



# Freedom and Flexibility with Accountability

*Sixth in a series of six*

## *‘All schools are not the same’*

When the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education developed its Theory of Action in 2006 to guide district decision-making, it was clear the board wanted to 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.

“...Managed Instruction does not stimulate innovation, create incentives for adults or build a performance culture. Therefore, in order to dramatically improve student achievement, it is essential that we incorporate the flexibility required to adjust to the needs and circumstances of each school and its students and to build incentives for innovation,” the Board wrote in its theory.

The Board also provided some parameters and some guidance on how that flexibility should be used.

“The district’s core business – teaching and learning – must be managed by the central office with some flexibility. This flexibility must balance accountability with empowerment, according to the needs and performance of individual schools or particular classrooms. ... All schools are not the same: the needs of children, the capacity of the workforce and

the concerns of parents vary from one school community to another. Because principals and teachers must be held accountable for student achievement, they should have as much decision-making authority as possible, consistent with effectiveness and efficiency.”

When Dr. Peter C. Gorman became superintendent of CMS in 2006, the district created a four-year strategic plan (a second four-year plan has now been completed) to align district actions with the Board’s vision. One of the goals in that first strategic plan was Freedom and Flexibility with Accountability. “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.”

This white paper offers an explanation of the goal, with details on how the district changed its practices to give individual schools and principals increased authority.

### **Selection criteria**

When CMS administrators began work on Freedom and Flexibility, they wanted to create a structure that would both support principals and encourage them to use innovative strategies in leading their schools. Administrators also recognized the importance of choosing principals for the program carefully, so that the district met the Board’s directive to balance accountability with empowerment.

“We wanted to encourage principals to think critically, to look at national research and best practices that could be used to increase student achievement based on the needs of each specific school,” says Lory Morrow, one of the CMS

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administrators who helped develop the framework for Freedom and Flexibility. The longterm goal, she says, is that all principals will think outside the box and learn about innovative strategies from research and each other.

Balancing freedom with accountability meant choosing the first principals for the program carefully. The district settled on a process that put the responsibility for nominating principals for the initiative on the area superintendents who lead the district's seven learning communities. Administrators wanted leaders who were closest to the schools to have a key role. Each principal nominated was then reviewed and approved by the top leadership in the district, and final placements were (and are) determined by the superintendent.

Principals chosen by the area superintendents also had to demonstrate an average two-year growth on state tests of .04 or more. (CMS used a calculation system that set zero as the point at which a school showed expected growth. A negative number indicates a school did not meet standards for expected growth; a positive number indicates the school exceeded the standard by making substantially more than one year's growth in a year's time.)

## The parameters in practice

The Freedom and Flexibility with Accountability initiative took place in the context of a district-wide effort to give all principals increased autonomy. CMS allowed all principals

to choose whether to use the district-sponsored behavior management system or another approach.

"Everyone still has to meet the same standard," said Dr. Gorman. "The code of conduct remains the same. What principals can change is how they make sure students know, understand and meet those standards."

Principals at FOCUS (Finding Opportunity; Creating Unparalleled Success – a designation given to schools with high poverty levels) schools were given the freedom to manage class sizes to meet student needs. Previously, all FOCUS schools were locked into a rigid ratio of one teacher to 16 students.

Then CMS selected 48 principals to receive even more autonomy as part of the Freedom and Flexibility with Accountability initiative in the 2008-2009 school year. The principals chosen led 12 high schools, 10 middle schools and 26 elementary schools. The 48 schools were a mix of FOCUS and Title I schools, as well as schools that did not have high poverty, and were spread across the district's seven learning communities.

Principals were encouraged to use the Freedom and Flexibility to try practices or actions that would work at their schools but perhaps not at other schools. For example, principals could choose to group some classes by gender or use teacher-developed tests to see how students are learning rather than district assessments. At a high school,

a principal could change the district-mandated course sequence if students seem to need more or less time learning a particular concept or subject. Principals could also opt out of district-sponsored professional development offerings, planning school-based workshops designed to meet the unique needs of their teachers or students instead.





“The Freedom and Flexibility with Accountability meant that these 48 principals did not have to meet the district’s long list of non-negotiables – things that every principal had been required to do,” Dr. Gorman said. “We shortened the non-negotiables list across the board with the changes in discipline programs and FOCUS ratios, and then we removed the list altogether for these 48 principals. We wanted to see innovation and creativity, rather than compliance.”

All schools continued to follow the state-mandated curriculum, school board policies and laws, as well as the state’s testing program; all elementary schools were still required to use the district’s core reading program.

## The first year

In its first year, the Freedom and Flexibility with Accountability initiative was used in a wide variety of ways by principals. Some schools opted for single-gender classes. Others shifted schedules, regrouped students and customized teacher training.

District officials, however, hope to see even more innovation as the program continues, and they acknowledge that they’d hoped for more in the first year. But they also recognize that CMS has a history of tightly managing schools, and that mindset takes time to change.

“We think our principals are going to become more free-range, more free-thinking, this year and next year as they become accustomed to increased autonomy,” Dr. Gorman said.

As principals become more comfortable with greater autonomy, they are likely to expand their experimentation with new ways and ideas.

“There are so many great opportunities to look at,” said Morrow. “The first year has helped principals realize the value of autonomy – they have autonomy in various instructional decisions. They have a license now to think creatively and try various nationally recognized best practices to close the achievement gaps.”

One principal is trying the family model in her second year of freedom and flexibility, Morrow said, where two classrooms combined for various parts of the day. Students are flexibly grouped by skills and abilities and taught by both teachers. Other new methods and nationally recognized innovations are being put in place at schools, she said, and that suggests that the initiative’s first year was successful in changing the principal mindset.

“We wanted to encourage an environment of creative thinking so principals can tailor instructional strategies to fit their schools and their students,” Morrow said. “We are encouraged to see new ideas taking root in our schools.”



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Principals have three years to exercise the freedom, and district officials will review the program at the end of the three years to assess the impact on student achievement.

For the 2009-2010 year, CMS expanded the initiative to add another 13 schools. The long-range goal is to give freedom and flexibility with accountability to every principal, but the district wants to gather data on a smaller pilot group first. Refinements and adjustments to the program will come from that data.

“We will learn a lot from watching how these principals manage their schools with increased authority to make decisions,” Dr. Gorman said. “We will use that knowledge to shape how we gradually extend broader authority to every principal in CMS.”



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## 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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December 2009

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