



# The Road to Reform

*‘At the end of the day, I believe it is that courage, and not our resources, that will transform educational opportunity in our country.’*

– Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) has accomplished measurable and significant progress since 2006. Student academic achievement has improved, with the number of schools making expected or high growth rising to 94.7 percent in 2010 from 54.3 percent in 2006.

The number of schools making less than expected growth academically has shrunk to nine from 64 in 2006. More than half (58.5 percent) of the district’s schools made Adequate Yearly Progress in 2010, up from 40 percent in 2006. The graduation rate increased in 2010 to 70 percent from 66.4 percent a year earlier.

The district’s academic progress comes at a time when the nation’s public education is in crisis. One in three American students in public schools doesn’t finish high school. In just one generation, the United States has slipped to ninth in the world’s ranking of college-attainment rates. Moreover, although federal funding for education has increased since 2008, the fiscal climate has been difficult because of the financial downturn that began that same year. It hit North Carolina hard, shrinking state and local revenues and dramatically reducing funding for schools. CMS has cut or redirected nearly \$186 million in state and local money from its operating budget in the past two years and faces a funding cliff of nearly \$50 million in the 2011-2012 budget.

Against this bleak backdrop, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has succeeded in making extensive, systemic reforms intended to improve teaching and learning in the district. Dr. Peter C. Gorman, who has led the district since 2006, has focused on district reform in four broad areas: teaching, leadership, data/accountability and differentiated use of resources.

“The only way we’re going to achieve academic excellence is to teach our way there,” he says. “Nothing else will work. And we know that great teaching doesn’t just happen by itself. It requires specific support structures: strong leadership in every school, access to data and other accountability measures, and the allocation of resources where they are most needed. As a district, we have made great strides in these areas and our results reflect that.”

The district is now operating under its second strategic plan since 2006. Both plans aligned district goals with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education’s directive to “provide the best education available anywhere.” The current plan, *Strategic Plan 2014: Teaching Our Way to the Top*, sets improving teaching and managing performance as its two main goals.

CMS has worked to make changes across the district in both processes and practices. Instead of tinkering by making small changes in unrelated areas, the district has focused aligning systemic reforms with the overall goal of improving teaching and learning. This white paper will discuss the four broad areas of CMS reforms.

## Teaching

Getting good teachers into every classroom—particularly those in struggling schools—is essential for academic progress. National research shows that fewer than 2,000 high schools in the United States produce half of all its dropouts. Even worse, according to the U.S. Department of Education, these “dropout factories” produce almost 75 percent of minority dropouts—students who are African-American and Latino. Similarly, CMS research shows that half of its struggling students are concentrated in a third of its schools.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has settled on several initiatives to improve teaching and to get strong teachers and leaders where they are needed. The district’s Strategic Staffing Initiative has brought remarkable results to 20 struggling schools. (See full discussion of Strategic Staffing in the Leadership section.)

Charlotte is now home to the Charlotte Teachers Institute, modeled after the Yale Teachers Institute. This program provides intensive content training for teachers during the summer.



A commitment to hiring Teach For America recruits, supported by a philanthropic gift of \$4 million from a Charlotte civic leader, has brought many effective teachers into low-performing schools for two years. More than a third of them—38 percent in a two-year period—have taught in CMS for more than the required two years, so Teach For America is helping CMS improve its teaching force.

CMS is also participating in the Measuring Effective Teaching study, funded by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Now in the second of two years, the study is examining the practices of thousands of teachers in six districts across the country, including nearly 500 from CMS. The results are expected to help guide districts in defining what constitutes good teaching and in enhancing professional development.

CMS is also developing a district-wide system of pay for performance. District leaders are creating a definition of effective teaching and value-added measures to be used as one of a number of ways to assess teaching performance. Similar measures will be used to evaluate all employees. Pay for performance is scheduled to begin in the 2013-2014 year. CMS expects that paying teachers for strong performance will increase student achievement in three ways: More people will enter the profession if they know they can advance based on ability. Highly effective teachers will stay in the classroom if their effectiveness is recognized financially, instead of moving into administration so they can earn more. Paying for performance will also encourage those who lack an aptitude for teaching to find other work.

