

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

First in a series of six



‘The best education available anywhere’

In 2005, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education was grappling with a far-reaching philosophical question: How do you move a school district from good to great?

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools had had many documented successes over the past two decades. The district had been nationally recognized for innovation on issues ranging from classroom instruction to magnet schools, and it has served as a model for many other urban districts seeking to improve.

But the Board of Education wanted more – it wanted CMS to be best-in-class. So in February 2006, the Board articulated its goals in a resolution addressing its Vision, Mission and Core Beliefs and Commitments. The resolution read in part:

Vision: CMS provides all students the best education available anywhere, preparing every child to lead a rich and productive life.

Mission: The mission of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is to maximize academic achievement by every student in every school.

The Board then listed a dozen specific commitments touching every aspect of schools and operations, from strong principals and effective teachers to safe schools and fiscal responsibility.

That resolution, and the accompanying Theory of Action crafted by the Board, became the basis for a comprehensive strategic plan and broad reforms put in place by Dr. Peter C. Gorman, the superintendent hired by the Board in the summer of 2006. This white paper will provide a broad view of the reforms undertaken by CMS, providing clarity and context for the district’s framework to move from good to great. Other white papers in this series will examine some of the key

reforms in detail, describing specific initiatives and methods, as well as data on outcomes.

‘We are accountable’

The Board’s resolution (later adopted as policy) on core beliefs and commitments began with a clear view of accountability. It read:

We believe a strong and equitable public education system is central to our democracy. We believe our principals and teachers make the critical difference in student achievement. We believe that, as adults, we are accountable for building and maintaining high performing organizations that ensure all students will successfully acquire the knowledge, skills and values necessary for success.

To turn theory into action – to “operationalize” these beliefs, in the lingo of corporate America – Dr. Gorman and the staff began work on a strategic plan to set goals and priorities for the next four years in CMS. Titled *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Strategic Plan 2010: Educating Students to Compete Locally, Nationally and Internationally*, it set forth seven strategic goals that addressed the core commitments articulated by the Board of Education.

The seven goals were: High Academic Achievement, Effective Educators, Adequate Resources and Facilities, Safe and Orderly Schools, Freedom and Flexibility with Accountability, World-Class Service and Strong Parent and Community Connections. (The district has now completed a second strategic plan, called *Strategic Plan 2014: Teaching Our Way to the Top*.)

As the 2010 plan was being developed, everyone at CMS was clear on one point: High academic achievement was the overarching goal. The other six goals were intended to ultimately enable the first goal of improving student achievement.

“High academic achievement – improving teaching and learning in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools – is the most important goal we have as a district,” says Dr. Gorman. “In the end, how we



are judged as a district will be determined by our success in educating our kids. We want effective educators, safe schools, adequate facilities, all those things we put in the plan, because those are the things that we believe will help us do a better job in the classroom.”

As the district worked to attain the goals of the plan, several key strategies emerged that seemed to be moving the dial on achievement in measurable ways. As the plan spelled out in the preamble, “some dramatic action and changes must – and will – occur immediately.”

Among the actions taken by CMS leading to measurable, visible improvement were initiatives on performance management, effective educators, strategic staffing, freedom and flexibility with accountability and succession planning.

These key initiatives, discussed briefly below, are also the topics of the other white papers in this series. They reflect, in the words of Dr. Gorman, “what is important to us as a district.”

Performance management

Performance management is a sweeping effort to effect cultural change, to transform CMS into a district that links student outcomes to employee evaluation, compensation and advancement. It is supported by the Board’s Theory of Action, which directed the district to do three specific things to increase accountability: Develop a school performance classification system to reliably measure progress on academic standards and other performance goals. Use the classification system to develop rewards and sanctions for schools and their staff which includes site-level freedom. Ensure that the work is transparent and shared across the community.

The district’s work on performance management is well under way. Three innovative tools for evaluating schools have been developed, using a mix of quantitative, qualitative and process measurements. The tools are: School Improvement Plans, School Quality Reviews and School Progress Reports. They have proven successful in CMS, helping pave the way for accountability and performance management.

Effective educators

Education, like life, has few absolutes. There are many ways to teach and many ways to learn. But in developing a four-year plan for reform, leaders in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools were united on one absolute: The only route to academic excellence is great teaching. As one consultant told the Board of Education, “If you’re going to get to greatness, you’re going to teach your way there. Nothing else will work.”

