

High-poverty schools: A hazard to all

All groups pulled down, UNCC researcher says

A UNCC professor Tuesday argued that Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools should reassess its student assignment plan to eliminate the high-poverty schools that she said research shows are hazardous to the academic achievement of all students assigned to them.

Mickelson said that “rather than use race, which it looks like the courts are not going to let us use,” she has pursued the subject of how socioeconomics would improve educational opportunity for all students.

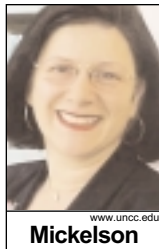
Successful economic integration “will also diversify our schools by race,” but “this is not just a back door to racial diversity in the schools,” she said.

“A substantial body of evidence from across the country demonstrates conclusively that high-poverty schools place all children [assigned to them] at risk, irrespective of their own economic status and irrespective of their race.”

Charts on Page 4, based on Mickelson’s research, illustrate, for example, that children who are not poor but attend high-poverty schools achieve at lower levels than similar children who are not poor but attend low-poverty schools.

Achievement of the average middle-class child assigned to a

Continued on Page 4



Mickelson

Sign of the times?



Together for Excellence At Middle ring schools

Scanned from original 14"x11" placard left at Nov. 9 school board meeting

More than 40 adults addressed the school board Tuesday night. A few petitioned for renewed child transport to day cares. But a majority of the crowd appeared united behind a new acronym, TEAM, in an effort to block reassignments of loyal and wealthier parents from older high schools like South and East Meck and Myers Park as new schools open on the edge of the county. Speech excerpts, Page 3.

Board explores assignment lines

Most of the sparks flying over student reassignment this year appear to be generated by proposed changes at south Mecklenburg high schools.

A package of changes to populate three of the five schools opening over the next two years is headed for a finale Nov. 23. Supt. Jim Pughsley has asked that the board delay decisions on a new middle school in the north and a new high school in the south. The latter project will affect other high schools in the area.

Some of the parents drawn to a Tuesday hearing, however, had on their minds not only the details of a middle school opening on Community House Road near Ballantyne, but how reassignments there would affect South Mecklenburg High and Myers Park.

The board heard from members of the public Tuesday night. Wednesday, board members pored over maps and spreadsheets in a work session.

The board went on retreat Thursday and Friday, holing up in a Greensboro resort facility to focus on longer-term strategic issues.

Parent task forces were created last summer to offer advice on how to draw new attendance areas. Their advice was accepted in some cases but not in others as Pughsley and his staff prepared their recommendations.

Parent participation in reassignment planning ranged widely. So has the apparent success of communication efforts.

At one end of the participation spectrum, parents in one south-

Continued on Page 3

List is long of our failures to address race problems

The writer is an author and CEO of The Kushite Institute for Wholistic Development.

In response to "When silence is not golden" (*Educate!*, Nov. 5):

Indeed, racial problems in Mecklenburg County continue to "simply fester." Examples:

– Public schools that do not truly educate, especially our black students and parents....

– The failure to provide related professional education for teachers and administrators....

– The failure to better define a "quality teacher".... Perhaps most important, it is a teacher who "connects" psycho-spiritually with students through acts of love, empathy or compassion.

– The failure to assign "quality teachers," including more African-centered black teachers, where they are most needed in schools with "at risk" students....

– The failure to adopt a more economical, rational and/or educationally sound pupil assignment

From Readers

plan....

– The failure to create... an African-centered magnet school or supplementary center ... for black students and parents....

– The failure to address underlying causes of disproportionate, often faulty academic "tracking" of students....

– The failure to address grossly disproportionate black poverty....

– The failure to address other, related miscellaneous racial disparities – in the prison population... in the public health arena, in awarding of contracts, other aspects of "capacity building" or economic development....

This implicit, ugly racial reality notwithstanding, our Black spirituality, "soul" or God-given inner strength will continue to sustain us and to keep us afloat, even in "death."

Gyasi A. Foluke

Educate! is a journal on public education focusing on Charlotte-Mecklenburg and N.C. Our aim is to supply information useful to you in your role as student, parent or citizen.

