

TO: Dr. Heath Morrison, Superintendent, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

FROM: Terry Abbott, Chairman, Drive West Communications

RE: **Review of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Communications – August 2012**

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### **Background, methodology, and acknowledgements**

Drive West Communications was contacted on May 30, 2012, by incoming Charlotte-Mecklenburg (CMS) Superintendent of Schools Dr. Heath Morrison and asked to prepare to conduct a formal review of CMS communications later in the summer. Drive West arranged to conduct the onsite interviews for the communications report on August 1-3. On those days, working at the CMS headquarters or by telephone, Drive West Communications conducted a series of half-hour and one-hour interviews with a total of 80 school district officials, board members, principals, teachers, parents, community members, and news reporters and editors. These interviews yielded a significant amount of information about the communications structures, procedures, and performance at the school district. The information from those interviews, along with a review of material on the district's website and a review of documents provided by the district, formed the foundation for this report.

Dr. Morrison and his administrative staff, including Chief of Staff Earnest Winston, Executive Director of Communications LaTazja Henry, board members, staff, teachers, parents, community volunteers and leaders, and members of the news media, were gracious with their time and attention. Those interviewed were willing and eager to provide details about the communications functions, capabilities, and history of the district and to make recommendations. Their support for this communications review was vital and is gratefully acknowledged.

### **Summary**

Outside its borders, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system enjoys a strong national reputation. The district is generally well regarded by other educators across the country as a high-performing district. But in various communities inside its borders, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) suffers from a deep level distrust of its work.

While employees of CMS are viewed around the country as being fortunate to work for a well-regarded public school district at a time when support of public education is reported to be at low



ebb, morale inside the organization is poor. CMS employees and community supporters know the district enjoys a generally favorable reputation among education media throughout the country, but they agree almost universally that local media coverage of the school district is very negative. When asked about the perception among employees and community members that local media coverage is overly negative, however, members of the news media vigorously disagree and point to failures of the school district to be open, honest, and transparent in their dealings with the news media.

The leadership of the CMS communications department is praised as caring and responsive but criticized as too reactive and not proactive enough in communicating with the public and the media. The leadership of the department is described as having great talents, especially in the area of tactical communications, but insufficient in strategic communications planning and execution to help the public better understand and engage with the school district. The communications department does an excellent job producing large numbers of feature stories for news media and information for the public about school-by-school events, but it fails to produce sufficient news to inform and encourage media coverage and public understanding of major, district-wide initiatives.

The district has about 18,000 employees but has no strategic internal communications plan or protocols to make sure employees hear about, understand, and communicate with the community about important decisions and the deliberations of district leadership.

Clearly, the work of the communications department has been hurt by severe budget cuts in recent years. But the department is also not optimally organized for maximum performance and suffers from a lack of strategic leadership. The district has not had up-to-date programming for its cable-access television channel because of budget cuts by the board of education, but the communications department has not made use of the capabilities of two staff members who are trained and proficient in production for television.

Among all groups interviewed for this report there exists great excitement about the new superintendent of schools and the opportunity he has to pull the community together and improve both the performance and public appreciation of the school district. But community members and employees alike also are cautious, anxious to see if the new superintendent can successfully bring the community back together and get the district back on track. Superintendent Morrison has a track record of success in that regard. Dr. Morrison met similar caution and concern when he began his work in Washoe County, Nevada, but ultimately he and his team were successful enough in pulling the community together that the district received an award from the Nevada Taxpayers Association based on improved public engagement.

## Findings

- **CMS suffers from inadequate strategic communications leadership.**

LaTarzja Henry, the executive director of communications, draws strong praise from CMS leaders and staff for the passion she brings to the work and her desire to strengthen the district's bonds with its community. Henry has a deep and abiding understanding of the need for real involvement by and feedback from all the community's constituencies. But a number of CMS leaders, staff, and community supporters believe the district suffers from inadequate strategic communications leadership. They believe that too much of the district's communications effort is reactive and not proactive, tactical but not strategic.

