

## CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG SCHOOLS: Reducing Concentrations of Poverty and Racial Isolation

Council for Children's Rights (CFCR)  
September 2017

---

CFCR supports Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' (CMS) efforts to reduce concentrations of poverty and racial isolation across the district. Further, we support identifying additional strategies to increase socioeconomic and racial diversity in all schools.

### CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG SCHOOLS

In 2015, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education (BOE) committed to deciding whether changes would be made to CMS' student assignment policy. A number of considerations prompted this commitment, including pressure from the community when the number of high poverty, high minority schools increased from 12 to 53 within ten years of redrawing school boundaries and changing busing practices in 2002. Other factors such as overcrowding, lengthy bus rides, and inequitable distribution of resources were also leading considerations.

In 2002, parental choice between home schools (close to the family's residence), zone schools in designated feeder areas, magnet programs with specialized curricula, and schools outside the feeder zone were foundational to the student assignment plan. In 2010, the BOE reconsidered several components of the plan when it approved closing ten schools, creating various magnet programs, and replacing several middle schools with K-8 schools. The 2010 review was ostensibly designed to save money and close underutilized and underperforming schools but was viewed by community members as unfairly targeting students of color and schools in low-income areas. Further, cost-savings were negligible and academic benefits remain unclear.<sup>1</sup> To remedy issues caused by both the 2002 and 2010 plans, several options were considered for the current student assignment review, slated for implementation in 2018-19, including: 1) redrawing school boundaries, 2) altering bus routes, and 3) increasing magnet utilization in the district. Of the three options considered, redrawing school boundaries was often cited as one of the more palatable options and suggested as central to a multi-pronged approach.

In February 2016, CMS released a 22-question survey to garner public input on student assignment. It received 27,000 responses. Around the same time, CFCR, with support from several local agencies committed to improving education, circulated a 4-question survey asking whether respondents would support student assignment changes that included redrawing school boundaries. Key findings<sup>2</sup> show that both opponents and proponents of adjusting school boundaries are in favor of children attending schools close to home. Opponents are concerned that altering boundaries nullifies familial decisions about purchasing property and choosing neighborhoods based on the zoned school. Proponents of boundary changes argue that the current boundaries don't make sense because they force a significant portion of the student population to travel long distances, thus undermining the notion of neighborhood schools. They also suggest that more equality and diversity across the district will increase student achievement and prepare students to live and work in a diverse society.

---

<sup>1</sup> Helms, A.D. (2015). *Specter of 2010 CMS turmoil haunts more than Ann Clark's future*. Retrieved from <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/education/article37375125.html>

<sup>2</sup> Council for Children's Rights. (2016). *Student assignment survey summary*. Retrieved from <http://www.cfcrrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2016-CFCR-student-assignment-survey-summary-FINAL-1.pdf>

In Fall 2016, the BOE agreed to move forward with a two-phase student assignment plan intended to address several issues facing the school system and adopted the following Guiding Principles:

- Reduce overcrowding
- Support the efficient use of resources (buses, buildings, etc.)
- Reduce the number of schools with high concentrations of poor and high-needs children
- Increase access to high-quality home schools
- Preserve and expand schools that work.

Phase I, approved in February 2016, focused on the use of partial magnets and Phase II, approved in May 2017, focused on changes to school boundaries and feeder patterns.

### STUDENT ASSIGNMENT REVIEW – PHASE I

Upon implementation, Phase I will use a combination of socioeconomic status (SES) indicators<sup>3</sup> to assign students to CMS' magnet programs. Students will be given priority based on measures such as household income, parental educational attainment, siblings in the home, home ownership, home school performance, and English speaking ability of the household. High priority students will receive preferential admission to the magnet school within their transportation zone. Over a four-year period, Phase I will also modify transportation zones and increase school choice options.<sup>4</sup>

### STUDENT ASSIGNMENT REVIEW – PHASE II

Phase II will shift attendance boundaries, establish seven new partial magnets (e.g., Long Creek Elementary, Quail Hollow Middle, Harding University High), and adopt partial magnet programs in five schools (e.g., University Park, Walter G. Byers K-8, Bruns PreK-5).<sup>5</sup> It will also establish sibling guarantees and alter school feeder patterns.