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People: Leonard R. (Deacon) Jones, president; Lucy Bush Carter, vice president; Steve Johnston, executive director and *Educate!* editor; Beth Kinny, outreach director. Assisting with this edition: Stephanie Southworth.

Thanks, Citizen Readers!

As this edition of *Educate!* closed Wednesday night, two readers had responded to last week's appeal by making donations toward the support of this community journal.

You are one of the two? Thank you!

Or are you one of the more than 3,600 recipients of this journal who at this point are depending on just these two readers to finance your independent source of information on public education?

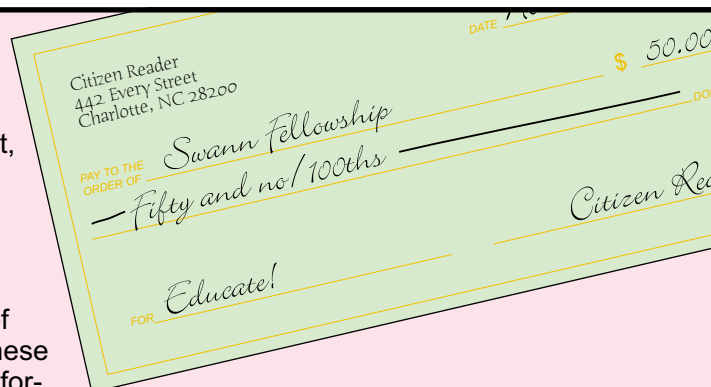
Do your part. Go now to www.networkforgood.org, type in the keyword Swann Fellowship, and make a donation consistent with the value you place in what you learn from this journal. Or send your check to The Swann Fellowship, 1510 E. 7th St., Charlotte, NC 28204-2410.

Our goal is to raise, by Dec. 31, the full \$50,000 that will ensure the publication of this journal throughout calendar year 2005. Many business people's reaction to our budget is, "That's nothing!"

So let's not dawdle over a "nothing" sum. And here's a challenge to get things started:

By this time next week, if your donations total \$10,000, we'll install a thermometer chart here on Page 2 to keep track of the progress. Thanks for the support. And remember:

If you don't help do it, it probably won't get done.



Assignment lines

Continued from Page 1

east area surveyed 90% of their 470 households and mustered responses from 42% of the 470.

At the other end, a school board member discovered Wednesday that even the PTA president of a northeast elementary did not know that the board was considering reassigning the entire school from one middle school to another.

And Sharon Elementary parents learned by reading the newspaper of a proposed reassignment of half their attendance area from one high school to another.

Five schools will open over the next two years: an elementary and a middle school in the north; a middle school in the northeast; and a third middle and a high school near the South Carolina line.

But with an enrollment increase this fall of 5,200 students and more students expected next year, the board is looking at additional strategies to better use available space. Among them:

- Moving some south Mecklenburg fifth-grades to middle schools for a year or two to ease crowding until more elementaries can be built.

- Moving as many pre-kindergarten and elementary exceptional children's classes as possible from Long Creek to Huntersville after a new Ranson Road school opens next fall, slicing Huntersville's attendance area.

- Pughsley has recommended moving Oakhurst and Chantilly/Billingsville neighborhoods from East Meck High to Myers Park High. The change would reduce overcrowding and high poverty rates at East.

That and other proposals appeared to bring parents at East, Myers Park and South together, if only fleetingly, in support of so-called "middle-ring" schools. Those schools, traditionally white, wealthy and successful, now face growing poverty and instability as newer schools open

"Our primary rationale is also proximity to those new schools."

– Kristen De Beer, Bridlestone neighborhood

"The message then is simple: The board and CMS will create a country club school at Ranson Road at the expense of 4,461 other children in the area and open a new school with new seats that are badly needed that will relieve only one school, and it tells the other 4,461 children, keep suffering in your current conditions."

– David McAlexander, Long Creek Elementary

"We worry that the assignment recommendations could trend us or other middle-ring schools for becoming Equity Plus schools. Certainly the school board would not want that."

