

## New CMS PR jobs spark questions

Charlotte Observer, Eric Frazier, Wednesday, September 7, 2011

After getting whipsawed by teacher and parent protests this spring, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is adding two public relations positions to help explain the merit pay issues that sparked the uproar.

One education activist questioned whether the hirings will bring a stepped-up publicity blitz for CMS on two issues at the heart of the controversy: expanded student testing and performance-based pay for teachers.

The new positions arrive in the wake of public comments from school board members who say budget cuts to the CMS public relations staff left the district unable to fend off a barrage of negative publicity last spring.

It came after CMS rolled out more than 50 new student tests, hoping for a better read on teacher performance. Parents and teachers protested at school board meetings; some students threatened to boycott their tests.

School board members have said they don't think the public understands how their push to revamp teacher pay and evaluations can help students. Critics say they understand, but simply disagree.

The Gates Foundation has stepped in to help, with a \$200,000 publicity campaign aimed at boosting public knowledge of CMS' overall education reform road map, Strategic Plan 2014.

CMS spokeswoman LaTazja Henry said the new PR positions are paid for with federal Race to the Top program dollars. The positions, both of which have salary ranging from \$47,070 to \$59,966, are funded for three years.

She said the two positions won't just focus on explaining the new tests and teacher pay. Lost in all the furor, Henry said, was the fact that CMS is fine-tuning the way it manages the performance of all of its 18,000-plus employees, not just teachers.

"We didn't do a good job of communicating that," she said. "We heard loud and clear, not just from our employees, but also from parents and community members, that they didn't understand what we were doing around the issue of performance management."

At least one of the jobs was still posted on CMS' website last week, but both had come down Tuesday afternoon.

Carol Sawyer, a leader with **Mecklenburg ACTS**, a parents' group skeptical about the additional tests and performance pay, raised questions about the wording of the ad for a communications coordinator.

The ad said the coordinator would promote a "reward program" and deal with related activities including performance pay, teacher effectiveness, and House Bill 546, controversial legislation that allows the school board to adopt performance pay without teachers' approval.

The ad said the coordinator would "pitch and place positive news stories about the reward program in the media."

CMS wants to adopt a performance pay plan by 2014, but district officials have stressed that they remain open to discussion and haven't locked onto any specific pay plan.

Sawyer said the specificity of the ad suggests CMS staff wants to build support behind plans already in mind.

She said after she raised her concerns with CMS human resources chief Dan Habrat, the ads came down off the website.

Habrat didn't respond Tuesday to several requests for comment; Henry said the ads came down because the positions have been closed to applicants.