CMS projects 176 active schools in 2017-18, up from the current 170 schools. It is estimated that the plan will result in 74 schools with increased socio-economic diversity (e.g., Bruns Academy, Cotswold Elementary, Sedgefield Elementary and Middle), 14 schools serving students from closer proximities (e.g., Albemarle Road Elementary and Middle, Nathaniel Alexander Elementary, Selwyn Elementary), 13 schools with feeder patterns that remain intact (e.g., Blythe Elementary, Ranson Middle, Whitewater Middle), and 35 schools with improved utilization via increased enrollment or reductions in overcrowding

---

<sup>3</sup> SES indicators are based on data from the US Census and American Community Survey (i.e., household income, parent educational attainment, English language ability, single parent household, home ownership) family reported data (i.e., household income, parent educational attainment, number of minors in household), and CMS data (i.e., home school performance). Block groups for the CMS district were then created using Census data and blocked spatial areas of the district into groups of High SES, Medium SES, and Low SES. Using Block Groups and family reported data, student lottery priority is determined.

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Board of Education (2016). *Update on student assignment review*. Retrieved from <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/sites/agenda/Lists/Agenda%20Items/Attachments/4046/Student%20Assignment%20Recommendations%20PowerPoint.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> CMS. (nd). *Related policies and Board motions*. Retrieved from <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/StudentPlacement/PlanningServices/20172018StuAsgnReview/Pages/Related-Policies-and-Board-Motions.aspx>

(e.g., Bruns Academy, Cornelius Elementary, Druid Hills Academy).<sup>6</sup> In total, the changes are expected to impact 10% of CMS' 147,000 students.<sup>7</sup>

While the policy aligns with the BOE's stated goals of improving schools and reducing concentrations of poverty and racial isolation, it was broken into 14 motions and vigorously debated.<sup>8</sup> BOE members opposed various components of the policy for reasons such as: it doesn't do enough to increase diversity, it doesn't adequately respond to community feedback, and replacement of full magnet programs with partial magnets is misguided. Additionally, community members criticized the planning process for occurring over a short period of time and failing to offer an opportunity for impacted families to provide feedback.

Recognition that the student assignment plan is simply a first step toward addressing the overcrowding and lack of diversity in CMS is critical. Changes apply to a few select schools and hinge on the hope that adding partial magnets will increase the attractiveness of underperforming schools. Its success in reducing concentrations of poverty and racial isolation relies on effective implementation, continued evaluation of impact, and exploration of additional strategies. One such strategy is a \$922 million bond referendum, proposed by the BOE and approved by the Mecklenburg County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) for the November 2017 ballot.<sup>9,10,11</sup>

## NEXT STEPS

The most immediate next step is to ensure that implementation is funded. The 2017 bond referendum is critical for building ten new schools, replacing seven schools, renovating 12 schools, and adding 4,000 seats to seven magnet schools.<sup>9</sup> However, the bond does not simply fund implementation; it is intended to better serve all students by supporting the construction, improvement, and maintenance of infrastructure across the district. Voters must understand the far-reaching implications and opportunities for the district beyond student assignment because all children need safe, sound buildings and strong instructional programming. This requires us to challenge efforts to vote the bond down in hopes that its failure will obstruct implementation.

Additional funding may also be available from the state. The North Carolina General Assembly considered companion bills (HB866 and SB542) in 2017 that would use a statewide bond referendum to provide school districts with funds for facilities and capital outlay projects. Under HB866 and SB542, CMS would receive over \$151 million, which could supplement the local bond referendum and further extend facility improvements. HB866 was re-referred to the House Finance Committee<sup>12</sup> while SB542

---

<sup>6</sup> CMS, personal communication. July 21, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Helms, A.D. & Harrison, S. (2017) *Divided CMS board approves 2018 assignment plan, with hard work still to come*. Retrieved from <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/education/article152505699.html>

<sup>8</sup> Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Board of Education (2017). *Regular board meeting agenda*. Retrieved from [http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/boe/Pages/viewAgenda\\_v2.aspx?meetingDate=May+24%2c+2017](http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/boe/Pages/viewAgenda_v2.aspx?meetingDate=May+24%2c+2017)

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools. (nd) *CMS bond information*. Retrieved from <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsbondinfo/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> Mecklenburg County Board of County Commissioners. Minutes of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina Board of County Commissioners. Retrieved from <https://www.mecknc.gov/CountyManagersOffice/BOCC/Meetings/Meeting%20Minutes/m061217%20Budget%20Straw%20Vote%20final.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> A previous version of this document, published in August 2017, referenced a \$937 million bond approved by the BOCC for the November ballot. This document was updated on September 5, 2017 to reflect CMS' final bond referendum request of \$922 million.

