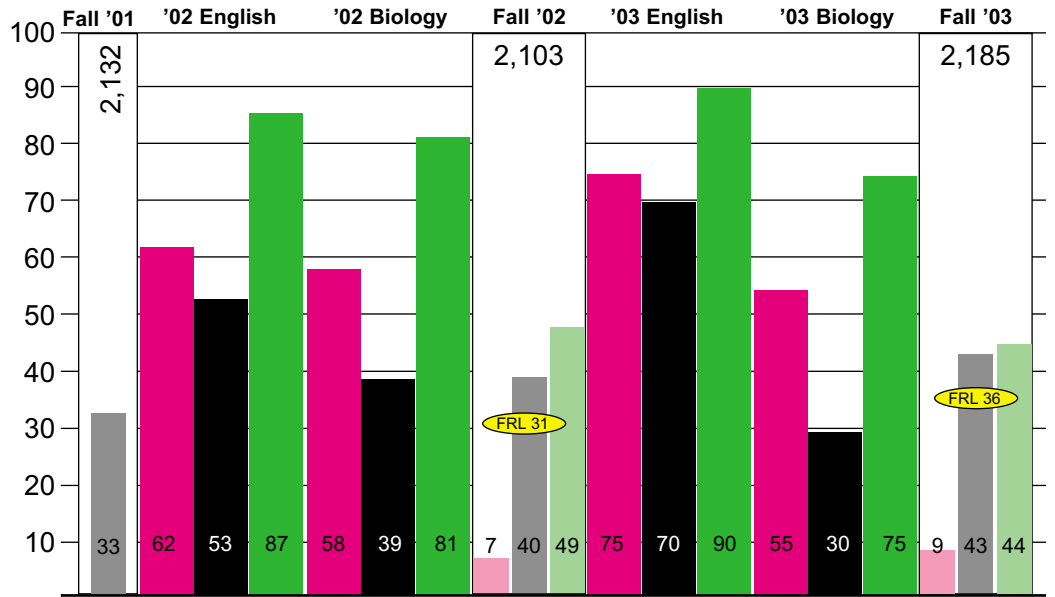
	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	1,902	1,993
Utilization %	112	116
Mobile units	16	19
Except. classes	6	8
Total ESL	0	0



CMS High Schools

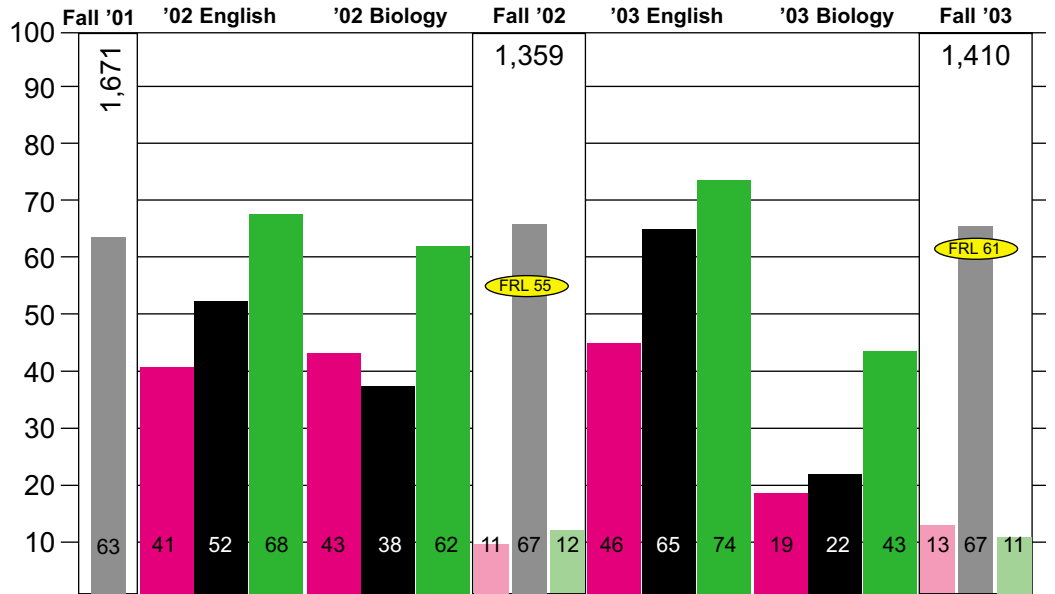
East Meck

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	2,103	2,185
Utilization %	122	115
Mobile units	12	21
Except. classes	8	8
Total ESL	81	132