To be sure, the executive director of communications has strong supporters both inside and outside the organization, and praise for aspects of her performance is strong even from those who do not believe she is the right person to lead the district's overall communications effort. One district executive said of Henry: "I think she does a good job with what she has. I think it's unrealistic to take a department from 30 (staff members) to 11 or 10 and take away the TV station (the district's TV channel operations were eliminated by budget cuts) and expect for them to do the same (work) . . . I don't know much about communications, but I would find it incredibly difficult to believe anyone could have done a better job."

One strong concern raised in some interviews was that when communications support is needed after normal work hours or on weekends, district officials have regularly had a difficult time contacting the departmental leadership. "After 5 (p.m.), we don't have consistent leadership (in communications)," a district executive said. A staff member of the communications department acknowledged, "It's the culture to hit the door at 5 p.m. We have zero on-call schedule." The communications staff member said there are "times when people call and say, 'I can't get in touch with' so and so . . . If it's on a weekend, it's hard to find anyone."

Communications department staff members gave differing accounts of the department's staff meeting schedule and the effectiveness of those staff meetings. One communications staff member said "Staff meetings tend to be rambling affairs and not particularly organized. . . We don't have any leadership."

The announcement of market-rate adjustment pay raises for some employees was a mishandled communications opportunity, a communications department staff member said. "I see us stumble like with those pay raises, and it could have been so very different. There was a real opportunity to put it out, and we just didn't see it."

School board members interviewed for this report generally believe CMS needs stronger communications leadership. One board member said the leadership of the department makes too many mistakes in public comments on controversial issues, pointing specifically to media coverage of the district's plan to purchase iPads for students. "Was

the information from the department (in charge of the iPad initiative) wrong or was the (communications) department wrong? Do they (the communications department) double check what they are putting out?” Another board member said, “I have no difficulty with anybody on that (communications) team, I just don’t think (the) leadership is strong enough to get the word out.”

Asked about the communications department, another board member suggested: “Blow it up. We’re reactive instead of proactive. I don’t think we’ve figured out what is our message, what are we trying to convey, what is our brand. We tend to shoot ourselves in the foot on issues.” Another board member sounded a similar theme: “There are times we are not as proactive and strategic as we should be. . . . What’s our annual strategy?”

- **The district has embarked on major initiatives with little or no communications planning.**

In recent years, CMS has embarked on major new initiatives and shifts in long-standing practice – such as the closure of schools or “market-rate” adjustments in pay scales – with little or no strategic planning for communicating with employees, parents, and the public about the changes. As a result, community members and employees have often felt disconnected from--and been disillusioned by--both the decision-making process and the results of these major decisions that affect the entire community.

Critics of CMS’ communications efforts said the department leadership regularly fails to strategically plan for the public release of important news and information about the district to better inform the public and the news media. The result often is, according to the department’s critics (including some on the communications department staff), a missed opportunity to engage the community and inform the media regarding major initiatives of district and community-wide importance.

One such occasion arose during the onsite work on this communications review. The district had known for quite some time that the state of North Carolina would be releasing data about the performance of school districts the week of August 3. But interviews indicated the CMS communications department leadership began planning for this important release of statewide data just days before the statewide release and then experienced difficulty in obtaining needed information from the district’s accountability department staff – a frequent problem, some said.

As a result, the district’s official news and public announcement about the state accountability report was substandard. Statistics in the district’s announcement did not match statistics reported in a local newspaper, and a media news report focused on information entirely different from what was highlighted by the district announcement.

A number of district officials interviewed discussed internal disagreements over when to release information to the news media and the public. For example, members of the news media became interested in a study by the Deloitte audit firm on the issue of a market-

rate pay adjustment for some employees. News media asked for a copy of the study, but the release of the study was delayed, reportedly as district officials debated internally about the release. By the time the specifics of the market-rate pay adjustments were made public, “there is no thought about getting out front. We’re going to react,” a district official said.

Members of the communications department staff and some district executives said the lack of communications planning is sometimes the result of a failure of internal communication—specifically, a failure by some district leaders to inform the communications department of major policy decisions in time for adequate communications planning. The most frequently noted example of this problem was the district’s handling of communications regarding school closings.

