

LOCAL

State accepts blame, but can't pay teachers for testing mistake

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After almost two months of waiting to hear back from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction about the Cleveland County Board of Education's resolution, an answer came Monday night at the school board meeting.

The school board wrote a resolution asking the state to take accountability for their mistake, after CCS was forced to repay bonus money awarded to Grover Elementary staff. Grover received bonus checks and the title of School of Distinction in October for their 2006-07 results on ABC tests. Shortly after staff checks were deposited in bank accounts, DPI was asking for the money and title back, claiming an error in test results. The Board of Education agreed to let Grover Elementary staff keep their bonuses, hoping the state would step up to the plate.

DPI's Deputy Superintendent J. B. Buxton addressed the board with information about the state's stance on the issue. "I do want to be very crystal clear, this mistake was North Carolina's fault. This was our problem," he said. "This was not something that any one in your central office and schools created in any way. This was something that lays on our doorstep.

"I want to be very clear about that, that we are accountable for this situation. Unfortunately, it

means you also share the burden of that issue and we understand that completely," he continued. "I will tell you that if the state allowed us to keep the bonus money that Grover Elementary received and that you received, frankly, in this situation we would have done that. State law doesn't allow us to do that. In fact, it's quite inflexible."

Without naming any names, he loosely described the general vicinity of where the figurative ball was dropped. "As you may or may not know, we had a programming error in the situation that caused a situation in seven different schools," Buxton said. He explained that in three of those seven, they found that the schools, which DPI had said made expected growth, had not actually made expected growth. The other four schools did happen to make expected growth, contrary to DPI's initial findings. Those four, received their bonuses and titles. The other three were asked to return all money and recognition.

Buxton said that they have taken measures to correct the problem. He noted that they have new leadership in the area where the glitches occurred and that they have instituted an internal audit into their process. "This is the first time this has happened in the accountability program and (hopefully) it will be the last," he said.

When asked later by CCS board members Mary Evans and Dr. Jack Hamrick if he

could guarantee that this would never happen again, he said that he could not, citing the infallible factor of human mistakes.

A state law, passed in 2003, basically gives the state school system an out for having to pay for their errors in cases such as this. "It requires to a point of civil suit that we acquire money that is overpaid," Buxton said, adding that although they would like to allow CCS to keep the money, "we don't have that flexibility."

"This sends a different message to our students that we don't want and that's a lack of accountability," Hamrick said. "In September, DPI knew about this mistake. But we weren't informed at all when it could've been handled."

Although certain employees of NC DPI were aware of the mistake in September, Buxton said, not every one was aware. "This was our error and we have to deal with that," he said. "If we could eat that error we would, but we can't."

Board member Philip Glover complained that they still have not received an official letter from the state explaining it was their fault. Buxton said that although a letter wouldn't fix the issue, they could provide CCS with one.

New board member Kenneth Ledford said that this error could come back to haunt the teachers again with their retirement.

Luminary display will shine in KM on Christmas Eve

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With the overwhelming support of local businesses and citizens, the 14th annual Christmas Eve Luminaries service at Mountain Rest Cemetery can sing, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine."

The service will begin at 6 p.m. on Monday, December 24, until the crowd stops coming. The fate of the service this year was shaken by the ongoing drought. A statewide open burning ban, spawned from drought conditions, has canceled many luminaries across North Carolina. Burning permits have been canceled and denied by the NC Division of Forest Resources.

Open flames within 100 feet of a dwelling have been strictly prohibited as even the smallest flame of a candle could spark a wildfire because of the land's "extremely dry" fossil fuels. But thanks to modern technology, no matches will be needed to let the light shine this Christmas Eve.

The glow of the cemetery this year will emit from 3,000 miniature battery-powered candles, donated and sponsored by local citizens and businesses. "Everybody has really given a good response," said event organizer Jim Belt.

Just like in previous years, the candles will be placed inside of sand-bottomed milk jugs, strategically stationed throughout the cemetery. The large hill, which Belt refers to as "the marquee" will spell a simple message, perhaps more powerful than any before. "I want to make a point without ever opening my mouth," he said. "I do it because I want you to let it be what you want it to be."

The service will offer a new addition this year. "There will be a hayride available for anybody who would like to experience riding through and feel the brisk air in the open," Belt said. Hayrides will take off from the back parking lot, behind the NAPA store on King Street.

Belt, founder of Jim Belt Ministries', started the Christmas Eve Luminaries service at Mountain Rest Cemetery in 1993, lighting one single candle in honor of his mother. It was a small start to a grand tradition. The service is free and open to the public. But people can donate or contribute money to be used for next year's luminaries and the bell tower.

Belt encourages volunteers to come out and help. To volunteer call Jim Belt at 704-739-5425.

Relay for Life recognizes CC Schools

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Cleveland County Relay for Life Chairman Jeff Ross presented Cleveland County Schools with an award for their continued success in the fight for a cure at Monday night's Board of Education meeting.

He said that the South Atlantic Division of Relay for Life, consisting of states from Delaware to Florida with 602 separate county Relays, has named Cleveland County Schools recently as a national pacesetter.

Over \$70 million has been raised for the American Cancer

Society over the past 10 years in the South Atlantic Division, Ross said. "For the last three years we have had an unbelievable amount of school participation and it has really changed how the ACS is battling cancer," he said. "Cleveland County has been a pacesetter in the ACS Relay for Life for the last five years now, along with the healthcare system and other teams in the community."

Ross has sat on the regional board and said that when questions like "how can we do this?" are raised, he has had the proud privilege to hear Cleveland County's efforts mentioned as

ideas for solutions. "The name Cleveland County Schools always comes up as the example," he said. "This year at our regional awards banquet, Cleveland County was recognized not only as a pacesetter for the nation, but in school involvement there are only three school systems in the counties that have 100 percent participation and Cleveland County Schools was the front runner."

Also at the meeting, Tommy Greene was elected as the 2007-08 chairman of the Board of Education. Philip Glover was elected vice chairman.

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