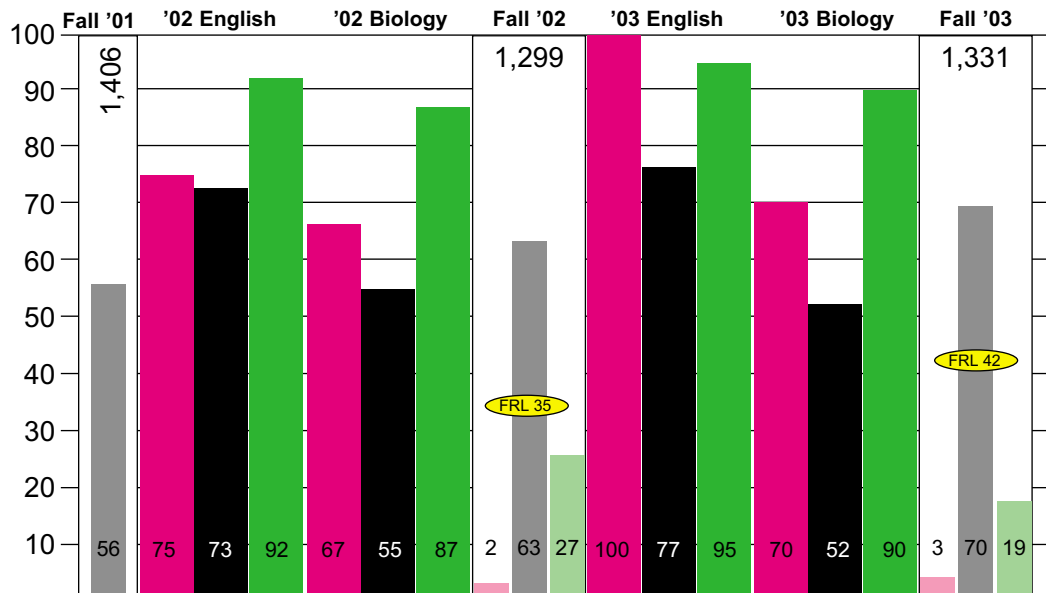
Garinger

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	1,359	1,410
Utilization %	82	87
Mobile units	0	0
Except. classes	6	8
Total ESL	132	148



Harding

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	1,299	1,331
Utilization %	116	111
Mobile units	8	12
Except. classes	7	7
Total ESL	3	6

