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## FOR THE RECORD

# Speak out for school bonds

## Broad-based community effort is needed to support bonds for CMS

*From Louise Woods and Carol Sawyer, members of the steering committee of Mecklenburg ACTS, a grassroots coalition working for equity and excellence in all schools.*

Last week's unproductive Mecklenburg County commissioners' debate over whether to issue a \$486 million or a \$616 million school construction bond provides an alarming indication of the dearth of leadership in our community regarding public education.

In the absence of effective leadership, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools facilities discussion has focused not on how the community can meet real student needs, but on whether some students' needs are more urgent than others' -- and whether the community can "afford" to provide decent learning facilities for all its students.

One distraction has been the struggle over building new schools vs. renovating older ones. This is a red herring. Garinger High School's science labs are hopelessly outdated. North Mecklenburg High's science labs are hopelessly overcrowded. Both these situations prevent students from learning to their full capacity, and both are unacceptable. One is not more urgent than the other. Fortunately, we live in a community wealthy enough to meet both kinds of needs -- if we can muster the will to do so.

The other distraction has involved the bonds' size. With a school construction need estimated at greater than \$2 billion, so-called leaders should not be engaging in pinched, shortsighted debates over whether a bond package should be \$400 million or \$600 million. They should be working together to meet the need. Genuine leaders do not focus on the way the political wind is blowing, or on spreading distrust and discontent. They evaluate the community's real needs, and then effectively promote an understanding of those needs among voters.

CMS is far from perfect, as we at Mecklenburg ACTS have pointed out on plenty of occasions. But denying students reasonable learning facilities -- whether in the inner city, middle ring or outer suburbs -- does nothing to address the system's most significant shortcomings. Rather, the ongoing facilities crisis distracts attention from other needed reforms.

It is also clear that even a bond in the \$600 million range will only begin to meet construction needs. Community leaders must insist on local and legislative action to actively pursue alternative funding sources, including impact fees, so those who benefit from growth pay their fair share of its costs. But in the meantime, children are filling -- and overfilling -- classrooms, day after day. We need to build and upgrade schools now.

Sadly, the political battles of recent years have produced so much misinformation and bad feeling that even the most visionary school superintendent cannot refocus the community's will singlehandedly. Charlotte and Mecklenburg County need a concerted effort on the part of a wide range of individuals and organizations -- including PTAs, corporate and civic leaders, mayors, congregations, the Chamber of Commerce, Mecklenburg Citizens for Public Education and other key institutions -- in support of a bond package that will address the full range of CMS's needs, and make a meaningful dent in the work that lies ahead.

Too many of these voices have been absent from these and other school discussions. It will take them all to get our community back on track, with this bond issue and beyond. If this does not happen, the failure will not be that of a few political leaders, but of an entire civic community. We shudder at what that would mean for all of us.

*For The Record offers commentaries from various sources. The views are the writer's, and not necessarily those of the Observer editorial board.*