Communications department staff members said they learned 45 minutes before a school board work session that the CMS administration was “to propose changes to 80 schools ranging from targeted assistance to closure . . . To the community it appears this was done out of the blue” because previous meetings had not included suggestions that schools would be closed, a communications staff member said. “To the community it appeared you’re going to close bunch of schools in black neighborhoods,” a communications officer said. People were under the impression that “we were just talking about schools, not closing schools. So we had to say we were talking about closing schools,” the officer added.

Asked how it was possible that the communications department could not have known in advance about such an important discussion by the administration and board members, one communications staff member said, “I think the political process got ahead of the planners. I think the planning department thought they were doing one thing and the board shifted into high gear and politicized it.” The staff member said the communications department attended “every meeting” regarding school-facility planning before that school board workshop and never learned of any plans to consider closing schools. “This is a great example of the staff being in one mind set, then something happened. We don’t know what it was that happened. It happened in the political realm . . . then they say, ‘communications department, where was the messaging?’” a communications officer said.

The communications staff insisted that in advance of that pivotal board workshop, the communications department was told only that the board would be discussing “the standards of the matrix, the age of the buildings, the cost” for future decisions regarding use of school buildings and that the department staff had no knowledge, until just before the board meeting, that actual closures of specific schools would be discussed. “Then we go to that meeting and there are 80 schools (to be closed) and parents are . . . freaking out and saying ‘they might close my school,’” a communications officer said. “The board will say it’s a lack of communication,” a communications officer said about the district’s communications issues in general. But the officer continued, “We can’t communicate what we don’t know. The easy way (for critics of the communications department) to go

is (to say) we didn't communicate it well . . . I feel there is disconnect between the governance team and the leadership team." Another communications department member added: "at central office you also have unilateral decisions made and then communications is called in to clean it up and it becomes our problem. Now we have to communicate it because you (district leaders) screwed it up. We're more clean-up crew rather than communicators."

Still, communications department members acknowledge that a lack of internal planning and leadership in the communications department plays a significant role in the communications breakdowns. Asked if the district has any kind of overall strategic communications plan, a communications officer responded, "no. There used to be (under past leadership). Everything is piecemeal."

The district's failure to communicate adequately about the August 2 release of state accountability data that led to the August 3 news coverage is a strong example of how too often a lack of planning and leadership in the communications department helps to cause a failure of communication.

One communications officer said the accountability department "never gave it (the data) to us" but that the communications department was aware "that data was coming. If we had a standard operating procedure," the communications breakdown would not have occurred. The same communications officer added: "(The communications department's work on the accountability results announcement) was last minute . . . We should over the summer plan to look at the data, feature a teacher who really shined so we can show (the public the good work) the teacher did."

Another communications officer said the department wasn't given the data for the state accountability report release until Tuesday, two days before the official state announcement. Initial information provided by the accountability department seemed to be wrong, and major changes in how some results were calculated by the state were not communicated to the communications department until the last minute, the communications officer said. "This was a total failure that doesn't belong (exclusively) to us," the communications staff member said.

A CMS district executive noted such communications planning failures but said of the district's communications department, "they can't do anything about it (communicating about major initiatives) if they don't know it." The executive cited as an example the announcement of the "BYOT" plan to allow students to "bring your own technology" to school as part of an effort to convert to digital learning. "We were sitting at a board meeting in March (when a district executive) said we're going to turn on BYOT for all students on the first day of school. My eyes almost popped out of my head. No planning had been done. There was no deep dive into what it would take to get that done . . . It never came up at leadership team (meetings)," the executive said. The executive continued, "(The executive who made the sudden public announcement) was talking to media. Nobody from communications was involved. So it got out in media" without the



communications office having been forewarned that the announcement was coming and given an opportunity to develop a communications plan. “Those department leaders have to involve (the) communications (department). They have always been agreeable to work with us,” the executive said. A staff member in the communications department agreed the communications team wasn’t ready for the BYOT announcement. “It became public, and we weren’t getting a lot of information . . . about it.” The communications staff member said that left the media to believe “communications was not being forthcoming when we didn’t have any information. We said to (district executives supporting the BYOT initiative) ‘this is not a good time to do this,’ but they went ahead and did it anyway.”