– Lee Ann Barrineau, South Meck High

"Since 2002, East Meck has undergone inequitable and undesirable boundary changes, and the piecemeal removal of selected, strong neighborhoods from its feeder zone. In only three years, East Meck's free and reduced lunch numbers have nearly doubled...."

– Jessica Otto

"Our neighborhood is 7.6 miles from Crestdale Middle School. Jay Robinson, which opened two years ago, is 1.3 miles from our neighborhood."

– Jill Zakerski, Sarah Hall neighborhood

Voices from the board room

further out in the suburbs.

At Wednesday's work session, Assistant Supt. Susan Agruso said the staff had focused reassignment proposals on those schools that would be opening in the next two years. All other plans and parent requests had been tabled until January's planned re-examination of the entire assignment plan.

It is not clear how extensive that review will be, whether it will address empty seats in center-city schools, and whether the board will revisit its 2001 decision to create high-poverty schools that Pughsley, academic researchers and scores of educational experts say make educating students more difficult or more expensive – or impossible.

But the initial complexity of the plan, plus numerous changes and inequities have left the district with, at best an unwieldy system, at worst a lawsuit waiting to happen.

The board has, in the words of one parent Tuesday night, opened a Pandora's box over the last two years by allowing reassignments requested by individual neighborhoods.

The board has also approved hundreds of transfer requests by individual families.

Add to that the dozens of magnet programs left over from desegregation days, and the blue, green, gold and purple zones designed to promote diversity and curb the length of bus rides during the transition to choice.

"You need to tear down those zones, Dr. Pughsley," District 1 board member Larry Gauvreau said Wednesday afternoon.

Pughsley responded, "The one thing that you and I agree upon is that everything should be on the table" in January.

Parents addressing the board Tuesday night included:

Jean Anderson, Lee Ann Barrineau, Leslie Berens, Pat Boorman, Scott Brennan, Susan Brown, Rick Campe, Mary Jo Clark, Maya Coffield;

Robin Dorfer, Shawn Davis, Donna Dawson, Kristen Debeer, Leslie Dellinger, Liz Downing, Kelly Duke, George Fowler, Lisa Godfrey;

Carol Hall, Diane Hill, Emily Kalmbach, Chas Mansfield, David McAlexander, Scott McClure, Richard McElrath, Lilly Nelson, Jessica Otto;

Virginia Page, Mike Patterson, Wes Settlemyre, Jane Shutt, Donna Smith, Diane Stevens, C.L. Taylor, Janelle Travis, Kevin Tully, Marty Uzen;

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A hazard to all

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high-poverty school is actually lower than a poor child attending a school full of wealthy children, she said.

Speaking to the Tuesday Morning Breakfast Forum at West Charlotte Recreation Center, Mickelson reviewed her research, which is based on surveys and other data from 1997. At that time, the system was under court order to racially balance school populations. Her conclusions:

- Classes within the integrated buildings tended to be segregated by race through tracking. Some children were “never even encountering people of a different social class.”

Mickelson said the children who went to desegregated elementaries tended to be placed on higher tracks at middle and high school. That gave them a real edge later in the college entry sweepstakes and in job placement.

- Learning in a racially diverse classroom “benefited all children. White students did better as well.”

- High concentrations of poor children tended to have the least qualified teachers. And “as soon as [such teachers] get their legs, they’d transfer to another school.

“Whatever the reason, there’s much more mobility among teachers in the high-poverty schools.

“Poor schools also have lots of children who are themselves mobile. Student mobility that is associated with poverty is also harmful to children who attend those schools.”

