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# Young people share their thoughts on CMS

**They hope grown-ups - parents, teachers, elected officials, superintendent - are listening**

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By Ann Doss Helms

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Posted: Sunday, May. 01, 2011

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for youth

Mecklenburg Youth Voice is a civic leadership program open to all high school students (including private and charter students).

The group will hold a youth summit from 6 to 8 p.m. Tuesday at the Government Center, 600 E. Fourth St. Topics include how to make youth voices heard in government decisions and how youth can address negativity in adult civic dialogue.

To sign up or get more information about the group, contact [info@kidsvoting.org](mailto:info@kidsvoting.org) or 704-343-6999.

For everyone

The school board will discuss and vote on a budget plan at 6 p.m. May 10 at the Government Center.

County commissioners will hold a public hearing on 2011-12 budget at 6 p.m. May 19 at the Government Center.

They worry about large classes, too many tests and their teachers' morale.

They applaud community efforts to support education. But sometimes they wish the city's adults would act more like grown-ups.

"They need to start actually working together, rather than trying to sabotage each other," said Jalen Feaster, a Mallard Creek High junior. "Students, we get fed up, because that's our education."

Jalen is a member of Mecklenburg Youth Voice, a program of the nonprofit Kids Voting Mecklenburg which is

designed to boost civic leadership among teens. As Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools faces a third year of budget cuts and teacher layoffs, those teens have met with Superintendent Peter Gorman, attended school board meetings and reviewed budget documents.

Four high school students - Aidan McConnell, a Providence junior; Henry Schoenhoff, a Myers Park sophomore; Tyiste Taylor, a West Charlotte senior; and Jalen - fielded questions from the Observer and Youth Voice adviser Amy Farrell to share their perspective with the adults who are making budget decisions.

The school board will vote May 10 on a plan to take to county commissioners. Most members say they'll seek up to \$55 million in additional money to avoid some of the cuts Superintendent Peter Gorman has talked about for months. Gorman's plan, which projects \$100 million in cuts, would cost about 600 teachers their jobs.

The students understand that CMS leaders face tough choices, but they wish those decision makers would spend more time in schools.

"Listen to what the students have to say and what the teachers have to say," Henry said. "Don't just rely on numbers."

Here are their comments, edited for length and clarity.

Q. What is your biggest concern about the budget?

**Tyiste:** "They cut the Bright Beginnings (prekindergarten) program, but we see some of the brightest students rise from Bright Beginnings. The achievement gap begins in kindergarten. At each school they've cut out major things you need to succeed."

**Aidan:** "A lot of teachers are seeing a lack of opportunity in the future. There's been talk about reducing salaries even further, talk about reducing teacher benefits." ( Note: Teacher pay has been frozen and teachers are paying more for some benefits, but a pay cut is not part of Gorman's budget proposal. However, many teachers fear performance pay could bring a cut, and some people have suggested pay cuts to save jobs.)

**Jalen:** "I'd point to getting the class sizes smaller and getting more teachers in. I think teachers are the highest priority."

**Tyiste:** "We're having more and more tests. I will be tested this year more than I've ever been tested in my entire life, and it's not only because I'm a senior. I hear that they're starting to test kindergartners. There are other ways to assess people; I don't see that a standardized test is going to be the way."

**Aidan:** "I think that the pay for performance that is being pursued right now needs to be revised. The number of tests that are being placed on the student body is too significant and probably doesn't accurately assess everything."

**Henry:** "How a student does on an (exam) from year to year is not solely influenced by the teacher. Yes, it's a big chunk of it. However, if there's something going on at home or other environmental factors - I just don't think it's fair for a teacher to be compensated solely on things they can't control."

Q. Do you agree with the superintendent that the most important thing schools can do is get the best-quality teachers in front of kids?

**Tyiste:** "I do feel that quality teachers are important because I have them. I also feel that access (to technology) is so important. I think CMS is coming closer to separation of the haves vs. the have nots. I don't feel that quality teachers are the only thing we need to change."

**Henry:** "It also depends on your definition of a good teacher. My chemistry teacher - three degrees, smartest

guy on the face of the Earth - I could not understand a thing in his class. I could have learned a lot of stuff from this guy, but some people just aren't fit for teaching."

**Aidan:** "The best teacher isn't necessarily the one who has the best academic degree; it's the one who can make themselves the most relatable to students. I have a calculus teacher - calculus is a subject that a lot of kids struggle in, but he is probably one of the most animated people I've ever met. He makes integration fun. Not only do we want to learn it, we crave it."