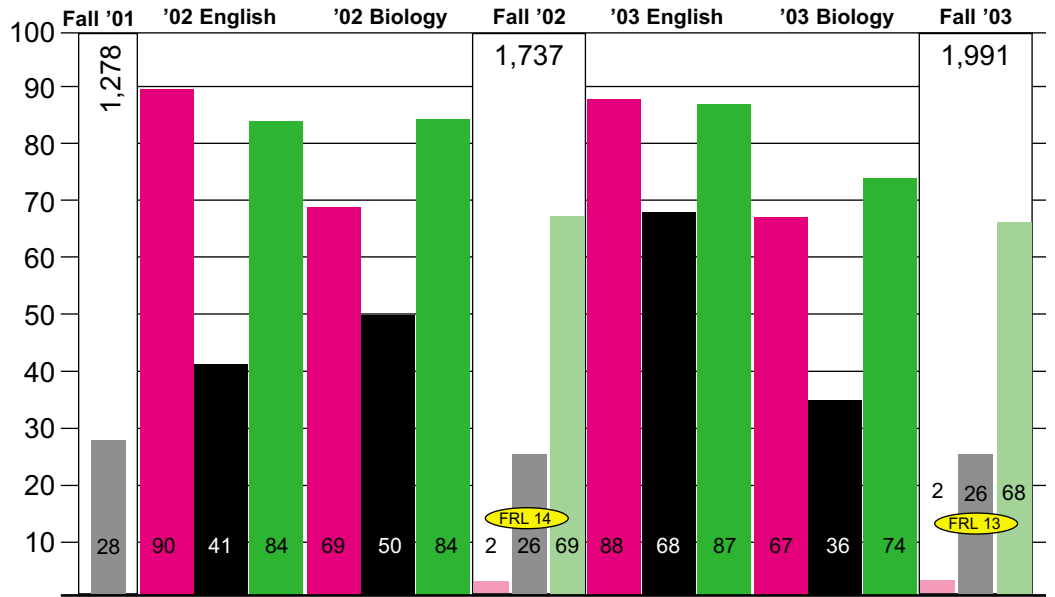


Key:
 Black
 Hispanic
 White

CMS High Schools

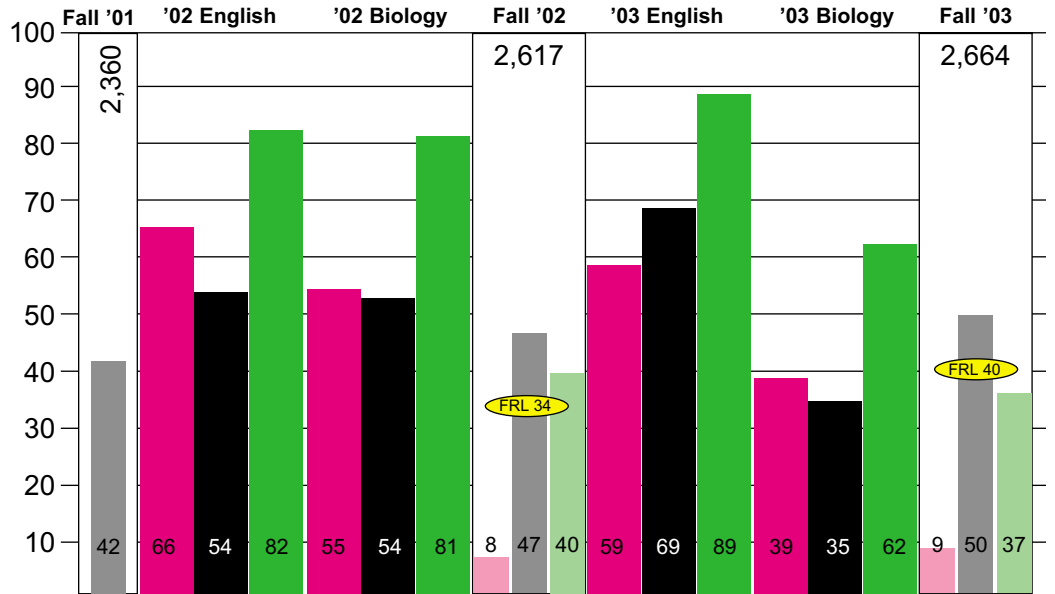
Hopewell

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	1,737	1,991
Utilization %	121	117
Mobile units	3	15
Except. classes	6	5
Total ESL	0	0



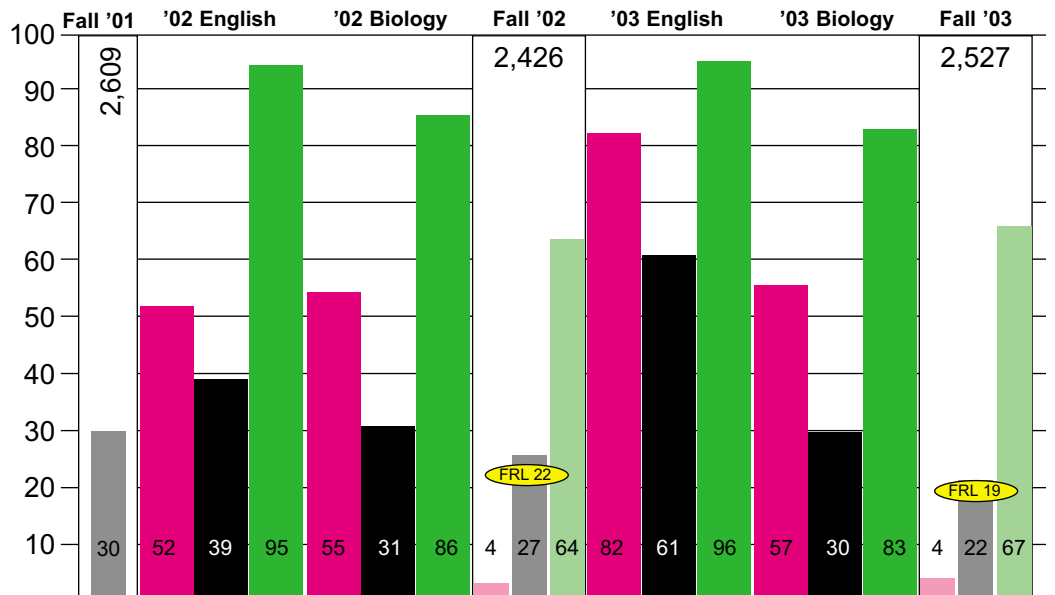
Independence

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	2,617	2,664
Utilization %	123	112
Mobile units	15	27
Except. classes	9	8
Total ESL	163	169



Myers Park

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	2,426	2,527
Utilization %	120	115
Mobile units	3	12
Except. classes	10	10
Total ESL	54	54