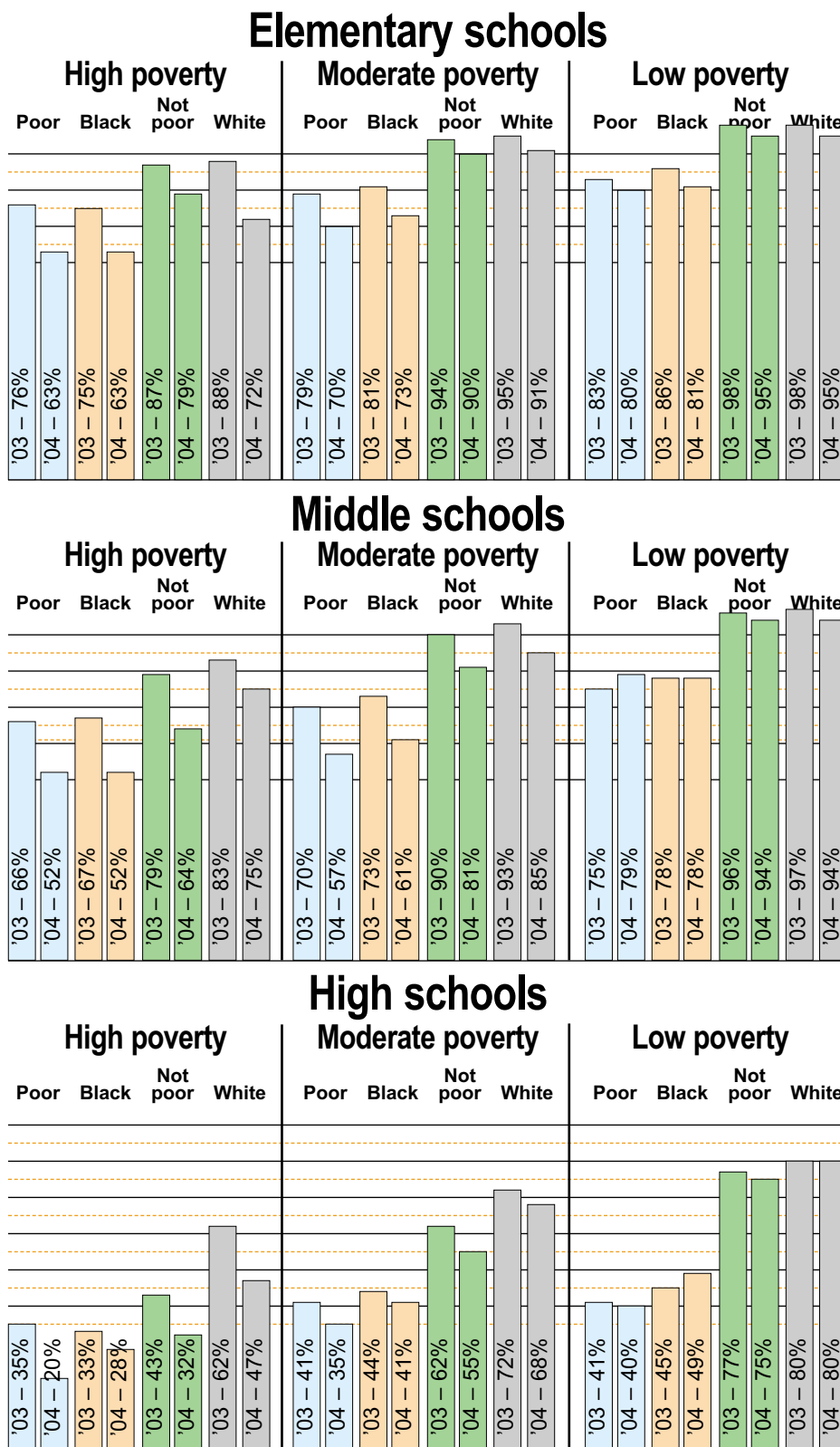
- High-poverty schools have less parent involvement. “And I’m not just talking about PTA money,” Mickelson said.

“Parents who are poor tend to be less educated themselves. They are less likely to be able to help children with their homework.

“You get the most needy children taught by the least-qualified teachers....

Continued on Page 5

Mickelson compared 2003 and 2004 CMS test scores for students at or above grade level. Graphs below focus on four color-coded groups: poor students (blue); blacks (brown); those not poor (green) and whites (gray). Charts show how those scores mostly fell between 2003 to 2004. But all four groups tended to do least well at high-poverty schools (80% or more on subsidized lunch); better at moderate poverty schools (21-79%); and best at low-poverty schools (20% or less.) Mickelson says the adverse impact of high-poverty schools is found not only among groups, but also among students more closely matched for background, income, etc.



A hazard to all

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Mickelson's research (charts, Page 4) shows that all groups perform better at low-poverty schools than at higher-poverty schools.