Effective teaching is critical in closing achievement gaps. Research has shown that highly effective teaching can have the same effect as adding extra days to the school year, while ineffective teaching effectively shortens it. A student who enters his grade about two years behind his classmates in math will begin to catch up with a teacher who is so effective that a year in

her classroom is like having 40 extra days in the year. But a teacher whose effectiveness is below the average will have the opposite effect: At the end of the year in that classroom, the student will be 400 days behind instead of 360.

“Every child deserves a great teacher,” Dr. Gorman says. “Effective teaching is the key to raising academic achievement, because the most important school-based factor in a child’s learning is that classroom teacher.”

## Leadership

District efforts to strengthen its leadership have focused in several areas: holding principals accountable for their schools, reorganizing to create effective central administration and building a pipeline of leadership for the future. The district has also put in place a Strategic Staffing Initiative that places teams of principals, teachers and staff in low-performing schools. Changes in leadership—either deliberate or through attrition—have occurred in more than two-thirds of the district’s schools since 2006.

“I have never seen a truly great school without a great principal,” Gorman said. “When we decided to create the Strategic Staffing Initiative, we knew that the principal was the key lever to achieve successful reform at any struggling school. We built the initiative around that.”

Strategic Staffing uses financial incentives and measurable standards of performance for principals and their teams. Principals can bring an assistant principal, an academic facilitator and as many as five teachers with them to the new school, and all receive increased compensation in recognition of the difficulty of the assignment. Principals may also remove five staff members (they are put on an improvement plan and dismissed or reassigned to other schools) who do not support the turnaround effort.

Strategic Staffing principals are given three years and greater autonomy to turn the schools around. The program began in 2008 with seven schools, added another seven schools in 2009 and six more in 2010.

The results have been very strong. Academic performance, as measured by proficiency on state tests, has risen at nearly every school—and at some schools, it has skyrocketed, jumping more than 20 points in a single year.

When the results for the first two groups of Strategic Staffing schools were released in spring 2010, the first group of principals had been in place for two years. The second group had been in place for less than 16 months. The state tests showed substantial growth at 13 of the 14 schools, ranging from five- to 23-point increases in student proficiency.

Scores in reading rose at all of the seven schools where the Strategic Staffing Initiative had been in place for two full years.

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One school had a 14-point increase in reading proficiency, and two others had 10-point gains.

Results were also strong in math, with one school reporting a 23-point gain and two others showing gains of 15 and 17 points. Six of the seven schools showed a gain in math.

There were similar improvements in science. All but one school showed increases in student proficiency in science, with one school showing a 22-point gain, another a 14-point gain and a third a 12-point gain.

“Some of these schools were starting with very dismal results—at one elementary, only one percent of students were showing proficiency in science,” Gorman said. “But to grow proficiency by 12, 14, 22 points in a year is a remarkable achievement, no matter where you start.”

CMS has also built or participated in several programs designed to attract talented emerging leaders into principal positions. New Leaders for New Schools will bring 50 new principals into high-needs schools in CMS by 2014. New Leaders for New Schools is a national organization which recruits and trains leaders from diverse backgrounds to become principals.

The district also collaborates with nearby Winthrop University in an advanced-degree program called Leaders for Tomorrow. Created in collaboration with CMS administrators and started with seed money from a local real estate firm, the program trains promising teachers for the principalship in a two-year program that results in licensure. The first cohort began in 2008, and has already produced principals and assistant principals for the district.

The goal of Leaders for Tomorrow was to address a flawed human-resource model that relied entirely on self-selection to create a principal pool: Educators who aspired to lead a school sought degrees and licensure and the district chose from the resulting pool of qualified candidates. With Leaders for Tomorrow, the district is identifying promising educators and inviting them to participate in the program (which is invitation-only), thereby establishing some control over the development of the leadership pool.



“Choosing good principals—establishing leadership for the future—is one of the most important parts of my job,” says Dr. Gorman. “These programs are helping us build strong leaders by nurturing the talent in our district as well as recruiting new talent from outside.”

## Data/Accountability

The first step to meeting a challenge is identifying precisely what the challenge is. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools relies on a comprehensive system of accountability that provides support, pressure, and transparency. It is tightly aligned with district goals and designed to drive improvement in the classrooms as well as in central administration.

