

Charlotte Observer, Posted on Fri, Mar. 23, 2007

CMS budget presents big puzzle of needs

Plan includes good initiatives, but leaves some needs unmet

FANNIE FLONO

You can depend on two things at budget time for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. The superintendent will ask for more money. And as long as he's a school board member, Larry Gauvreau will say the money isn't needed and that the funds CMS already gets is too much.

On Tuesday, at a budget work session, both sides got to play their roles before CMS staff and the few members of the public and the media who sat in. A final work session is set for 3 p.m. today at the school system's Education Center in the board room.

Gauvreau was only a bit player in Tuesday's two-hour meeting. Most of the time was taken up with staff answering other board members' questions about the proposed \$1.2 billion budget including \$346.5million to come from Mecklenburg County.

Dr. Gorman is presenting puzzle pieces he hopes will click in place to the advantage of students and the community at large. I'm not sure whether all the pieces are the right ones. But he has compelling facts on his side to back up needs.

- Student population growth is zooming. More than 5,000 additional students are expected next year. More facilities and personnel are needed.
- CMS is now more than 55 percent minority, and more than 45 percent low-income. With such diversity comes more costs. Additional services and more specialized educators are required.
- Achievement is lagging for too many students, and increased efforts are necessary to boost performance. Promising initiatives cost money to implement.

So, what in the budget addresses these issues? Here are a few:

A new Eight-PLUS program is designed to give struggling 8th graders academic help to move on to 9th grade and make a successful transition to high school. Garinger High is breaking up into three smaller schools to provide better learning environments. One elementary school, Billingsville, will pilot an expanded school day program that has proved successful in boosting academic performance in high-poverty schools nationwide.

A substantial piece of money -- more than \$8 million -- will go towards decentralizing CMS by establishing regional offices to improve communication and services as well

as an Achievement Zone to focus resources and attention on academically struggling schools.

All of that is good. Public discontent with CMS's response to student and parent needs drove the call for decentralization. It was one of the major recommendations of a business-backed citizen's task force in 2005.

What I found troubling about this budget is less what's in it than what's not. On Tuesday, staffers acknowledged the budget as is does not make good on the lower class-sizes officials promised and teachers have expected at high-poverty, at-risk FOCUS schools.

To guarantee those class sizes -- one teacher for every 16 students in kindergarten through third grade (slightly higher in upper grades) -- the system would need an additional 49 teaching positions in grades K-3 at a cost of \$2.4 million. The numbers of teachers needed in middle school and high school is even higher. Guaranteeing the smaller class sizes at all levels would *add* \$27 million to the budget.

Yet smaller class sizes is a nationally proven aid to academically struggling students.

Board member George Dunlap, who raised this question, rightly noted that CMS is not "keeping trust" with educators by not meeting this staffing need.

Gauvreau pressed Gorman at the end of Tuesday's work session for a budget that lops off \$57 million. He wanted to delete money for, among other things, the system's Bright Beginnings pre-kindergarten program.

On that, I can say unequivocally, NO, NO, NO. Just a week ago, I attended a conference where child development researchers were bemoaning the fact that every child in North Carolina doesn't have access to pre-kindergarten. They're pushing for universal state-funded pre-K. Data show at-risk kids gain immeasurably from such programs. On this, CMS is ahead of the curve. Pre-K programs need to be expanded, not cut.

There's still time to make your voice heard on the budget, and you should. A public hearing is set for 6 p.m. Tuesday at the Government Center. At today's work session though, you only get to listen, not talk.

Fannie Flono