Q. Is teacher morale bad?

**Aidan:** "The lack of confidence is really significant following the pay-for-performance idea. Being a teacher in a public school system is hard enough. You've got to deal with us, for one thing. And now they're having to deal with an administration that they feel may not always act in their best interest."

**Henry:** "It seems like a lot of the teachers who just want to teach and make sure that their students learn are starting to get bogged down and not see the light at the end of the tunnel."

**Jalen:** "There's been teachers that have left my school. You have really good teachers, especially in the engineering field, when they leave, you're left without a teacher who can fill that place. It is kind of discouraging."

**Tyiste:** "In the past, in middle school, teachers would say, 'You need to do well because you can be this. You are great.' Now they say, 'You need to do well so you can pass this exam.' The conversation has totally changed."

Q. We hear a lot about big classes. Are you seeing that?

**Tyiste:** "We have huge classes. We have students who come to class quickly because they don't have a desk. On a perfect-attendance day, the teacher doesn't have anywhere to sit."

**Henry:** "My AP psychology class has around 40 students."

**Aidan:** "My calculus class is filled to the brim, and when we accepted a new student we had to make him sit on the floor for the first few weeks. Spanish class, we had to have three students sit in the hallway once."

Q. What would you advise the school board and Gorman to do?

**Tyiste:** "They need to understand local issues before they make life-changing decisions for more people."

**Aidan:** "The higher-level CMS administrators should probably actually go to these local areas, try to understand what makes the school tick. Now's not really the time to have a huge generalized metropolitan school system. I probably have almost no issues at Providence that West Charlotte has. It's representative of the community: West Charlotte and east Charlotte are very different from each other; north and south are different."

**Jalen:** "Stop the puerile actions and actually start getting down to business and helping the students. People shoot down Peter Gorman all the time, but in reality it's not always Peter Gorman, it's the school board."

**Aidan:** "Although the school board needs to understand local issues, parents and students in CMS need to come together so they can mesh across city lines and regional lines. We can't afford to have a partisan school system and we can't afford to have people who don't understand each other, especially with regards to maybe, say, the school closings, where there were individuals who thought it was unfair and there were individuals who were apathetic. Now's the time for compromise. We can't afford to remain fractious."

Q. What can officials do to deal with a shrinking budget?

**Tyiste:** "I was a part of Project LIFT (a philanthropic effort to boost performance at several westside schools)

and I believe that project would be a great start. I like how the philanthropists have stepped in, how the community has stepped up to take their role. I don't think we always need to have a crisis such as budget cuts to have that type of community involvement."

**Henry:** "I think they can save some money through efficiency programs, turning off the lights. There's a great amount of energy wasted in CMS. I know that during the winter some buses just sit in the parking lot idling, burning gas, burning tax dollars that could be spent on other things."

**Jalen:** "Cuts, you can't get around those. That's just the reality. I would love for all of my teachers to stay in their positions, but unfortunately, we can't keep all of them."

**Aidan:** "I actually approve of the idea of having sports be privately funded. I know that at Providence there was a parent once who donated a \$200,000 Jumbotron to the school. If there's a parent willing to donate something that relatively insignificant to academic or sports performance, there'd probably be someone willing to provide for the sports program entirely."

**Henry:** "I disagree. Sports, in some areas or some schools, gives students incentives to go to school, to stay in school, stay off the streets and not become a burden to government. It can help them get scholarships to universities. Any kind of extracurricular activity that's necessary to get into college, if you can keep that kind of incentive it does a lot of good."

**Aidan:** "I didn't say take sports away. I just said CMS shouldn't pay for it."

Q. If you look at online comments, it seems like there's a lot of negative about CMS. Does that affect you?

**Aidan:** "It is really kind of an indirect negativity toward their own kids. They need to understand that by negatively impacting CMS, they make their kids' lives a bit rougher and they reduce their kids' opportunities. It's important to point out things that CMS could do better, but there needs to be cooperation."

**Tyiste:** "Some people are not well informed. And the biases are instilled within the students. You have students with these negative perspectives: 'My mama don't care, I don't have to care.' If they change it to more positive outlets, we could all move forward together."

**Jalen:** "It's sad that we have adults who are rather bigoted toward CMS. People who are calling CMS racist and things of that nature ... CMS has its responsibility, but the real way to (bring) change is examples. They need to start getting more involved with the community, teaching their kids, saying 'I can help with your homework.'"

"They're shouting at the wrong people. Instead of shouting at CMS, at school board members, saying, 'You guys are racist,' they should be in their neighborhoods saying, 'Stay in school. Do well in classes.' This is your child, not CMS' child. I think people do get that twisted."



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