The district uses a mix of accountability tools and tactics that touch everyone from teachers to the superintendent. The goal is to provide a mix of pressure for positive change, as well as a structure of support to enable it.

Each school has a School Improvement Plan that identifies strengths and weaknesses and sets out strategies for improvement. The plans are created by each school’s leadership team, reviewed by the Office of Accountability and updated each year.

School Progress Reports, generated each year in the fall, summarize the previous school year. The four-page reports provide information about school demographics, test results, parental involvement, facilities, the quality of the teaching staff and a letter from the principal. The reports (published in English and Spanish) are shared with parents and posted on each school’s Web page.

School Quality Reviews are designed to capture the progress being made in each school that may not fit neatly into testing or other measures. Trained reviewers include CMS principals and staff from international consultant Cambridge Education. The reviewers spend two days in the school, interviewing staff and observing classrooms. The reviewers write up their findings in a report, which is made available to the public and becomes part of the school’s analysis and reflection in its School Improvement Plan. The reviews began three years ago and two-thirds of CMS schools have been reviewed. The district expects to finish the initial round of reviews this year.

The use of data to monitor progress and improve classroom instruction is also a key element in the CMS approach to accountability. The district has created its own formative assessments, used to help teachers differentiate instruction, and has built a platform that makes the information available to all teachers. The formative assessments give teachers information about students’ learning history, areas of difficulty, risk factors and other pertinent background. The assessments also help provide context and depth for the results of high-stakes end-of-year testing administered by the state and used to calculate Adequate Yearly Progress.

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As part of its Managing for Performance initiative, CMS has also created online portals for teachers, principals and administrators. The portals provide access to in-depth student data that guides instruction—whether a student is at risk of failure, previous academic history, formative testing results and attendance. Principals use the portals to help them effectively manage learning at their schools; teachers use them to guide day-to-day teaching in the classroom.

To make district results transparent to parents and the public, CMS created a Data Dashboard, a platform accessible through the Internet. Parents and other users can look at results for a school, compare school demographics and other information. (To protect student privacy, the Dashboard does not provide the individual-student data available through the teacher and principal portals.)

To help teachers use data most effectively to guide instruction, DataWise training was provided to all schools. DataWise is an in-depth method of analyzing and understanding test results and other data.

The Office of Accountability also provides in-house research and evaluation as needed by the district, and Accountability staff members are building the measures the district will use to evaluate teacher effectiveness.

## Resource Allocation

As budgets have tightened in the economic downturn, CMS has had to find operational efficiencies and make significant cuts in district staffing and programs. However, the district has also continued to fund promising new initiatives and to focus its financial resources where they are needed most, with a focus on changing the culture of CMS and investing in processes and methodology, rather than programs or products. The long-term goal is to build capacity within the district by creating efficient, effective processes to improve performance by students and staff.

In addition to using federal Title I funding, the district designates high-need schools as FOCUS (Finding Opportunity, Creating Unparalleled Success) schools.

Despite the significant cuts required in recent budgets, CMS has also focused on shielding the classrooms as much as possible and directing resources to high-need schools through a variety of methods: Strategic Staffing, Teach For America, New Leaders for New Schools and other programs that target high-poverty schools.

The district has created a culture of innovation and results, rather than compliance, around its state and federal funding, allocating funds to support district needs.

## Summary

Effective education reform does not come packaged in silos—data over here, curriculum over there, staffing across the room. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has worked for four years on a comprehensive, interdependent series of reforms that together have lifted district results and improved academic achievement.

That alignment was noted by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan during his September 2010 visit to CMS.

“The eyes of the country are on this district—so much is going right here,” he said. “There’s an entire community effort to see a school system get better. If this district can systematically turn around schools, I can’t tell you how important that is for the country.”

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has taken on the challenge of systemic, district-wide reform and the district is heartened by its results. But much work remains to be done, and district leaders say they will continue to push for widespread improvements in key areas.

“We’re pleased but we’re not satisfied,” Dr. Gorman says. “We want to be the best district in America and we’re not there yet. But we have a clear, coherent and coordinated strategy and we are moving forward.”

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## About Us

*Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is North Carolina’s second-largest school district, with more than 138,000 students (pre-kindergarten to grade 12), 178 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 public information at (980) 343-7450.*

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October 2010

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