"These are astounding numbers," Mickelson said. "We cannot provide the quality of educational opportunity to anybody in a high-poverty school."

"A school with high concentrations is just not an environment that maximizes learning."

Mickelson acknowledged that some high-poverty schools are successful, "but it cannot be done across the system."

Mickelson recalled that, a decade or so ago, West Mecklenburg High was honored for high SAT scores. The very next year, the school's scores were near the bottom of the heap. Mickelson said the principal told her that staff turnover in the intervening 12 months had cost the school 100 years of teaching experience. West Meck is now part of the High School Challenge, a county-mandated program to pump about \$1,300 per student into three low-performing high schools in an effort to improve academic achievement.

Mickelson supported additional teacher incentives to raise experience levels. "You get more flies with honey than vinegar," she told the group.

During questions from the audience Tuesday, former CMS principal Ken Simmons said CMS's white enrollment had dropped from 70% of the total in the 1970s to 39.7% today. "There's not a lot of discussion that white students are bailing out of this school system." Soon, he said, "it will look like Detroit."

Mickelson responded that a lot of African-Americans "have been extremely disappointed about desegregation and the failure of desegregation to deliver on the promises" of equity.

"Aside from the way in which white privilege was protected through grouping and tracking,"

Principal isolation

Center for Public Leadership co-founder Ron Heifetz in The School Administrator:

"You know, the isolation and aloneness at the top is really unnecessary. These people will by default move into a lonely position in relation to their job by virtue of the politics... the organizational dynamic of their job.

"You fight it by calling colleagues on the phone in other districts who have no competing stakes and with whom you can start getting real. The more real you get, the less lonely you feel."

— www.aasa.org/publications/sa/2004_11/heifetz

she said, "a lot of the desegregation was poor kids with poor kids.

"If we were to have schools that were diverse in terms of social class but not necessarily by race we would be part of the way toward solving the problem.

"Even if most white people were to leave Charlotte, we would still need to pay attention to the socioeconomic composition of schools to maximize achievement."

Asked about No Child Left Behind, Mickelson said low-poverty schools have a key advantage: With fewer children far behind, there is "time for history and art and music and science."

"Do you know they don't teach science because it is not on the EOGs? This is outrageous."

At high-poverty schools, "any child is going to be spending more time drilling for the bloody test than learning."

Asked about teacher training, Mickelson said she did not teach in a college of education, but thought few new teachers are "formally prepared to educate children from a diverse background.

"The issue is no longer black and white. It's Latino." And most new teachers "are not prepared to

deal with children who are different from themselves."

Asked if she was saying that poor children could not learn, Mickelson said no. Poor kindergartners are behind from Day One. "If you present them with a teacher who understands those children and has the skills to teach them... they will learn.

"But the likelihood that they will have such a teacher is less. We are failing the children.

"The adults created the system, the adults perpetuate the system, the adults do not change it. We are responsible. The children are the victims."

A CMS teacher in the audience said the district's quarterly and biweekly assessments are culturally biased and "inherently racist." By the time children get to the test that counts, "they will not perform.

"They are not accurate. They are designed for failure. You need to wise up."

The teacher said 184 teachers had already resigned this school year.

"This is genocide by education. We need to really say stop, because it is destroying our children," the teacher said.

Mickelson responded, "Those abominations are going to be here until parents and educators rise up and force the powers that be at the state level and the federal level to stop it."

In the meantime, however, "decisions about our children's futures are being made on the basis of these scores.... Until we get rid of this testing nightmare we have to maximize their performance."

Said Robert Dawkins, community organizer for ACORN, "the school board needs to see 700 parents, a thousand parents..." involved in protest.

But in door-to-door visits, Dawkins said he had realized that parents do not understand the issue well. They see their child making good grades and are satisfied. Or, "what parents tell us is, 'My kid made C's but I think he's doing better.'"

Assignment lines

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Lorrie Vanbuskirk, Janet Williams,
Tracy Williams, Jill Zakerski.

Title 1 transfer lottery

Parents at 15 CMS schools have a right under federal No Child Left Behind legislation to transfer their children to a higher-performing school.