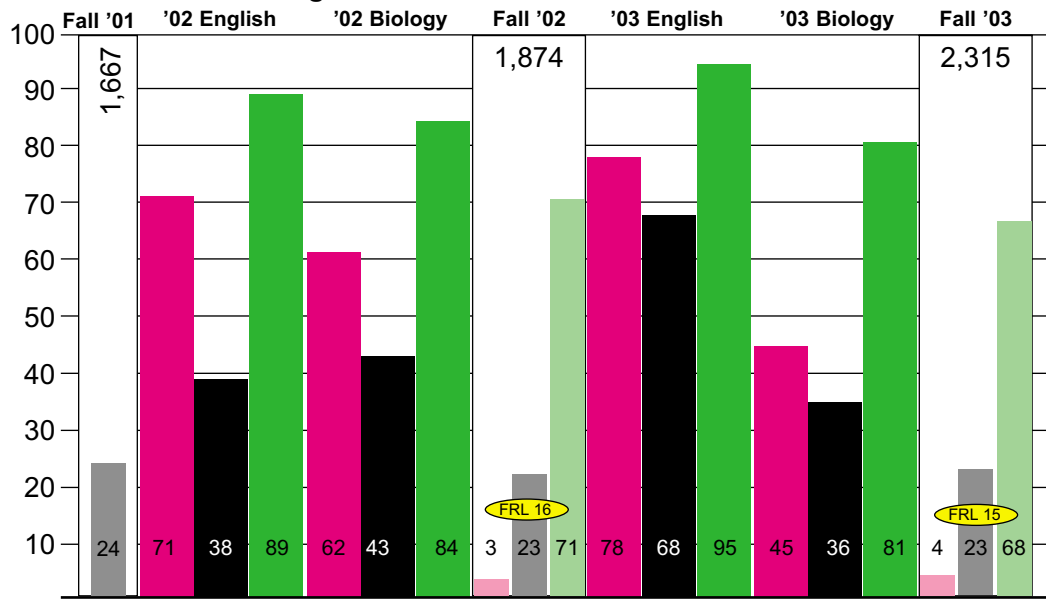


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CMS High Schools

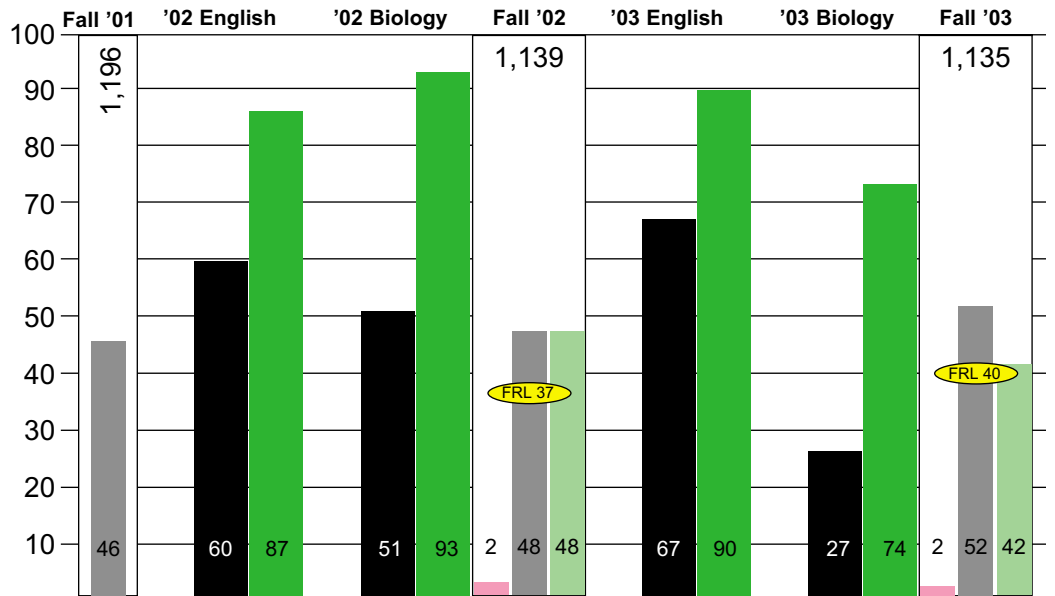
North Meck

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	1,874	2,315
Utilization %	123	122
Mobile units	0	19
Except. classes	8	8
Total ESL	3	41



