

FOR THE RECORD

A necessary intervention

Tonight (Thursday), the Orange County Board of Commissioners are to examine the question of whether the county should intervene in the permitting and licensing process for expansion at the Shearon Harris nuclear plant in New Hill.

This would not be the first time the county has gotten involved with issues at the plant and, should the commissioners decide to do it, likely not the last.

Driving the decision-making process in Hillsborough is a confluence of facts on the ground in both New Hill and Capitol Hill.

*Dubious safety and financing and concerns about waste storage and the efficacy of new technologies should give the commissioners plenty of reason to raise serious objections not just to an expansion at New Hill but to the whole idea that nuclear energy is the answer to our energy problems and reliance on fossil fuels.*

In New Hill, these facts include findings that fire-safety materials at the existing plant are not sufficient and that federal safety regulators have known about the deficiency and allowed it to slide for 15 years. Also in New Hill are years of spent fuel rods stored long term through a method designed only for short term use in a facility that is not the kind of protection against natural and man-made disasters the public has long demanded of the nuclear industry.

On Capitol Hill, the powerful lobbying machines of the power and nuclear industries have won a handsome incentive to construct a so-called new generation of nukes. With that comes a Byzantine permitting and licensing process that has proven very beneficial for fast-tracking projects and shutting out public input. There has been insufficient time allotted to plow through the tens of thousands of pages in each application and offer an independent review.

Now comes word from the industry-friendly Nuclear Regulatory Commission that the new generation of nukes have not been as thoroughly reviewed as touted and may be much further away from full certification than we were led to believe.

A further sign of the lack of confidence in the nuke resurgence is that Wall Street won't touch the projects without substantial guarantees.

Unfortunately, North and South Carolina have already given the power companies authorization to charge ratepayers \$230 million for construction costs in advance of the nuclear expansion plans.

Dubious safety and financing and concerns about waste storage and the efficacy of new technologies should give the commissioners plenty of reason to raise serious objections not just to an expansion at New Hill but to the whole idea that nuclear energy is the answer to our energy problems and reliance on fossil fuels.

Conservation and alternative energy are the real answers to the fix we're in. Let's not delay efforts in those areas by pouring money and time into another nuclear boondoggle.

THE CARRBORO CITIZEN

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Not a Session for Social Justice

SARAH PRESTON

The 2008 session of the North Carolina General Assembly has come to a close and it's time for us to assess the performance of state lawmakers. Unfortunately, even a brief look reveals that this was not a session that did much to advance the cause of social justice. Most notable among the session's many shortcomings in this department were the last-minute failures in the state Senate of two very important bills, House Bill 1366, "The School Violence Prevention Act" and House Bill 1291, the "N.C. Racial Justice Act." Both measures were simple and small steps that North Carolina could have taken to ensure equality for all people in this state.

Commonly referred to as the "bullying bill," a more accurate name for the School Violence Prevention Act would be the "anti-bullying bill." The bill set out a common definition of bullying and harassing acts that every local education administrative unit would have had to adopt if the bill had passed. There was also a minimum procedure that each school would have been required to follow in order to deal with bullying by students and teachers. The bill was intended to make sure that what is "bullying" in one school is "bullying" in every school in North Carolina and to set certain minimum guidelines for schools so that all children are protected.

Somehow, this small fact was ignored by the bill's opponents, because as part of the definition section of the bill, HB 1366 listed groups of students with identifying characteristics. The listed categories were "race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, gender identity or expression, physical appearance, sexual orienta-

tion, or mental, physical, or sensory disability." These categories were spelled out because research has demonstrated these groups of students may be most at risk of being bullied because of these differentiating characteristics and because these students are most vulnerable to the effects of bullying. These categories are listed so that school administrators are aware of the risk to these students. The bill does not create any special rights or raise any group of students above any other group of students.

*Both measures were simple and small steps that North Carolina could have taken to ensure equality for all people in this state.*

And make no mistake, the need for reform exists. Surveys show that 43 percent of North Carolina's students agree that bullying is a problem in their schools and 7 percent of students have missed one day out of 30 because they felt they would be unsafe in school. Moreover, a statewide poll during the session's waning days showed that 72 percent of North Carolinians support legislation "to protect children from bullying based on their sexual orientation."

Unfortunately, it seems that opponents would rather not give schools all of the information and tools necessary to protect all children. Hence their claim that the inclusion of the terms "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" were a part of some hidden plot to promote a "homosexual agenda" in the schools. Even though this claim was demonstra-

bly absurd, lawmakers in the state Senate failed to muster the courage to pass the bill.

HB 1291, the NC Racial Justice Act, enjoyed bi-partisan support in the House. The bill would have allowed a criminal defendant to challenge his or her sentence of death (but not the underlying conviction itself) if he or she could prove that race played a role in the sentence. Under the bill, a defendant could use any relevant evidence, including statistics, to prove race was a significant factor in decisions to seek the sentence of death or impose it.

The fact that race plays a role in the criminal justice system is undeniable, but we should demand that the ultimate penalty be applied in as color-blind a way as possible. While this bill also became embroiled in controversy, the issue it sought to address was really quite simple: Race should not play a role in who is sentenced to death, but studies show that it does. Unfortunately, as with the anti-bullying bill, the state Senate failed to take the measure up.

As the dust settles and everyone returns to campaigning or other work, it is worthwhile to remember what these two bills were really about. One bill would have protected children and the other would have protected the integrity of our criminal justice system (and may very well have prevented an innocent person from being executed). To pass these measures would have been to take a stand for social justice — something we should all be in favor of. Let's hope this was not our best chance to enact these important bills into law.