They had the right last summer, and parents at those 15, or more, will have it again for next fall.

The school board Tuesday set in motion a policy change that should ease CMS logistics and give parents at the underperforming schools a better opportunity to participate in this new federal right.

If approved in two weeks, parents with a choice out from underperforming Title 1 schools for next fall will be offered their choices in the January assignment lottery. Parent decisions would then be made early, allowing bus routes, teacher assignments and other details to be in place for fall opening.

Last summer – the first time CMS had to participate in Title 1 transfers – hundreds of students moved during the summer. Tuesday night, Pughsley offered this rationale for the policy change:

“It’s very difficult to arrange transportation for all these students in July and August. Those routes have been determined. We have to go back and un-do a great deal of that work to accommodate these students.

“Come that same period of time, we have in many cases already staffed our schools. We have to go back, un-do that, and then find the teachers or transfer teachers into these schools.

“In fact, if we handled it in the way that it has been suggested... the students themselves have greater choice than this past go-round.

“I would say to you that if you were to poll... the principals of those receiving schools, it was a

DidYaHear?

✓ “I’m just short.... I believe the term is vertically challenged,” corrected CMS numbers czar Susan Agruso after DidYaHear referred to her as “height-challenged.” Student placement and planning director Scott McCully, who towers over his boss, talked as though the Oct. 29 item gave a hard-pressed staff a good laugh. As usual, the boss showed no evidence of short temper.

✓ Tom Spivey was named Wachovia Principal of the Year for CMS this week. The former math teacher was named an assistant principal at Piedmont Middle in 1987, and became principal in 1992. Last time we caught up with him was during a break in a basketball game he was attending, and the end of that 14-hour day was just about in sight.

✓ The campaign to entice students back to CMS begins for next fall on Monday, with the application center at 700 Marsh Road extending its hours. Parents of rising kindergartners are also encouraged to do the paperwork before Jan. 19 in order to be part of the assignment lottery process. And while Marsh Road off South Boulevard may not be in everybody’s neighborhood and staff can’t deliver customer convenience from one site, the district is aiming for customer satisfaction: They’re offering curbside service for parents dropping off forms, which can be mailed or dropped off at any school or dropped off at the application center. The forms themselves are available at schools and at www.cms.k12.nc.us.

✓ Board members are still adjusting to their new meeting site in the Government Center. Some commented that the seats seemed designed for large tall men. But the most heat seems to be generated by the lighting levels. “Those lights just kill me,” said one.

– *Send intelligence to swannfello@aol.com*

mandate they were willing to accept, but one that they accepted with a great deal of difficulty because of how it came on them and when it came on them. We need this to be more efficient and effective....”

Scores of CMS schools did not make adequate yearly progress under No Child, but only Title 1 schools are covered by the No Child provision allowing parents to choice out after two years of not making AYP. The 15 schools are:

Elementaries: Allenbrook, Ashley Park, Bruns Avenue, Chantilly/Billingsville, Devonshire, Druid Hills, Hidden Valley, Reid Park, Shamrock Gardens.

Middle schools: Cochrane, Eastway, J.T. Williams, Marie G. Davis, Spagh and Wilson.

The ‘choice’ word

The proposed school assignment policy revisions include removing “choice” from the words used to describe the district’s assignment plan. That would conform to an administrative decision last fall to drop the word from lottery materials in favor of the word “option.” In both previous lotteries, many parents did not get their first or second or third choices, and reverted to a guaranteed seat at a nearby school.

Board member Kaye McGarry objected. “We’re regressing,” she said.

“There’s mounting evidence throughout the country that choice in education works. And that word is very very important, I believe, to who I hear from in Mecklenburg County.”

Briefly...