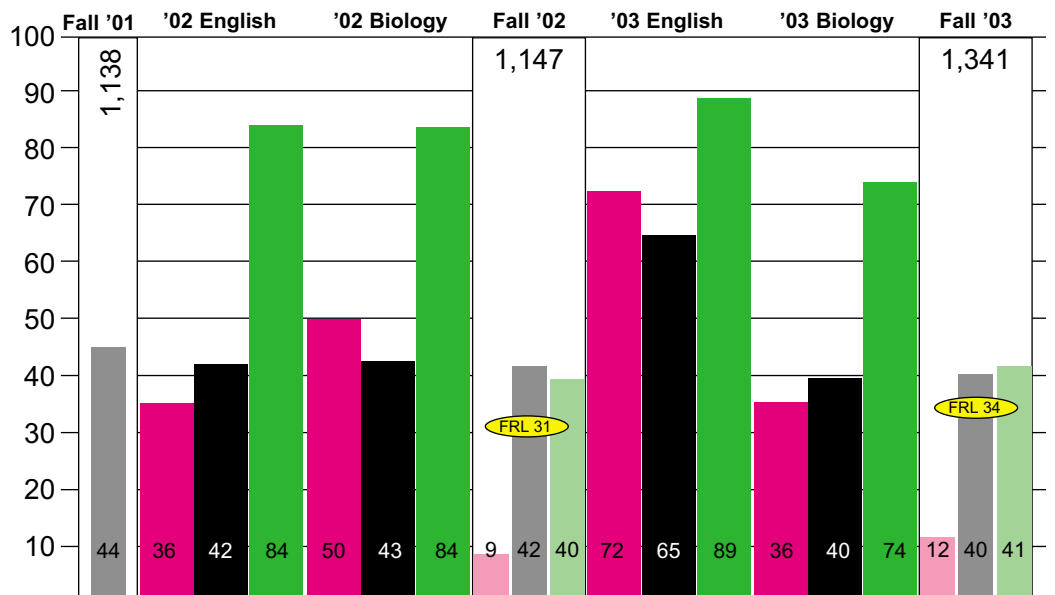
Northwest Arts

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	1,139	1,135
Utilization %	114	116
Mobile units	5	5
Except. classes	4	5
Total ESL	5	6



Olympic

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	1,147	1,341
Utilization %	74	85
Mobile units	0	0
Except. classes	6	5
Total ESL	53	65

