

## **Rev. Joe Blosser: Schools, Sales Tax Deserve Our Support**

A few times a month I get referred to talk to someone moving to High Point, and they all want to talk about one thing: schools.

Nothing could be more central to the health of a community, to our moral fiber, to our ability to attract and retain talented people and families, to our future. As the Guilford Education Alliance puts it, great communities have great schools.

In our city, most kids are educated in Guilford County Schools. GCS is the third largest district in the state and one of the 50 largest in the country. They are also the second largest employer in the county with some 10,000 employees. So, in addition to being responsible for the education of our kids, they are a critical leader in our business community, setting the tone, culture and pay scale for man Right now, though, we aren't competitive. Our teachers' salaries are 35% lower than those in peer counties. It's hard to attract and retain great teachers under these conditions.

Finding teachers is hard, but finding HVAC employees may be even harder. And the real-world implications of this are just as dire. For instance, last week Southwest Elementary had to dismiss school because the building was too hot. Yes, the systems are old and need parts, but also, the district is dramatically short on HVAC staff to perform the repairs. Why? Because everyone wants to hire HVAC specialists, and GCS pay isn't competitive.

Bus drivers are another critical piece of making our public schools work. Kids need safe, reliable transportation to and from school. Did you know that every day GCS buses travel 45,000 miles? That's like driving across the entire country twice. Thankfully, our bus drivers love the kids because their pay isn't where it needs to be. And finding new drivers is hard.

Our school lunch staff serve 10 million meals each year, and we saw last year how disruptive it can be if they miss even one day of work. Front office staff, custodial staff — all our frontline workers are critical to ensuring that all our kids get the quality education they deserve.

Here's the reality — I can't change the county budget to fit my priorities. There's limited money and a lot of demands. If I value quality education and its central role in creating a strong business environment, then I have one option:

It's the very last item on the 2024 general election ballot — so you have to stick it out to the very end. The ballot language says nothing about education because state law prevents it. But the county has said the tax is earmarked for teachers and frontline education workers.

Business High Point has come out in support of the referendum. They know it is critical to advancing our efforts to grow and attract businesses.

GCS does a lot of things very well. We had the least learning loss in the pandemic of major districts in NC. We're making academic gains at every level and for every kind of student. We have a graduation rate over 90%. We have North Carolina's No. 1 elementary, middle and high school.

And yet, these gains can be so quickly lost if kids aren't in school because of HVAC issues, if they can't get to school because the buses aren't running, if they don't have great teachers in the classrooms, or if they aren't being fed during the school day.

Fortunately, the fraction of a penny sales tax doesn't apply to things like gas, groceries or prescription drugs. And a huge portion of the tax is paid by out-of-town visitors.

I don't love taxes. But I do love our kids, our teachers, and our frontline workers who've dedicated themselves to the kids.

Sometimes it feels really good to help our neighbors or to help our kids, and sometimes it feels like voting for a tax. I don't love it. But I'll suck it up. Our kids and our neighbors deserve it.

**Reverend Joe Blosser**