The district is using a broad range of actions to build effective educators. But all actions are aligned along a single principle: The most important school-based factor in student learning is the classroom teacher. The district is also seeking to find and keep highly effective, rather than highly qualified, teachers.

To recruit and retain great teachers, the district is reshaping training, evaluation and compensation strategies with a Teacher Incentive Fund-Leadership for Educators’ Advanced Performance initiative. CMS has also partnered with nearby Davidson College and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to create a Charlotte Teachers Institute, which will train CMS teachers in scholarly content using the Yale National Initiative as a model. CMS has also been invited to take part in a national two-year study to measure effective teaching funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Strategic staffing

Without intervention, any underperforming school can find itself trapped in a cycle of failure: Ineffective teachers and weak administrators lead to poor academic performance, which makes the school unattractive to the successful teachers and strong principals who could improve it. With the same staff and the same problems year after year, poor results become the norm – and a culture of failure takes root.

Breaking that cycle of failure is an essential first step in leading a low-performing school to excellence. In 2008, CMS met the challenge with its Strategic Staffing Initiative. Teams of high-performing educators – principals, teachers and support staff – were sent to low-performing schools.

The district used five key tenets to create the Strategic Staffing Initiative:

- A great leader is needed, a principal with a proven track record of success in increasing student achievement. Also, great teachers will not go to a troubled school without a great leader as principal.
- A team needs to go to the school so a person is not alone in taking on this challenging assignment; there is strength and support in numbers.
- Staff members who are not supportive of reform need to be removed from the school.
- Principals must be given the time and authority to reform the school, and be freed from the district list of “non-negotiables” that constrain autonomy.
- Not all job assignments are equal in difficulty and compensation should be varied to match.

The results have been fast and favorable. Academic performance, as measured by proficiency on state tests, has risen at nearly every school – and at some schools, more than 20 points in a single year.

Freedom and flexibility with accountability

When the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education developed its Theory of Action in 2006 to guide district decision-making, the overarching goal was clear: create a culture where innovation and flexibility could flourish and children would benefit.

The Theory of Action noted that managed instruction – using a consistent curriculum in every school – was both necessary and effective. But the Board also expressed discomfort with some aspects of tight central supervision in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

The superintendent created a four-year strategic plan to align district actions with the Board’s vision. (The district has now completed a second strategic plan: *Strategic Plan 2014: Teaching Our Way to the Top.*) One of the goals in that first strategic plan was Freedom and Flexibility with Accountability.

Principals who participated in Freedom and Flexibility were given wide-ranging autonomy, with the understanding that they would be expected to show significant and measurable gains in academic achievement over a three-year period.

“The principal at each school knows that school best,” Dr. Gorman said. “Placing the decision-making closer to the classroom and holding principals accountable for results is the best way to increase our student achievement.”

The principal pipeline

Building leadership at the school level is one of the most critical issues facing any public school district. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has built a strong leadership pipeline with two innovative partnerships that provide programs for aspiring principals. New Leaders for New Schools, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to training principals for high-needs schools, will provide more than 50 principals over the next five years to the district. Another 50 principals will be trained over the next three years through Leaders for Tomorrow, a unique program developed by Winthrop University in collaboration with CMS administrators, produces leaders who have been trained and licensed to serve as assistant principals.

These two programs are helping CMS identify, train and nurture future school leaders. The district’s principal turnover in any given year approaches 25 percent because of retirements and other reasons. Moreover, CMS has opened 12 new schools in two years, with several more expected in coming years. New Leaders for New Schools and Leaders for Tomorrow are helping the district fill a critical and growing need.



Summary

Sweeping, systemic change of the sort that Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools aspires to make is not simple. As the topics above make clear, this kind of academic reform requires multiple strategies and programs. While the white papers in this series are not a complete catalogue of the many efforts under way in CMS to strengthen academic performance, they do provide a broad view of how the district is working to effect change in specific areas. They also reflect a district-wide commitment to excellence.

“Everything we do is purposeful,” says Dr. Peter C. Gorman, CMS superintendent. “We have set an ambitious goal for this district: increasing academic achievement. We are deploying our assets of time, people and money as effectively as we can to help us reach these goals.”



About Us

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is North Carolina's second-largest school district, with 137,000 students (pre-kindergarten to grade 12), 180 schools and 19,000 employees. The district has been recognized nationally for excellence and innovation. These white papers are an informational series designed to share the district's experience and expertise with others involved in public education. If you would like additional information about CMS, please call the office of public information at (980) 343-7450.

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