

The Public School Forum's Friday Report

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Volume 11, Issue 21

November 21, 2008



Mary Teachey Price, the mother of the Forum's director of the Collaborative Project, Dr. Jean Murphy, died Thursday, November 20. Services will be held on Friday, November 21, in the Padgett Chapel at the Padgett Funeral Home in Wallace, NC. Our thoughts and prayers go out to Dr. Murphy and the Price family.

NC Schools Asked to Make Reversions

North Carolina's 115 public school systems have been instructed to revert \$58 million in state funding, including \$1.4 million from the state's charter schools, in an effort to make up a budget shortfall expected to exceed \$1 billion for the current fiscal year. The reversions are in response to a directive Governor Easley has sent to all state agencies, in which he asked most to trim as much as 5 percent. DPI was instructed by the State Budget Office to cut \$117 million from its budget, and through typical budget cutting measures was able to absorb \$59 million of that amount, passing the remaining amount on to local systems.

The reversion decision was announced on Monday, November 17th, and schools have until Wednesday, December 19th to identify the money to be reverted. The amount being asked of the schools represents 0.75 percent of their state appropriation. Cuts for local systems range from \$5.5 million in Wake County Schools to \$40,114 for Weldon County Schools. Charter school cuts ranged from \$51,262 for Pine Lake Preparatory in Mooresville to \$1,531 for Grandfather Academy in Banner Elk. Most charter school reversions were less than \$30,000.

Committee Recommends Arts Education Credit

This week, committee members met to present their findings and recommendations regarding the implementation of arts education in the K-12 curriculum. If a recommended bill from the Joint Select Committee on Arts Education is approved during the 2009 session of the North Carolina General Assembly, the 2009 entering class of freshman could be required to take one arts education course for graduation.

"It is important for the children we serve to have a complete education and they won't until arts is a part of this," Representative Alma Adams, D-Guilford, said to fellow committee members. While the committee room was filled with arts education advocates, several organizations in attendance expressed concerns regarding the unintended funding requirements this could place on local school boards and school systems. They suggest the impact would be toughest for smaller, low-wealth districts that now share some art teachers between middle and high schools.

Triangle Area Schools Receive Connectivity Funding

As part of the N.C. School Connectivity Initiative, thirteen school systems in the Triangle area will receive a combined \$1.79 million allocation. The money, provided by a partnership between state government and the Golden LEAF Foundation, will be used to connect schools to the N.C. Research and Education network, which will link the schools to the UNC and N.C. Community College systems online.

Once completed, the two-year statewide initiative will give all school systems in the state access to online services and resources, including the N.C. Virtual Public Schools, and the Learn and Earn program online. The total allocation of \$22 million is being distributed based on the needs of each school system. Included in the thirteen Triangle area school systems to receive the \$1.79 million are Wake County, Durham County, Orange County, Chapel Hill-Carrboro, Johnston County, Chatham County, Franklin County, Harnett County, and Lee County.

Michelle Rhee: Taking on the Holy Grail

“I believe we should proliferate what’s working and close down what’s not. Period.” These are the words of Michelle Rhee, chancellor of the Washington D.C. public schools. Rhee is attempting to do what many reformers and policymakers have long viewed necessary but never had the authority to achieve. Since her appointment in June of 2007, Rhee has lived up to her audacious undertaking, closing over 23 underperforming schools and firing hundreds of district employees including over 200 unlicensed teachers. Monday evening at Duke University’s Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy, Rhee, one of the nation’s leading education innovators, spoke about her task to lead one of the nation’s most troubled school systems out of failure.

As if colossal changes in school administration and operating status were not contentious enough, Rhee is now taking on tenure. First summarized last summer, Rhee’s plan proposes paying up to \$40,000 to any teacher agreeing to relinquish tenure. The proposed plan offers teachers two alternatives. The green plan awards significant raises potentially boosting the salaries of effective teachers to \$140,000 by 2010. Under this plan, teachers are required to give up tenure for a year, after which they must have a principal’s recommendation to continue employment. The red plan, although not as aggressive, offers sizeable pay increases to teachers reluctant to give up tenure but willing to lose seniority.

