

Charlotte Observer, Posted on Sun, Nov. 12, 2006

FOR THE RECORD

Outrage should lead to action CMS test score gap demands urgent response by concerned community

From Louise Woods served on the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education from 1995-2005. She is writing on behalf of the steering committee of Mecklenburg Area Coming Together for Schools (www.mecklenburgacts.org):

News of the widening math achievement gap brought two significant and predictable reactions -- indignation and resignation. But, as columnist Tommy Tomlinson aptly put it, where is our outrage? ("Test scores, outrage get failing mark," Oct. 27.) Outrage that says this is unacceptable. Outrage that leads to action!

This lack of outrage is similar to the reaction 10 years ago when another new CMS superintendent, Eric Smith, was hired. Reading and math scores for minorities and poor children were less than half those of white children. Systemwide, just above 60 percent were on grade level.

Goals were set to close the achievement gap while reaching 85 percent of students on grade level. Few believed it could be reached. Fewer acknowledged that churches, businesses, organizations and individuals needed to become far more involved in the schools to reach the goals. Yet by the spring of 2005, more than 85 percent of K-8 students scoring at grade level on reading and math, according to state tests.

So what's the significance, now that with higher standards, scores have dropped and the math gap, while less than before, has increased?

There are at least five lessons to be learned.

- 1.** There is hope. Ten years ago, most folks doubted that 85 percent of all CMS students could score at grade level, even with the lower state standards. Yet CMS, with hard work from staff, raised achievement levels significantly by setting goals, maintaining focus and providing additional staffing for our neediest students. High goals matter.
- 2.** Standards matter. "On grade level" should mean students can be successful when promoted. We have sadly recognized that this is not always true. Many students reach our high schools unprepared. If high school achievement levels do not improve, under the new graduation standards for this year's 9th graders

hundreds from all schools will fail to graduate! Our focus must be teaching higher-order thinking skills and challenging information to students in all grades at all schools. There should be significant Talent Development support in every school.

3. All classrooms must have high quality teachers and all schools must have effective principals. Attracting, supporting and retaining high quality staff for all schools is essential. We must value, honor, support and adequately pay the educators we expect to educate all our children.

4. Educating more children and educating all children well are challenges we've never met. It costs more. We have never fully funded the template for assuring all schools succeed in the CMS Family Choice Plan. In fact, we are backsliding. We must be realistic about the funding it really takes to educate all children -- and the higher cost, ultimately, of not educating them!

5. The schools can't do it alone. An outraged community would demand that its leaders put the same energy and passion into our children that was put into bringing the NASCAR Hall of Fame to Charlotte. Low-income families are concentrated in certain areas, fostering economic and social isolation and school re-segregation. Many families speak a different language. Nearly half of CMS families are struggling financially. Children struggle emotionally. Growth is huge. Our schools now serve over 1,800 homeless children. These are factors CMS cannot control.

Government and private entities need real commitment to dealing with these issues. We all have a part to play in meeting the schools' needs for mentors, tutors, leaders and other volunteers. Parents matter a great deal. Schools and community need to do their part as well.

Where is the outrage -- outrage that leads to action? Actions speak louder than words!