Regardless of the reasons, CMS clearly has failed to develop strategic planning for communications to inform and engage the community around significant issues. “The role of a communications plan should be enhancing support of CMS and public education,” a community member said. “They need to define (who) their customers (are) and those who are not.” The community member added, “I don’t know if that’s the communications department’s plan. They don’t identify what their mission is and don’t measure what they do.”

The result of failing to plan is not acceptable, a board member said. “What tends to happen is we will get the email that goes out to media or others. The board will get an email, reporters will call me to ask questions before I ever get a chance to see it . . . .A lot of times we will get calls from the media, (and) we’re caught flat-footed because we don’t have more information they do.”

- **School district staff and parents generally believe news media coverage of CMS is overly negative; some members of the media and CMS officials point to a lack of responsiveness from the district to legitimate questions as one factor in negative media coverage, along with too little proactive outreach by the district to inform and encourage media coverage.**

Asked their thoughts about the news media’s coverage of CMS, it didn’t take long for district officials, staff, and parents to respond. The media coverage of the district is considered almost universally among these groups to be negative. Many who were interviewed believe the local media, taken as a whole, routinely reports about the district’s work unfairly, with the intent to showcase negative aspects of CMS to the virtual exclusion of positive news. News media representatives, on the other hand, noted the district often is not forthcoming with important information about issues of significant interest to the public and this perceived lack of transparency from the school district is a significant factor in what school district staff and supporters would describe as negative media coverage. A number of CMS officials agreed the district is not only too slow in responding to some media requests for information but also fails to be proactive in encouraging and informing positive media coverage of the district.

One district executive summed up the situation by saying the media treats the district “very negatively . . . Ninety percent of the time it’s negative.” But the district executive said: “absent a more proactive push by CMS to communicate the news, they dig it up on their own and that tends to be quite negative. If we were to be a lot more proactive in supplying information and stories . . . I think that could turn around, but absent all that, we are at the mercy of the media.”

A school board member agreed that CMS needs to improve its work in providing information to the public and the media. “There is an overall resistance. Media asks for data (and) we aren’t coming back and giving them an idea of when they will get it. (The district should) just respond, don’t drag our heels,” the board member said. Pointing to the release of the Deloitte study on the market-rate adjustment issue, the board member said the new superintendent, Heath Morrison, correctly asked, “Why are we dragging our feet?” on releasing the study to media. “That shouldn’t be the case. Make it public. The more transparent we are” the better, the board member said.

Some at CMS also believe the district has not done enough to build communications relationships with members of the media. “We’re always worried about what the negative aspect (of a news report) is going to be, especially the newspaper . . . Building those relationships so they have a level of trust in CMS to know we’re not hiding information and we are being up-front” is an important step for the district, a CMS executive said.

One district executive said the media tends to quote the same long-time critics of the school district in frequent stories critical of the district. “It doesn’t seem the media looks for objective sources. I think that is a big part of it.” But the same executive acknowledged: “as an organization, we bring it on ourselves. We are very reactionary in our communications approach. We wait too long. We try to have everything dotted and crossed before we say anything. There are so many places where information is coming from . . . because we wait so long and we don’t report what we know when we know it, our employees hear about it through somebody else.” A school board member said one newspaper reporter is “pretty fair with us,” but also talked about very negative coverage from one television reporter. “I won’t talk to him,” the board member said of the television reporter. “He’s more concerned about creating headlines than he is about getting the facts straight.”

Several CMS officials pointed to the media’s focus on the market-rate pay raises for a few employees, including one raise of \$17,000 – instead of what they said should have been a focus on the overall 3 percent pay raise for employees – as an example of media bias against the district.

“It feels like a ‘gotcha’ mentality (among the) press,” a school board member said. “It feels like (the media’s focus was) . . . ‘one person got \$17,000, how can anybody be worth that?’ I get that, but it’s picking out the worst thing and highlighting it that is too much.” The board member said some in the media “make funny connections with things,



usually negative connections. I'd love to read a story someday that said 'however many students are straight-A students this year.'"