<sup>12</sup> Seven Mecklenburg County Representatives sit on the House Finance Committee: Representatives Kelly Alexander, Jr., Chaz Beasley, William Brawley, John R. Bradford, III, Becky Carney, Rodney W. Moore, and Scott Stone.

remains in the Committee on Rules and Operations of the Senate;<sup>13</sup> neither bill is slated to be discussed in the special legislative sessions in 2017. CFCR encourages proponents to contact their [representatives and senators](#) about supporting HB866 and SB542 and bringing the bills to the floor during the short session.

In order to ensure the student assignment plan meets its intended goals, it is critical that community members keep their voices at the forefront of implementation planning. Through the 2018-2021 implementation period, CMS and the BOE welcome community involvement and engagement through their [CMS Listens](#) initiative, slated to launch in August 2017.

Evaluating progress is also imperative to ensuring strategies have a meaningful impact. Indicators such as performance levels, student demographics, school resources, and utilization offer insight into whether these first steps advance intended goals or whether new strategies need to be explored. CFCR will work collaboratively to monitor implementation as well as examine school-level and student-level outcomes.

### WHY WE SUPPORT CMS' EFFORT

CFCR supports reducing concentrations of poverty and racial isolation in CMS. Further, we support efforts to increase socioeconomic and racial diversity in all schools through activities such as redrawing school boundaries, passing bond referenda, and expanding the use of magnet schools.

Thoughtful implementation of the current plan is critical for increasing socioeconomic and racial diversity within schools and providing adequate resources to the schools that serve our most vulnerable students. Previous CMS student assignment policies<sup>14</sup> prioritized school choice and maintained a “race-neutral” approach. This approach caused further harm to historically underserved students by forcing them to remain in underperforming schools where test scores declined while offering more freedom in enrollment options to families in higher income brackets, effectively widening the achievement gap.<sup>15</sup> Previous policies were intended to preserve the desegregation achieved in CMS and reduce achievement gaps, particularly for students of color and low-income students, but were unsuccessful. Instead, they resulted in sharp increases in failing schools with high concentrations of poverty and racial isolation.

Research has shown that racially and economically segregated schools provide fewer opportunities for students to learn and negatively impact the academic performance of students.<sup>16,17</sup> Attending schools that have high concentrations of poverty negatively affects all students, regardless of student-level socioeconomic status.<sup>18</sup> However, attending more diverse schools is related to significantly higher student achievement, regardless of both students' individual characteristics (e.g., race, socioeconomic status) and other school characteristics.<sup>16,17</sup>

Increasing socioeconomic and racial diversity in schools is good for all children and CFCR is committed to ensuring children receive the adequate and equitable education to which they are entitled by the

---

<sup>13</sup> Mecklenburg County Senator Joel Ford is a member of the Committee on Rules and Operations of the Senate.

<sup>14</sup> Following the 2001-02 landmark decision that CMS must stop using race as a factor in determine student assignment plans, a plan focused on school proximity and choice was established.

<sup>15</sup> Godwin, R.K., Leland, S.M., Baxter, A.D., & Southworth, S. (2006). Sinking Swann: Public school choice and the resegregation of Charlotte's public schools. *Review of Policy Research*, 23(5), 983-997.

<sup>16</sup> Southworth, S. (2010). Examining the effects of school composition on North Carolina student achievement over time. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 18(29), 1-45.

<sup>17</sup> Zehr, M.A. (2010). *Socioeconomics replacing race in school assignments*. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/05/12/31poverty.h29.html>

<sup>18</sup> Poverty and Race Research Action Council (n.d.). *Annotated bibliography: The impact of school-based poverty concentration on academic achievement and student outcomes*. Retrieved from [http://www.prrac.org/pdf/annotated\\_bibliography\\_on\\_school\\_poverty\\_concentration.pdf](http://www.prrac.org/pdf/annotated_bibliography_on_school_poverty_concentration.pdf)

Constitutions of North Carolina and the United States. The current CMS student assignment plan and 2017 Bond Referendum are two first steps toward reducing concentrations of poverty and racial isolation that persist within the district. CFCR supports CMS staff, the BOE, and the BOCC in their respective efforts, since meaningful impact on our community's children requires effective implementation, continued evaluation of impact, and exploration of additional strategies. A vital element of CFCR's Mission is that the educational needs of children in our community are met, particularly the vulnerable children we serve. CFCR will work with CMS and other community partners to help make the plan a success and to advocate for educational equity in our community.