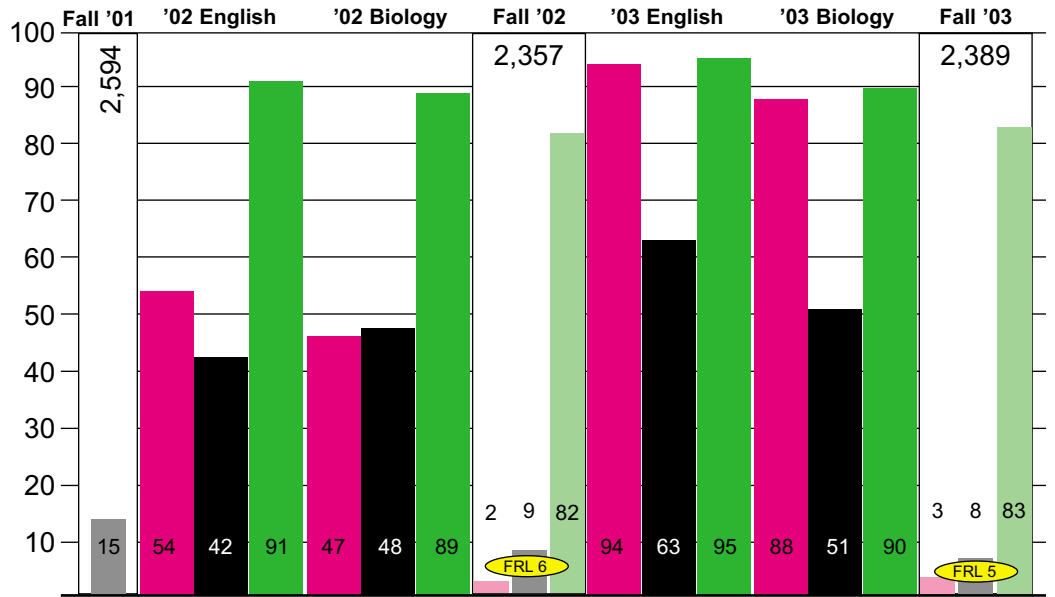


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CMS High Schools

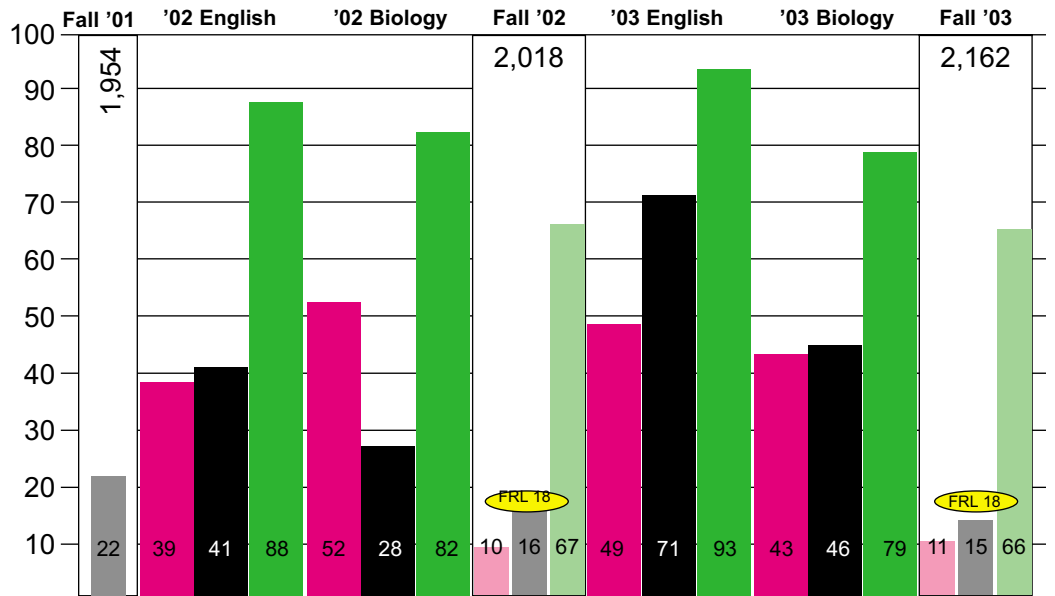
Providence

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	2,357	2,389
Utilization %	113	113
Mobile units	22	22
Except. classes	6	4
Total ESL	47	42



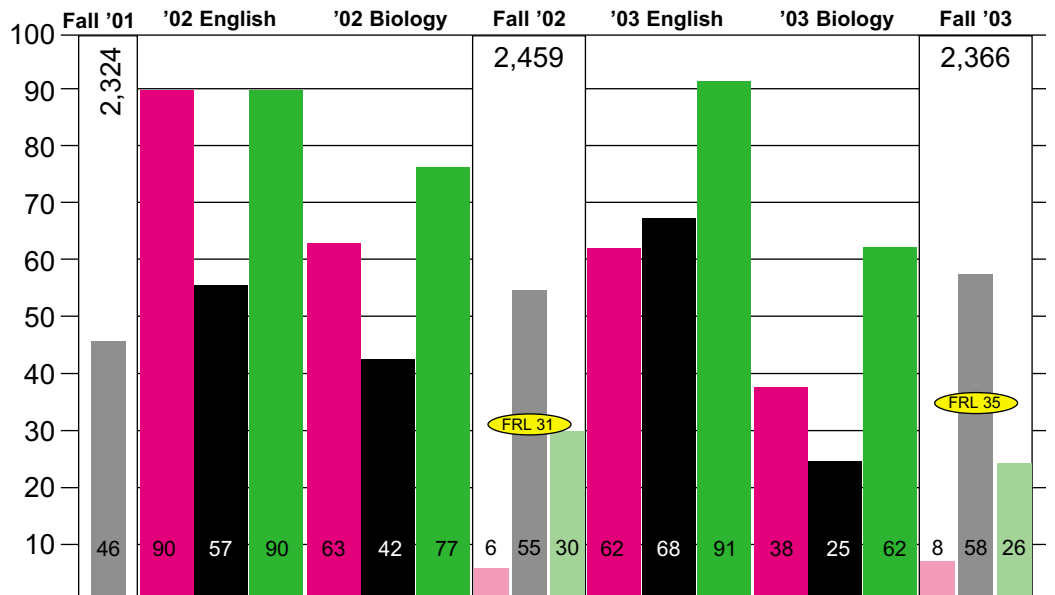
South Meck

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	2,018	2,162
Utilization %	116	116
Mobile units	2	7
Except. classes	6	5
Total ESL	86	136



Vance

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	2,459	2,366
Utilization %	122	108
Mobile units	31	39
Except. classes	7	6
Total ESL	90	116