But journalists interviewed for this report strongly disagreed that they failed to report the good news about the raise for all employees or that the focus was unnecessarily negative and controversial. "The teacher pay raise got eight months' worth of focus," one journalist said, noting the pay raise had been announced months before the market-rate adjustment was announced. Another journalist agreed: "The 3 percent pay raise was reported for a long time." The "real focus" of the story ultimately became that teachers, some of whom must hold "several jobs to make this work" with no pay raises in four years, then saw one school district employee who was not a teacher get a \$17,000 raise, a journalist said. "The board had been saying 'we want more stuff to impact the classroom.' When you see 30-cents-, 40 cents-an-hour (raises) for teachers . . . it makes you stop and ask why," the journalist said.

The journalists pointed specifically to the market-rate pay increase issue as an occasion in which the district failed to communicate in a timely fashion. "(The newspaper) had been asking about all these market increases," said one journalist who said the district kept promising to release the information and then kept pushing back the time of release. In the end, the information was released by CMS late in the day, and "no one from the district is available" to comment, the reporter said. "It's like they are shooting themselves in the foot. (They) just piss people off," the journalist said of CMS. Another journalist agreed that CMS should have been more proactive in dealing with the market-rate pay adjustment story. "That's where . . . they could be more proactive rather than reactive. They should have somebody out there (responding to media questions) and it's a no-brainer." Another journalist added, "If it was such a positive story, then why wasn't anyone from the district able to comment?"

The negative media attention prevents the district from promoting good news about good work by students and educators; and social media is enabling even more negative media coverage, some district officials said. "Most of the news nowadays is bad news. We're always reacting. They have valid (concerns) sometimes. So many people are Facebooking, blogging, tweeting, you have to be able to respond. If it's a tweet or blog (the media) picks up on 'what are you doing about it?'" one district official said. Another district executive agreed. "There are days when I feel like we work for the media when (I know) my first priority should be supporting a principal" working to educate students at school.

### **Comments from school district officials about how the media covers CMS**

- "I think they look for the glorified stories, which generally are not the most positive. I don't think they purposely make them out to be negative, but it's very selective . . . I think there are a lot of missed opportunities that we could put out stories that would make our parents and students know we are there (for) kids." – District executive
- "(The media covers the district) very poorly. CMS . . . attracts a lot of interest, a lot of heat.

- . . . (The media focuses on CMS) because bad news about the district moves the meter. It's their job to sell papers, not to report our news. They get more bang for their buck focusing on the district and controversial things." – District executive
- "There are many days I feel like I work for" the media. "I've been quoted a lot of times with not having information when we're working on it." – Communications department staff member
  - "The media does a lot to sabotage us . . . They'll try to sensationalize things . . . They create dissention." – CMS school principal
  - "A graduating student did a senior project in Israel. It was a phenomenal story. You would think the media would have (treated the story as) positive. It ended up talking about (the student) dropping out of school in fifth grade, ending up (in another school) because (the student) didn't want to go to a traditional school . . . That was not what the story was about. . . . The story focused more on his issues in fifth grade than his success." – CMS school principal
  - "I do worry about the coverage, the way the media portrays the district. I worry that it sometimes feels like stories are instigative rather than objective. . . . I think there is a trend in media these days (toward) the salacious nature (of) how facts are presented. I think CMS' strategy has been transparency, keeping the doors wide open . . . It feels often like we are trying to do something that is positive, like the (pay) raises, something that will be beneficial to employees and students; and somehow when it ends up being reported, it ends up having more of a negative slant. Something gets lost in us trying to do something positive and work with the media in portraying it positively." – District executive
  - "We seem to be their number-one target." – CMS school principal
  - "There's no sense of partnership or alliance. It seems to be adversarial." – CMS school principal
  - "(The media coverage is) slanted and sensationalized." – CMS school principal
  - "(There is) a major lack of trust from principals in the media." – CMS school principal
  - "It is amazing when stories come out people will question me, 'is it really that bad?' Good news stories never happen." – CMS school principal.
  - "(The media's philosophy seems to be) it isn't a story worth discussing unless there is a controversy around it." – CMS school principal
  - "I won't talk to the media. They broke that trust. I don't believe they will do an unbiased story." – CMS school principal
  - "(CMS sends) out a list of all the positive stories happening in schools, but seldom do they (media) show up to those events. They choose to not report on those stories." – CMS school principal
  - "It's a great district (with) so much good going on. It's really sad to go out in our public (and) hear the things that are hurtful. It's really sad because (there is) so much potential and great stuff going on, so many great educators. It's just really sad the way the media and community portray it." – CMS school principal
  - "They seem to be extremely biased in what is going on at CMS. They don't really dig in and get the real facts of what's going on. I see that as a pretty bad representation of what's really happening. They sugar coat a lot of it." – CMS teacher
  - "The local media says a lot of things before they have all of the facts . . . A lot of times they are too critical of our schools before they figure out what has happened." – CMS teacher
  - "They will incite lots of people around an issue that doesn't exist." – CMS teacher
  - "(Media are) following a trend nationally that public school education is spoken down of. They tend to highlight things that are going wrong in public school education instead of supporting teachers." – CMS teacher

