

## **Stand up for teachers now**

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Special to the Observer: Pamela Grundy and Carol Sawyer

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Teachers play central roles in children's lives. For hours every day, they challenge young people to think, inspire them to love literature or chemistry, teach them to get along with others, wipe away tears. Every day they go to work, they hold the future in their hands.

Yet the burden of our national hard times has fallen especially heavily on these keepers of the future. Even as they face layoffs, larger classes and loss of support staff, they are forced to contend with a national avalanche of critique that places the blame for lagging student achievement squarely on their shoulders.

South Carolina teaching star Kay McSpadden wrote the other week that in more than 30 years of teaching she "can't recall another time when public school teachers were so demoralized."

Here in Mecklenburg County, the time has come for parents to stand together for our children and their teachers. We can start with pay for performance.

The corporate and government leaders who are driving the national movement to transform American education have decided - despite a lack of supporting evidence - that one way to "fix" our education system is to upend the way that teachers are promoted and paid, with a heavy emphasis on how students perform on standardized tests.

Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools is at the forefront of this effort, working in conjunction with the Gates Foundation and the federal government to develop a systemwide pay-for-performance plan. CMS has already spent millions on this system, including almost \$2 million to design more than 50 new standardized tests. In next year's budget, which calls for laying off almost 600 teachers, CMS has set aside \$2.9 million for pay for performance - money that would save 50 of those jobs.

CMS claims that its pay for performance system will improve the quality of teaching and learning for all our children, by attracting and retaining a stronger group of teachers. We believe the opposite - that it will drive strong teachers out of the county and the profession.

Part of the problem lies in the difficulty of judging teacher quality from standardized test scores. The method currently in vogue - known as "value-added" calculation - has proven to be highly unreliable. In a 2009 letter to the Department of Education, the National Research Council cautioned specifically against using value-added methods in high-stakes teacher evaluation.

Value-added calculations take student test scores and claim to identify every factor that could possibly influence a child's performance - from individual and school demographics to whether a particular class had problems with discipline. The result - in theory - is a number that precisely measures how "effective" a teacher is, no matter what classes she teaches or which students she is assigned.

But value-added - unsurprisingly - has not held up well in practice. Students and classes vary tremendously from year to year. Some classes "click" and some don't, even for the best teachers in the highest performing schools. A student may perform brilliantly one year, only to fall apart the next when a parent files for divorce. Drug traders may invade a neighborhood, destabilizing all the families who live there. The claim that value-added can smooth out such variations makes no sense. There are far better and fairer ways to evaluate teachers.

Tying salaries to test scores will also produce a massive expansion of high-stakes standardized testing.

As parents, we know that even the best standardized tests measure only a fraction of what we want our

children to learn in school. But if these scores figure into teacher salaries - even in part - pressure will grow to teach to the narrow range of skills and content that standardized tests can measure.

An evaluation system that cannot be fairly administered. More pressure to focus on raising standardized test scores. How will that attract good teachers to CMS, or convince them to stay?

Pay for performance puts CMS teachers in a tough spot. Many fear for their jobs and are reluctant to speak out. Even if they do, they risk being unfairly labeled as "whiners" interested only in their jobs and salaries.

This is why parents must step up. If this is not the kind of education we want for our children, we are the ones who have to say so.

MecklenburgACTS has started a petition that allows parents, teachers and community members to challenge the use of value-added calculations in setting teacher salaries, and call for fairer systems of evaluation. ([www.mecklenburgacts.org/petition/](http://www.mecklenburgacts.org/petition/)). The petition has also been endorsed by the Charlotte Mecklenburg League of Women Voters.

Education is a complex and challenging endeavor. As parents, we don't always agree on all the problems or all the solutions. But surely we can agree that our children do not need more high-stakes standardized tests, and that value-added calculations are not the magic bullet that will revolutionize American education.

We need to stand up for teachers now. Please sign the petition.

Pamela Grundy is the mother of a CMS fourth grader. Carol Sawyer is the mother of a recent CMS graduate. **Mecklenburg ACTS** is a five-year-old grassroots coalition of parents and others working to build community commitment to equity and excellence in ALL schools. It's affiliated with Parents Across America ([www.parentsacrosamerica.org](http://www.parentsacrosamerica.org)), a national organization advocating for proven, progressive school reforms.