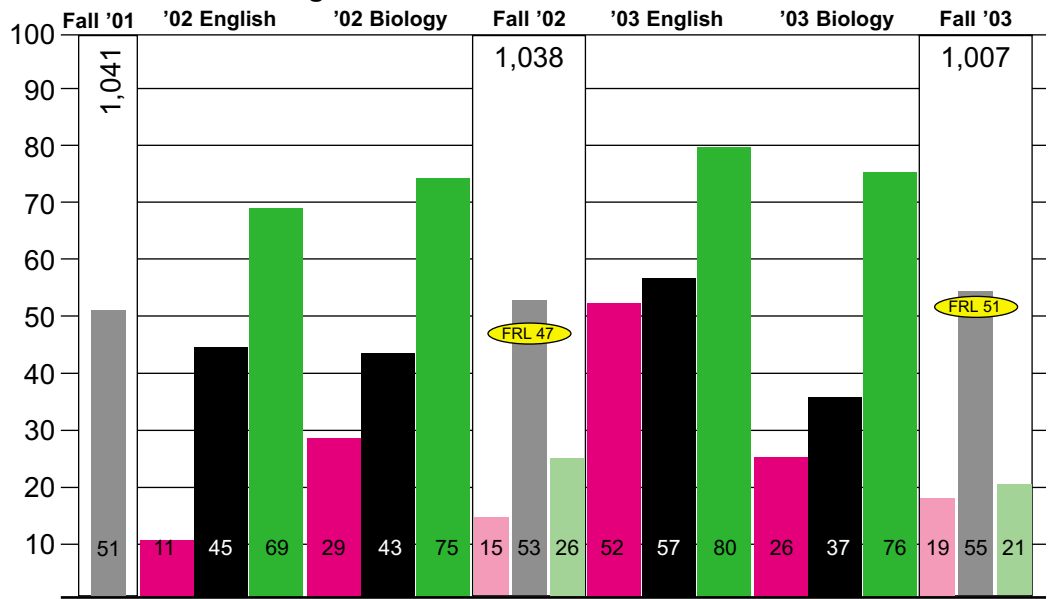


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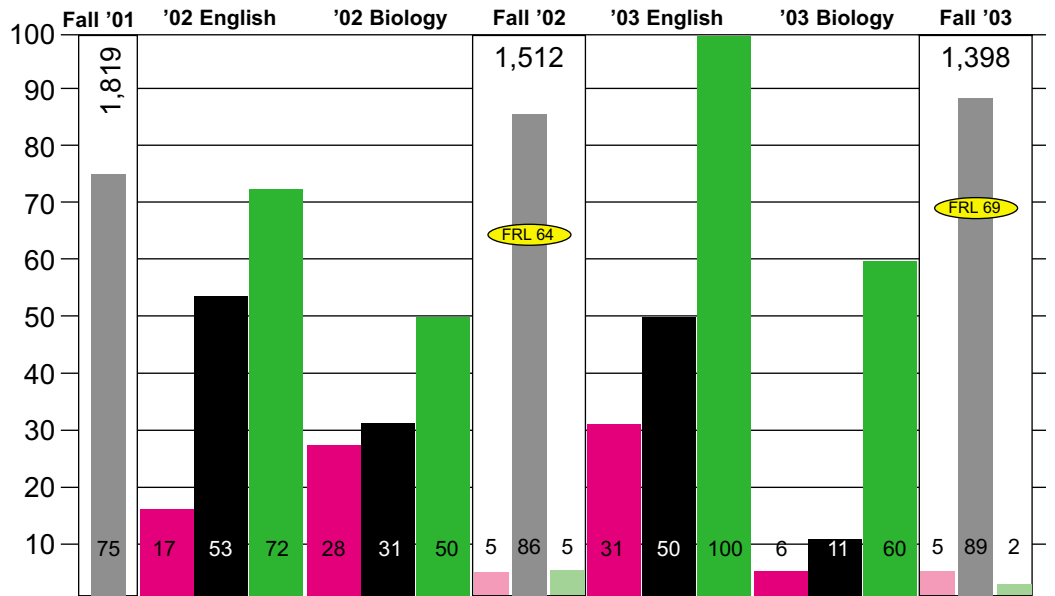
Waddell

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	1,038	1,007
Utilization %	76	74
Mobile units	0	0
Except. classes	7	7
Total ESL	104	130