No bonus: An advisory panel told N.C. State Board of Education members that middle school test score results from the 2003-2004 school year should be recalculated, but the board has refused, The News and Observer reported. An erroneous statistical formula resulted in only two out of 388 middle schools reaching "expected growth" levels. A recalculation would put more schools at expected growth, which is part of the requirement for teacher pay bonuses under the ABCs testing program. The board's decision means thousands of middle school teachers won't get extra bonus pay this year.

www.newsobserver.com

Hearing problem: Science Daily reported that researchers had found that children who are autistic have a reduced brain response to sound. That smaller range may inhibit children with autism from understanding human speech, which is typically fast and complex.

www.sciencedaily.com

Scores and home prices: Many California homebuyers are placing API (Academic Performance Index) school scores above commute time, upgrades and price when buying homes, the Mercury News reported. Schools are affecting real estate prices as well. As school test scores improve, the price of the real estate in the community increases as well. Critics argue that test scores measure the test-taking ability of students and is not necessarily a measure of education quality.

www.mercurynews.com

AP standards: Districts across the country, including Charlotte-Mecklenburg, are trying to increase poor and minority AP class enrollment by emphasizing that AP classes are open to anyone willing to do the work, Education Week reported.

Calendar

11 "Intro to the Continuum of Care for the Homeless in Charlotte," noon, Covenant Presbyterian, 1000 E. Morehead St. \$6 includes lunch, no reservation needed.

12 Second day of school board retreat, Grandover Resort, Greensboro.

12 "Invisible Fences: Municipal Underbunding and Minority Exclusion," the third annual conference of the UNC Center for Civil Rights, Friday Center, Chapel Hill, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. An exploration of how annexation, zoning and sewer extensions, and environmental regulations are being used in small Southern towns to disenfranchise African-American homeowners, deny them city services and even leave them little alternative but to sell their ancestral lands. Information: (919) 962-5106.

17 Cheryl Brown Henderson and Linda Brown Thompson to discuss *Brown v. Board*, 7 p.m., Dana Auditorium, Guilford College, Greensboro. The Brown sisters are daughters of the lead plaintiff in the landmark *Brown v. Board*.

17 School board's Safety Committee, 3:30 p.m., Room 414, Education Center.

18 School board's Personnel Committee, 2 p.m., Board Conference Room, Education Center.

18 School board's Finance, Capital & Facilities Committee, 4 p.m., Board Conference Room, Education Center.

18 Habitat For Humanity annual Volunteer Appreciation, 6 p.m., Myers Park Baptist. RSVP: Beth Van Gorp at Habitat, 704-376-2054 ext.12 or bvangorp@habitatcharlotte.org by Nov. 12.

19 Bond Oversight Committee, 11:30 a.m., Building Services, 3301 Stafford Dr., off Wilkinson Boulevard.

23 School board's Curriculum Committee, 3 p.m., Room 414, Education Center.

23 School board meeting, 6 p.m., Government Center.

30 School board work session on Efficiency and Effectiveness Business Process Review, Room 414, Education Center.

Currently African Americans comprise less than 5% of test-takers; about 10% are Hispanic. Fear that the increased efforts will water down the curriculum has caused many universities to tighten their standards regarding college credit for AP courses. Harvard, for example, now requires a score of 5 on AP courses, where in the past a 4 was acceptable.

www.edweek.org

Budget reform: Seattle schools use funding formulas for schools that give those with, for example, special education students more money per pupil than other schools, Education Week reported. The formulas are part of growing