- “Charlotte news is ‘if it bleeds, it leads.’ They would much rather cover negative than positive. They twist anything they can into a negative way.” – CMS teacher
- “I think (one newspaper reporter) tries to take a balanced approach. (But the overall coverage is) negative to the point of where I stopped my subscription.” – CMS teacher
- “Generally they make sure they report the negative. It’s the negativity at minority schools they report. The district counters that. (CMS creates) a lot of information about what is going on at our school . . . I think our media just prints just what they want to print. Some schools are predominately white, and with that comes the prestige. Even if the negative stuff happens, it doesn’t get as much media attention (as) if the same thing happens at minority schools.” - District executive
- “For whatever reason it’s really hard to write a good story about our school system, even when the news is good . . . There’s definitely a lack of balance here.” – CMS school board member
- “I think the media is biased. We get a negative slant quite often. They tend to put a spin on things in order to make news . . . That doesn’t match my experiences in other communities. (The negative media coverage) seems to be unique here.” – District executive
- “It would appear the district and the media have a contentious relationship for reasons I’m not clear about. The media is not looking to offer favorable coverage . . . I find the coverage here less meaningful and terribly negative in general.” – District executive
- “(The media treats the district) poorly, shabbily to outright nasty.” – Communications department staff member
- “(The media has) an audience who does not trust us right now. They feed off negativity.” – Communications department staff member
- “We get a lot of negative coverage because there is a dedicated reporter (at the newspaper) for education. The charter schools and private schools, on the other hand, virtually never have negative stories written about them. There is no examination by the media of how the charters operate. Some of the charters refuse (to enroll) kids, but that doesn’t get reported or explored. CMS has added 3,000 children through increasing enrollment, but we don’t get a front-page story about that like the private schools do when they get an increase in enrollment. (The media) presents a negative view of public education but never of the private schools or charters.” – District executive

Parents interviewed expressed strong frustration with what they saw as overly negative media coverage of the district. “(The media is) looking for the negative, never the positive. I think they think that makes for good press . . . They make people angry,” one parent said. The media coverage, another parent said, “creates a lot of animosity.” Another parent noted, “the media tends to be so negative, and the system is so large most people listen to the media as their primary source of perceptions.” One journalist interviewed confirmed there is “definitely distrust of the media.” The journalist has “fielded some of the calls when CMS and others felt they were getting a raw deal . . . I’ve seen stories (that) I might have questioned the angle.” But the journalist added, “by no means do I think the coverage is unfair.”

Schools try to overcome the negative media coverage by providing information directly to parents and the community, parents said.

Some leaders of some of the active community organizations that support the school district were less critical of the tone of the media coverage of CMS than were district officials, staff, and parents, although they still had concerns.

“I think (the media coverage) is fairly neutral,” one CMS community partner said. “I wouldn’t say it is skewed toward being negative, or particularly positive. I think they try to present the information they have.”

But another community partner echoed the complaints of some district officials that the media seeks out those who chronically complain about CMS. The media coverage is “a mix. The newspaper has become . . . very negative in their coverage. It feels like they are only looking to the sources in the community that talk negatively about the system,” the community partner said. Another community partner said the Charlotte media works to “build up drama between the board members.” One community member was critical of the newspaper coverage of the district, saying the paper is “a huge problem . . . (The paper) digs up any kind of trouble to get people to read.” Another community member added, “I do agree the (newspaper) is a big problem,” but another noted, “CMS doesn’t speak for itself, so (the newspaper) does.”

