

Mecklenburg ACTS
School Board Statement
27 March 2007

We at Mecklenburg ACTS were of course, delighted to see board members champion the importance of small classes in high-poverty schools – and to see Dr. Gorman acknowledge that issue. Class size matters. We also appreciated the acknowledgement that the current Weighted Student Staffing formula failed provide these schools with the number of teachers that they needed. Specific class sizes need to be a targeted goal for CMS.

At the same time, we are disturbed that money could only be "found" for 14 teachers. This prompted an unfortunate discussion. Which schools "need" these teachers most. Are they the schools with the highest levels of poverty, or the lowest levels of achievement?

This is not the discussion the board – or the community – should be having. The fact is that *all* our high-poverty schools need those extra teachers. No one school needs them all that much more than another.

As long as CMS has majority-poverty schools – and I'm sure you'll all agree that they're not going away any time soon – those schools are going to need significant amounts of extra staff and resources, *if* we as a community are truly going to provide the students at those schools with the opportunity to get the education that will allow them to lift themselves out of poverty. To be effective, extra staff and resources need to start with majority-poverty schools, and they need to rise sharply as poverty levels rise. This is a fact, which we all need to confront. Extra resources are not a SWAT team to be temporarily deployed to cope with a crisis. For schools facing the challenges of poverty, they need to be there permanently.

The discussion should not be about which schools and which students are going to be lucky enough to get the limited resources provided. It should be about how those resources can be provided to all the schools that need them. This includes support staff such as social workers and family advocates. For example, this budget does not add to the existing corps of twenty social workers, even though more than twenty schools need them. Instead, CMS has shifted social workers around, based on which schools have moved to the top of the free and reduced lunch scale this year. So schools whose populations have changed little have lost their social worker because some other school has moved to an even more challenging position. This is no way to operate a school system.

Along those lines, I want to make clear that in advocating for smaller classes Mecklenburg ACTS is decidedly *not* advocating that class size be reduced at the expense of social workers, family advocates, literary facilitators or other support staff. If CMS is to tackle the true challenges of poverty, it needs to deploy all of these resources. It cannot go into triage mode, weighing one against another.

Mecklenburg ACTS believes that the vast majority of Mecklenburg County citizens understand that this community has a moral obligation to ensure that children in poverty have a fair shot at educational success. We are constantly meeting up with people who assumed that these opportunities were being provided, and who are deeply shocked when they learn the truth about 26-student kindergartens or the sharp disparity in experience between teachers at high-poverty schools and those at low-poverty schools. Lowered class size is a concrete, practical, proven way to address the challenges of poverty. We believe that if it were necessary to raise CMS's request to the county commission in order to provide the 40-plus positions required to lower class sizes at all FOCUS elementary schools, you would find widespread support for the move.

Thank you.