*Sarah Preston is legislative counsel for the ACLU of North Carolina.*

Teaching first

MARGOT CARMICHAEL LESTER & STEVE PEHA

Something big happened in the world of reading recently: A major study found that kids who participated in the multi-billion-dollar Reading First program fared no better at reading than kids who didn't participate. To most people, whether they've been directly involved in Reading First or not, this comes as quite a shock.

Reading First is a big deal. It concentrates more money and more research-based practice in a single curriculum area than any other educational program in our nation's history. But it doesn't appear to have generated much in the way of positive results.

As the home page of the Reading First website states: "This program focuses on putting proven methods of early reading instruction in classrooms. Through Reading First, states and districts receive support to apply scientifically based reading research — and the proven instructional and assessment tools consistent with this research — to ensure that all children learn to read well by the end of third grade."

Proven methods. Scientifically based reading research. Instructional and assessment tools consistent with research. Who wouldn't want a program like this? And yet the kids who got it don't read any better than the kids who didn't. For six years, we've been pouring extraordinary amounts of money into a program that allegedly applies proven techniques and we don't seem to have gotten much for the effort. Why?

Is the scientific research base in reading seriously flawed? That's an obvious

place to look. Reading First advocates reading programs that rely on systematic phonics and scripted instruction. This means teachers are told very strictly what they can do and how they can do it. Often they rely — literally — on a script to teach their lessons. This is sometimes referred to as a "teacher-proof" curriculum because it discourages teachers from introducing individual differences in teaching style and lesson delivery that might take their instruction off the prescribed program.

Another area to look into is how schools implement publisher programs. Just because a school adopts something doesn't mean they actually use it in the way it was intended. Getting everyone in a school to follow an adopted program can be difficult. For one thing, there just aren't enough supervisory personnel to assist teachers who may be struggling.

While the study didn't take this issue on in great detail, it did note that teachers in Reading First schools showed measurable differences in the amount of time they devoted to systematic phonics instruction. From this and other factors, the study concluded that teacher behavior in Reading First schools was changed in ways that matched the goals of the program.

Whether the research base is wrong or the way schools implement programs is wrong, something is very wrong about Reading First, not just as another failed educational program but as a metaphor for our entire approach to education reform.

The problem as we see it is that Reading First, like most other reform-minded initiatives, ignores a simple truth about education: Good teaching comes from good teachers. Maybe individual teach-

ers make the difference, not scripted publisher programs. Maybe some teachers are just a lot better than others at helping little kids learn to read. Maybe if we spent a little time and money finding out who those teachers are and what those teachers do, we could define a new research base in reading — one based on proven classroom practice rather than on publisher or government self-interest.

As education reform marches on, we continue to ignore our marching orders. Multi-year, multi-billion-dollar programs that produce no results are unconscionable. And yet we persist in ignoring a fundamental truth: Teachers make the difference in how kids learn. Until we commit to investing directly in the capacity of our national teaching corps, we can expect little in the way of progress, and more in the way of disappointments like Reading First. Reform efforts that focus on programs, curriculum, alternative school structures, even incentive pay systems, will never be as effective as actually training teachers to be better at what they do.

Until we put teaching first, programs like Reading First will continue to produce disappointing results. And so will our efforts with testing, charter schools, alternative certification, voucher programs and so many other popular approaches to education reform. The secret to improving student learning is improving teacher teaching. And we can only accomplish this if improving teaching is our top priority.

*Steve Peha and Margot Carmichael Lester own Teaching That Makes Sense Inc., an education reform, advocacy and consulting company based in Carrboro.*

Library cuts went deep

As branch manager of the Carrboro Library for the last 12 years, I feel compelled to correct erroneous statements made about our library by former Carrboro Cybrary manager Margot Malachowski ("Letters to the Editor," July 17).

1. The cuts in Carrboro Library hours were indeed unique to our library and necessitated by our particular situation. Sixty-five percent of our circulation desk staff time is filled by contract workers, the portion of our budget that was cut by 62 percent by Orange County. Our permanent staff is mostly involved in the "behind the scenes" operations of a full-service library. These are operations like evaluation of book reviews; ordering books (our collection is currently 20,000); cataloging and labeling books, DVDs and audio books; acquiring interlibrary loans; weeding the collection; and maintaining a full schedule of adult and children's programming. Neither of the other Orange County library branches are full-service libraries; neither has a book circulation even one tenth that of the Carrboro Library. Those libraries were able to simply spread their staff more thinly; the Carrboro branch could not do that without seriously compromising the many services it provides.

2. It is indeed true that Carrboro Library's Spanish-speaking outreach position was cut last fiscal year. It was cut because our temporary-personnel budget was cut LAST fiscal year as well, from \$16,500 to \$13,500.

It is true that this position was originally funded by a grant from Triangle Community Foundation and was later funded with temporary funds provided by Orange County. Since that position was the last one funded with county funds, it was the first one to go when county funds were cut. Our staff person in that position began immediately looking for another job when I informed her that her position was to be eliminated at the beginning of fiscal year 2007-2008. She did not leave us because she found a new position elsewhere.

3. We at the Carrboro Library are happy to refer to the library in Hillsborough as the "main library." That statement in the "Library Criticisms Inaccurate" [letter] is one of the only accurate ones.

JAKE LEHRER  
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