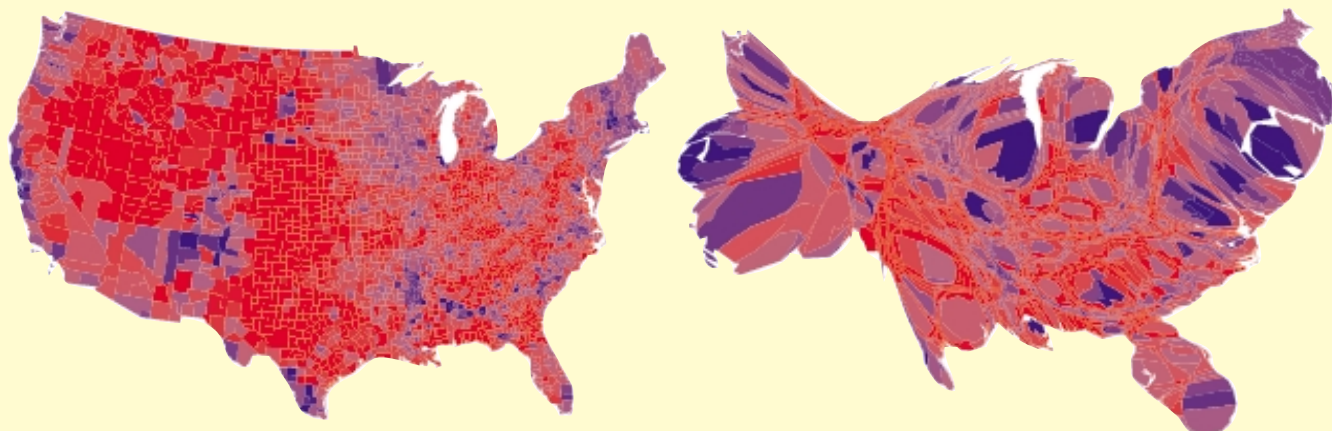
national trend of giving principals more discretion in how dollars are spent. CMS's differentiated staffing, which allocates more teachers and supply money to more-challenged schools, centralizes more budgeting decisions. Education Week quoted former Supt. Eric Smith as saying the CMS system, which centralizes budgeting, prevents a principal from coming up short, for example, when a reading teacher needs to be hired. Critics say site-based budgeting also upsets school programs when just one or two children transfer.

www.edweek.org

How to fuel economy: Strong,

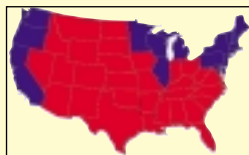
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Mapmaking 101: Re-visioning the presidential election outcome



Our thanks to *Educate!* reader Bob Knisely for pointing us to the maps above, which show two ways of picturing the presidential election results. The maps are by the University of Michigan's Michael Gastner, Cosma Shalizi and Mark Newman.

At left above is a variation on the typical red states-blue states map (inset) seen on TV on election night. This version, based on county vote totals, uses red for counties with 70% or greater Republican majorities, blue for 70% or more Democratic majorities, and shades of purple for counties in between.



At right is a cartogram, which the authors define as "a map in which the sizes of states have been rescaled according to their population." Example: Rhode Island is shown twice the size of Wyoming because it has twice Wyoming's population, despite Wyoming having 60 times Rhode Island's acreage.

The authors say the map at right more accurately reflects the 51%-48% margin between President Bush and challenger John Kerry.

See all their work at their Web site at www-personal.umich.edu/~mejn/election/

And as for the youth vote...

Based on exit polling, the University of Maryland's Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement estimated that 10.5 million 18- to 25-year-olds voted, up from 8.7 million in 2000. The group turnout was 42.3%, up from 36.5% in 2000. The youngest voters' percentage of the vote total held steady, as all age groups saw a rise in participation in this year's election.

Looking for the under-25 set? Use a cell phone: About 19% of 18- to 24-year-olds said they did not have a land line and used only a cell phone. That 19% compares with 7% in the overall population. More information is at www.civicyouth.org.

Briefs

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high-quality preschools make their mark on economic growth, Education Week reported. A report by the Committee for Economic Development found that quality preschools offer a better way to strengthen the economy than giving businesses tax breaks. The study cites the workforce quality: "If you have a dysfunctional workforce that's barely literate, the economy will suffer," said Arthur Rolick, the director of research at the Federal

Reserve Bank in Minneapolis. Other reports issued this year shared the same view. www.edweek.org

Slow down: An Australian study found that when teachers slowed their speech and maintain eye contact, student literacy improved and behavioral problems decreased, the Melbourne (Australia) Age reported. When a teacher talks fast and use excessive words, children find it difficult to process the information. Boys are more affected than girls. A report earlier in the year found that boys process sound more

slowly than girls. www.theage.com

No more A's: Wake County elementaries have sent home the first report cards using a new grading system, the News and Observer reported. Instead of the traditional A's through F's, parents are finding 1's through 4's, with 3 and above a passing grade. The numbers appear directly tied to the goals of the ABCs testing program. More information is at www.wcpss.net/curriculum-instruction/report-cards/elementary.html www.newsobserver.com