Charlotte-area media outlets reflect some of the concerns about public education nationally, one community partner said. “There is skepticism about public education across the country. I don’t think it’s treated any different here. But it’s also the angle of how the (newspaper) sells the paper. If the drama is at (level) four, they will uptick it to six or seven.”

Progress is being made with the news media though, one community partner said. “It’s not something that happened overnight. The media has been negative around the schools for (many years). I can remember as a child watching the superintendent being fired by the school board on TV. There is a lot of negative, but there has been some progress made in the last eight to 10 years, specifically in the last five years,” the community partner said.

Charlotte journalists who agreed to be interviewed for this report as a group generally said they are simply trying to do their jobs and that a lack of transparency and responsiveness from the school district hurts their ability to do that job. They spoke of occasions when it seemed the district was deliberately withholding information and not being responsive.

During the selection process for the new superintendent, for example, one journalist noted that reporters received 20 minutes’ notice of an informal board meeting. “Twenty minutes’ notice is not enough. That doesn’t say ‘we’d like to have you.’ As a whole, the way it was being handled . . . they didn’t want much media coverage of how the process works. To me, if they start shutting down, I’m really asking questions.” Another said journalists appreciate the “tip sheet” of story ideas they receive weekly from the district, but when reporters are looking into something of public interest, school district officials

tend to “judge it and . . . (may not) help in a timely fashion.” Another reporter said, “if it’s something in their interest, they are very responsive but not otherwise.”

“It needs to be a team effort,” one journalist said. But when information is slow to come from the district, “I don’t know if they are dragging (their) feet. Everyone is in meetings. You just can’t get information you need. (On such simple questions as) ‘how many employees do you have?’ you should already know that. But to take hours to respond” hurts the district’s cause, the reporter said. Another reporter added: “if (information is) positive, you’ll get a good quality (news release from CMS). But if it’s negative it’s like pulling teeth to get any information. (Media tries) to talk to several different people (at CMS and is) getting basically shut down. If, as a whole, you make the community think you are hiding so much, that is in and of itself bad. What’s happening is we have some of the board members saying they want to be transparent, but it isn’t really what’s happening. I get the runaround.”

The general public tends to remember negative stories longer, but Charlotte media reports plenty of positive stories about CMS, one journalist said. The public “always seizes on the one negative story and forgets all about the positive stories we do. CMS has made some bad decisions over the years. Of course that’s going to get coverage. I don’t know if that’s negative. We’re just reporting the news,” the journalist said.

Asked for advice on how CMS could improve its communication, one journalist said pointedly, “We’re not the enemy. Tell them that.” One journalist reported working with “a lot of communications departments, and I don’t think this one is bad.” Another journalist said the district is improving its communication. “Lately, communications has been much better. For a while, it was difficult to get anything, any statistics, any information” regarding some groups of students, the journalist said. “It’s different now because (the journalist’s news organization has) been more involved in things related to the district.” And another journalist advised that CMS “be there, be available to round out the story, to provide that context.”

- **Distrust of school district leadership by various CMS communities and distrust of the various CMS communities in each other run deep.**

A universal theme of the interviews for this report was that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools community is deeply divided on the fundamental issue of equity of educational opportunities within CMS. Whether they were speaking about the controversial decisions regarding school closings or the ongoing debate over the level of funding that schools in different parts of the district receive, a common thread that ran through the discussions was one of distrust of the CMS leadership’s decision-making process and, as a related issue, its communications efforts.

Virtually everyone interviewed for this report said the community’s distrust of the school district is real. The distrust seems to be rooted, in part, in disagreements between communities over how schools should be funded but has been stoked by what community



members see as a lack of transparency in the school district's decision-making process. School board members, administrators, teachers, parents, and community members agreed that restoring community faith and trust in the district is a very important priority for the district.

