

Charlotte Observer, Posted on Sat, Mar. 24, 2007

Gorman moves to decrease class sizes

CMS chief reworks budget plan

ANN DOSS HELMS

ahelms@charlotteobserver.com

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Superintendent Peter Gorman will shift \$720,000 in his proposed budget to shrink class sizes in high-poverty elementary schools, he told the school board Friday.

The change comes after parents and board members blasted Gorman's initial plan for failing to honor long-standing promises to hire extra teachers for the neediest schools. Smaller classes allow teachers more time to help students.

For years, CMS has claimed to have 16-student classes for kindergarten through third grade in its high-poverty schools, although officials say class sizes fluctuate as kids move in and out during the year.

As of this month, 282 K-3 classrooms in 31 high-poverty schools have at least 20 students, according to data requested by the Observer. The largest, a first-grade class at Bruns Avenue Elementary, has 26 children. Bruns is a center-city school where 99 percent of children come from low-income homes.

"It's very frustrating to know there are kids who could be learning, who should be learning, but aren't because there's not enough of me to go around," said Mattie McLean, a kindergarten teacher who recently transferred from Bruns to Hickory Grove, another high-poverty elementary school.

She said the large classes at Bruns were caused partly by a new apartment complex nearby and partly by CMS redrawing districts to relieve crowding at Mountain Island Elementary.

Chief Operating Officer Maurice Green said the \$720,000 will pay salaries and benefits for about 14 teachers in 2007-08.

Green and Gorman trimmed money they had planned to spend on reorganizing administration, recruiting and keeping teachers, strengthening parent/community relationships and hiring administrative interns.

At Friday's budget session, it wasn't clear whether the shift would win school board support for Gorman's \$1.2 billion budget. Only five of nine board members attended. Three -- Chairman Joe White, Trent Merchant and Tom Tate -- said they'll vote for Gorman's plan.

Tate said the shift to hire teachers earned his support. He, Vilma Leake and George Dunlap had criticized the first plan for spending more than \$6 million to create regional administrative offices while leaving needy schools short of teachers.

"I guess I'm on the borderline," Leake said Friday.

Dunlap, Larry Gauvreau, Ken Gjertsen and Molly Griffin were absent. Kaye McGarry said she'll talk to Gorman privately about her position.

What's Next?

PUBLIC COMMENT

- The school board will hold a public hearing on Gorman's budget plan at 6 p.m. Tuesday, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Government Center, 600 E. Fourth St. • To speak, sign up at the hearing or call 980-343-5139 by noon Tuesday.
- To read a 107-page summary of Gorman's plan (which does not include Friday's change), go to www.cms.k12.nc.us and click "Budget" under "Quick Links" on the right.

SCHOOL BOARD VOTE

- The school board is scheduled to vote on a 2007-08 budget request April 10.

COUNTY VOTE

- County commissioners are scheduled to vote on their budget, including school spending, June 5. Gorman's plan seeks \$346.5 million from the county, up \$30 million from this year.