

Statement at March 10 Board of Education Meeting

-Chris Smithson, Southern Pines native, resident, and Councilmember

The board was considering dropping the IB program at Southern Middle School. Hundreds of parents, students, and concerned citizens made their opinions clear to the board through letters, e-mails, public meetings, and individual conversations. Thanks to the efforts of all, the board chose to keep the IB program and make it school-wide.

Members of the Moore County Board of Education:

My name is Chris Smithson. I live in Southern Pines. I am a native of Southern Pines. I attended Moore County Public Schools. I also serve on the Southern Pines Town Council. I am not here to speak on behalf of the town, but I believe I speak for more than a few people.

Like you, I am an elected official. I understand having to make tough decisions. Sometimes they are popular and sometimes they are not. In the end, however, it is our duty to do the right thing.

One of the questions before you now is, "what is the right thing for Southern Middle?" The fate of the IB program is in your hands. You have a recommendation from Dr. Purser to make the IB program at Southern Middle school-wide. It is either that or drop the program from the school.

If I am to believe what I read in the paper, at least some of you are concerned about the cost of the program. Furthermore, some of you may be concerned about the fairness of having a program at some schools but not at others. Can we calculate real costs or define fairness from simple bottom-line thinking or "all or nothing" program offerings?

I don't have a lot of time to dance around the issue, so at the risk of upsetting a few people on the board, in the audience, or at the school, I'll be blunt. Southern Middle does not have a very good reputation. I have talked to parents who are very concerned about the direction of the school. I have talked to parents who have moved their children out of the school. I have talked to a teacher who, if she had not been able to transfer to another school, was going to get out of the profession. School Report Cards show Southern Middle fails to meet expectations. Southern Middle is the lowest-scoring Middle school in the county on the report cards. Economically disadvantaged students pass both their end-of-grade tests only a third of the time at Southern Middle while economically disadvantaged students at West Pine do twice as well.

I have looked at transfers in and out of Southern Middle's attendance districts. While the numbers are not huge, there is a trend. There is a very clear pattern of students transferring out of the district and into other county schools. There are some students transferring in to Southern Middle, but it should be noted that many of them are from neighboring counties. I do understand, however, that many in-transfers from within the county are because of the IB program. Moreover, I understand anecdotally that the only reason many parents have not yet transferred their students out of the school is the IB

program. Of course, none of this speaks to the children whose parents do not have the ability to transport their children to other districts.

The bottom line here is that the IB program at Southern Middle appears to be the one shining light that is actually drawing students in and retaining others. To extinguish that light on such simple grounds as nominal additional costs or some misguided notion that if all schools cannot have the program then none should is myopic and blatantly unfair to the students and communities served by the school.

Fairness should be measured first by performance. Costs should be measured by the costs to the community of underperforming schools. By either measure our community is not being well-served by Moore County Schools.

I have heard some of the excuses before. They say the situation with our schools is complex. I agree that we face complex social issues and differences throughout the county. Even if our issues are complex, shouldn't they still be addressed? Under the political cover of the new facilities plan, you had the opportunity to address some of these issues by choosing new school locations that would allow for diversity through redistricting. Instead, the plan reinforces current trends including resegregation of schools in southern Moore County.

A lot of people, including me, think the IB program at Southern Middle is a good thing. If expanding it school-wide also diminishes some of the friction between those in the program and those not, how could we not support it? How could cancelling the IB program at Southern Middle not be interpreted as just another punch in the gut for the students and communities of Southern Pines, Aberdeen, and Pinebluff?

I'd really like to be more diplomatic about all this, but the concerns and issues with our schools are not new. They have developed and existed over many years. Through inability or willful inaction, the board has not addressed any of our concerns with real action or commitment. Frankly, I'm pretty angry. I think I have a right to be angry when some people don't want to live in my town because they believe the schools are better in Whispering Pines or Pinehurst. I'm angry when students in my town are not making adequate progress, especially when compared to similar students on other attendance districts. I'm angry when our schools are resegregating.

Our school attendance district is not being treated fairly and the cost is very high. I ask you to start taking steps in the right direction. The first, but not only, step would be to make IB school-wide. Then we can begin doing whatever else it takes to ensure that any student in Moore County can expect the same quality of outcome from any school they attend.

I know some of you represent districts and some are at-large members. I know most of you live in the north half of the county. Remember, however, your duty is to ALL the students in the county and ALL the voters in the county.

Thank you for your time.