

Keep schools in focus

Voters nationwide sent strong message on Election Day

With Republicans winning so overwhelmingly last week, aided mightily by President Bush's campaigning on terrorism and security issues and the economy, one analyst predicts education "may become little more than a sideshow or bargaining chip in the new political constellation." Politicians, think again.

Though the public's votes this year brought to office many who have pledged to rein in government spending and cut taxes, those same votes said emphatically that money is well-spent on education needs. Terrorism and the depressed economy must be tackled with vigor, commitment and resources. But the serious problems and needs of public education cannot be shunted aside in the process. To do so would only invite long-term economic malaise and fuel widespread discontent that would hamper this country's ability to effectively tackle terrorism or the economy.

Voters nationwide were clear on the need to stay on course with improving education. Californians approved one of the biggest school construction bonds ever in the state, as well as before- and after-school programs for needy kids. Florida voters approved spending \$15 billion to \$27 billion to lower class sizes though Gov. Jeb Bush, who won re-election, opposed it, and the referendum didn't specify how it would be funded. And Utah gave the nod to a measure that increases taxes on storage and disposal of radioactive waste and will use 80 percent of the revenue on education.

In all, 24 education ballot issues were considered on Election Day and voters approved two-thirds of them. Noted Dane Waters, president of the Initiative and Referendum Institute: "Overall, voters didn't pass any big-ticket items except those pertaining to education. People are saying, 'Every year we waste not trying to improve public education is another year my kid doesn't benefit from it.' "

That feeling was expressed here as well. Despite a lagging economy and substantial sentiment for tax and spending cuts, 63 percent of Mecklenburg County voters said yes to \$224 million in school bonds -- a quite healthy margin.

It is urgent that North Carolinians stay focused on improving education, even in shaky economic times. It is the strategy that, long-term, will bring about the necessary changes to make and keep the state economically healthy.

Gov. Mike Easley was right to cling stubbornly to initiatives that promise to better prepare more N.C. students to succeed in school. That is the only way they'll have a chance to succeed in life and become contributors to the state, not burdens.

The pundits have tagged education the big winner in this election. But it will only remain so if the politicians keep their eyes squarely on it.
