

Posted on Fri, Mar. 02, 2007

FOR THE RECORD

Equity, not adequacy, needed

Present information transparently, state how to reach CMS goals

From Pamela Grundy and Carol Sawyer, CMS parents and members of the steering committee of Mecklenburg ACTS, a grassroots group promoting excellence and equity in CMS:

As parents committed to the education of all students, we are glad to see a spotlight on this year's Equity Report. The report is a crucial document. To effectively evaluate the success of Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools' commitment to educating all children, concerned parents, staff and community members need meaningful, accurate data that is clearly presented.

The Equity Report was created when CMS switched to a neighborhood school assignment plan that created large numbers of high-poverty schools. It was designed to track CMS's efforts to ensure children at these schools had access to the same quality of education found in other schools.

In recent years, attention to data in the report has ebbed. No report was issued last year. The flaws in this year's withdrawn report raised further questions about CMS's ongoing commitment to equity. These questions started with the shift in language from "equitable" to "adequate." Other questions grew out of the report's content.

We found three specific problems.

Some figures were simply inaccurate. Summary data for faculty qualification did not match the raw data presented because the summaries were generated from data from the wrong year.

Some of the data did not reflect reality. For example, the figures on co-curricular programs counted not actual programs, but the number of programs principals said they intended to offer. These figures contradicted our own experience. According to the report, almost all of CMS's middle schools, regardless of poverty level, fielded National Academic League teams. But last year one of our children was on an NAL team that struggled to compete in enough matches to qualify for the district tournament, because so many of the schools in their region had no viable team.

Most important, some of the sections provided no useful information. This was

especially the case with teacher-student ratios. For many years, lowered teacher-student ratios at high poverty schools have been a cornerstone of CMS equity programs. The district's new weighted student staffing formula has cut the teaching staffs at a number of high-poverty schools. At Bruns Avenue, the elementary school with the highest poverty level in the district, the average kindergarten class size this year was 25 -- far above the previous year's average of around 16.

But the measure used in the report gave no way to evaluate the effects of the new staffing formula, or status of individual schools. It did not provide teacher-student ratios at individual schools, or compare them to previous years. Rather, schools were graded on whether or not they met a vaguely defined standard of "adequacy". Virtually every school in the system, including Bruns, received a check of approval.

We applaud Dr. Gorman for recognizing these flaws, and withdrawing the report. He now has a chance to issue a report that will clearly evaluate where CMS stands with regard to equity.

Such a report would present specific figures for every school in several categories, including teacher-student ratios, number of unfilled positions, actual class size averages, percentage of classes taught by certified teachers, actual number of co-curricular programs, and of students participating in co-curricular programs.