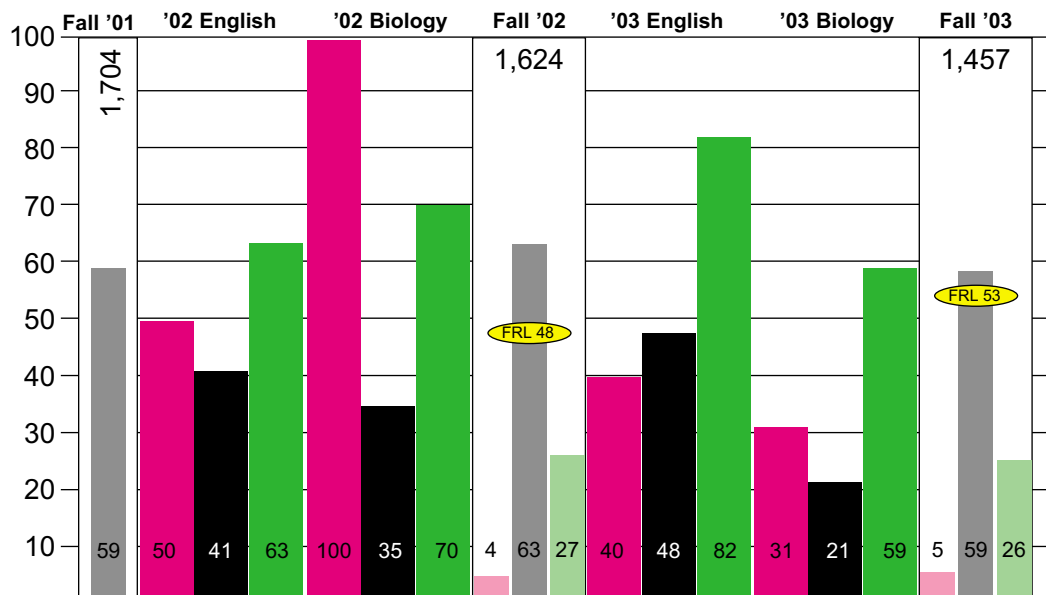
West Charlotte

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	1,512	1,398
Utilization %	84	79
Mobile units	0	0
Except. classes	6	7
Total ESL	79	60



West Meck

	9-02	9-03
Enrollment	1,624	1,457
Utilization %	85	77
Mobile units	0	0
Except. classes	7	7
Total ESL	38	60



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Calendar

NOVEMBER

- 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.

DECEMBER

- 3** Urban League volunteer orientation night, 6-8:30 p.m., 740 W. Fifth St. Reservations: Sarah Bisland Young at 704-373-2256 ext. 205 or sbyoung@urban-leaguecc.org
- 4** Education Budget Advisory Committee, 7:30 a.m., Government Center 11th floor conference room.
- 5** Equity Committee, 8 a.m., Board Room, Education Center.
- 9** School board installs new members, 5 p.m., Board Room.
- 9** School board meets, 6 p.m., Board Room.
- 16** Bond Oversight Committee, 7:30 a.m., Building Services, 3301 Stafford Dr. off Wilkinson Blvd.
- 16** Policy Committee, 3:15 p.m., Room 414, Education Center.
- 17** Education Budget Advisory Committee, 7:30 a.m., Government Center 11th floor conference room.
- 18** Finance, Capital & Facilities Committee, Board Conference Room.

JANUARY

- 26-28** North Carolina character education conference, Renaissance Suites Hotel, 2800 Coliseum Centre Dr. Download details and registration forms from pink box at www.ncpublicschools.org/charactereducation.

Mixed news about the digital generation

“The vast majority of children are growing up in homes where television is a near-constant presence. Two-thirds of zero- to 6-year-olds (65%) live in a home where the TV is on at least half the time or more, even if no one is watching, and one-third (36%) live in ‘heavy’ TV households, where the television is left on ‘always’ or ‘most of the time.’ Just under half (45%) of all parents say that if they have something important to do, it is very or somewhat likely that they will use TV to occupy their child while they finish their task.

“Given the omnipresence of media in these children’s lives, it is not surprising that in a typical day, about 8 in 10 use screen media (83%) – about the same proportion who read (79%) or listen to music (79%).

“But many of these toddlers and preschoolers are not just passively consuming media chosen by other members of their homes – they are actively asking for and helping themselves to what they want.

“They are turning on the TV by themselves (77%), asking for particular shows (67%), using the remote to change channels (62%), asking for their favorite videos or DVDs (71%), putting in their own music tapes or CDs (36%), hopping up to the computer by themselves (33%), loading their own CD-ROMs (23%), and for some, even asking for specific websites while surfing the Net (12%).

– “Zero to Six : Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers,” fall 2003, a survey based on 1,000 parent responses conducted for the Kaiser Family Foundation Report, www.kff.org

Surveyers asked parents "how important, if at all, you think each of the following is in helping the intellectual development of children...." Parents said the following were "very important:"

Reading books	96%
Building toys (blocks or Legos)	77%
Doing puzzles	74%
Using educational toys like talking books	62%
Watching educational TV shows like "Sesame Street"	58%
Watching educational videos or DVDs	49%
Playing educational computer games	43%
Visiting educational Web sites	31%

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