In her lecture, Rhee affirmed that she has no interest in demonizing tenure or teachers unions although she views such constructs as political roadblocks in the way of school reform. She simply wants to see great teachers rewarded and ineffective teachers, currently enjoying job security under tenure, removed. In a recent interview with *The New York Times*, Rhee asserted that “tenure is the holy grail of teacher unions but has no educational value for kids; it only benefits adults,” a sentiment which she repeated Monday evening. Her critics and union advocates see tenure as a necessity to educator job security and a safeguard against arbitrary firings.

Michelle Rhee (cont'd)

Rhee is often approached by family, friends and colleagues questioning her desire to take on the beast that is public education in Washington, D.C. Her answer - she has tremendous confidence that this reform will be successful. She attributes her confidence to two key factors; the dynamic leadership of D.C. mayor Adrian Fenty and the belief that *all* children including "poor minority students can achieve at the highest level despite all obstacles" when repeatedly exposed to a high quality education and educators.

Only 18 months into the chancellorship, the success of Rhee's efforts is still to be determined. What is immediately evident, however, is her fierce commitment to the students she serves. For more information on Chancellor Rhee and the district's 5-year Action Plan go to: http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor/schedule_forums.htm.

National News...

Second Georgia County May Lose Accreditation

Haralson County schools were put on probation last week by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). The 4,000 student school district west of Atlanta has five months to make the necessary improvements in order to avoid losing its accreditation.

The problems SACS cited Haralson for were similar to those seen in Georgia's Clay County, which, on September 1st, became the first county in the country to lose accreditation in almost 40 years. Haralson was cited for school board governance problems, including micromanaging, not following policies, and ethics violations. The county has until April 2009 to meet seven mandates, including training, following policy, amending hiring procedures, and following the district's chain of command. This is the second time Haralson's accreditation has been at risk, having been put on probation by the SACS in April 2005.

Male Teachers – An Endangered Species?

According to the most recent state data, only 24% of teachers in Massachusetts last year were men, compared to 32% fifteen years ago. In North Carolina, 20% of teachers are men, dropping to 10% in lower (elementary) grades. These numbers mirrors that at the national level, where only a quarter of all teachers are men, a 40-year low. In lower grades, this number drops to just 6% nationally. More school administration positions are held by women in Massachusetts, with the exception of school superintendents. However, that is anticipated to change as more male superintendents retire.

This decrease in the number of male teachers has caused education specialists to raise concerns that it could lead to a hindrance in boys' ability to learn. A study out of Swarthmore College found that boys learn better in reading when taught by a male teacher. The research also questioned the ability of female teachers to handle boys' often rambunctious behavior and if boys respond better to the 'coach-like sternness,' of some male teachers.

Male Teachers (cont'd)

The widening gap between the number of male and female teachers is just one of the challenges Massachusetts faces as it works to form a teaching force that better reflects the student body. According to education specialists, low pay and lack of respect for teachers are primary reasons men do not go into teaching. The average starting salary for a teacher in Massachusetts was \$35,832 two years ago, and the average for all teachers in the state was \$58,257, according to the Massachusetts Teachers Association's most recent data

Educators Prefer Weighted-Student Funding

While using student-based or weighted-student formulas to allocate school funds requires more work for employees than traditional methods do, a report released this month from the American Institutes for Research found that most educators prefer weighted systems. The report also found that this method helps direct more dollars towards students with the greatest needs, such as students with disabilities.

Typically, school districts use staff-based budgeting, where funds are allocated based on student-teacher ratios. But as districts face a worsening economy, more may look to funding based on the needs of the students. Weighted-student formulas won't solve inadequate funding problems, but may create greater equity in funding, as well as increase autonomy and accountability within schools, and reduce class size.

The report identifies nine key considerations for districts when implementing such systems. Among these are making salary calculation decisions, choosing what student information to use for weighting, degree of school-level discretion over the budget, interactions with other policies, and alignment of budgeting and academic planning processes. The report does not make recommendations on which strategies work better than others, as each district has its own specific needs.

The *Friday Report* is published weekly by the Public School Forum of NC and is distributed to Forum Board members, legislators active in education policy, the press, and Forum subscribers. Archived editions can be found at www.ncforum.org/doc.