"In the African-American community there is distrust over school closures," said one school board member, who acknowledged the district has not produced data yet showing whether it was financially worthwhile to close schools. "In other areas they feel there is disproportionate spending in urban areas." Another school board member said the district has hurt its standing in the community by "saying one thing and doing something entirely different." The board member said the distrust of the CMS leadership has been prevalent among teachers as well as the community. "(Some employees) in a sense were like walking zombies, feeling like the thumb was down on them," the board member said. "Just talking to teachers and other employees, it was the feeling that 'if I don't get out of CMS, I'm going to go crazy.'" A school district executive acknowledged deep community concern about the lack of transparency in CMS' decision-making processes. "Yes, the feeling (of distrust by the community) is real. I hear that all the time from parents. They feel the process and decisions are not transparent. They want to know how we came up with decisions. Or they ask a question and we can't tell them why," the district executive said. "A lot of it stems from closing African-American schools. The sentiment is that 'what they do to some of those schools they would never do in the more affluent neighborhoods.' People didn't find out about it until the news was released."

A big blow to trust of the CMS leadership among employees came during a proposal in the state legislature, backed by a then-CMS leader, regarding pay-for-performance, a board member said. Employees were surprised by the CMS leader's support for the bill, and that issue "took all the trust out of everywhere," the board member said. The school district simply does not know how to engage the public, another CMS board member said. "We know how to go to the public with 'this is what we're planning to do.' We go as though we're asking for their input, but we don't know how we're going to have input," the board member said. "Our M.O. has been 'we're the educators, and we know what to do. We're just going to tell you and do it.'" The board member said the district's handling of the school closings issue was a prime example of using "the wrong process" for engagement. "We don't know how to do (an engagement process). We've been seen as thieves. We have a tin ear to the African-American community."

CMS' handling of the school closures issue was a significant problem for community trust, staff members said. One principal noted, for example, that CMS originally planned to close Waddell High School, but "that shifted in a matter of hours to Harding and back to Waddell. Most of the schools that were closed were high SES (socioeconomic status) schools." A teacher said, "There is a huge distrust of the powers-that-be downtown." A district community partner added, "people trust their kids' schools and teachers and principals. It's the district as a whole that people tend to have a distrust of." The school closures were "centered in the African-American community. That riled up the African-American community. Their response is 'why aren't you doing it to the suburbs?' If you



look at the utilization of schools you will see that suburban schools are packed to the gills . . . If you're going to close schools and be more efficient, it makes sense to do it in areas where there are underutilized schools. So those are two totally different viewpoints," the board member said. "Because we are so splintered and there are such differences in this community, various actions we take create mistrust in the community." While an improved communications effort would help, "we are so splintered, it's going to be a hard nut to crack with any communications," the board member said.

One communications department staff member called the school closings "a disaster." The staff member explained: "The board said we needed to get people out and involved and engaged. To me that means asking you what you think and then doing something about what you think. We had thousands who came out about criteria to be used on closing (schools). Then midway through it, the board made different decisions . . . There were schools on that list that pissed off everybody in the community involved. In a board work session they decided to take schools off the list. We couldn't explain that from the communications side. That was a board decision. (The communications department) didn't even see it coming."

Many interviewed pointed to a difference in funding for schools in higher poverty areas compared with those in more affluent areas as a major source of the community's distrust of the school district, and they said the district has not done enough to communicate about the issue. "There is a deeply rooted perception that we spend more time, money, and resources on the more-or-less affluent areas, depending on who you talk to," a CMS executive said. "Absent information that levels that playing field—that tells people the truth about how those decisions are made—you have these wild swings in perception about how we make decisions." A school board member agreed: "We're a rich district and a poor district. We're a suburban and urban district . . . The suburban folks will argue 'we're not getting our fair share on a per-pupil basis. It's all going to the inner city,' and that's true because of the policies we adopted . . . But if you look at who's performing, it's the suburban schools."

Those perceptions of disparity in funding exist even among CMS school employees. One school principal said: "The district does spend beyond (what it should) on lower SES students. When (higher poverty) schools get smart boards for classrooms and those are used as chalkboards, that infuriates our staff. We earned it. Our faculty and staff (are) very involved in fundraising." The bottom line, the principal said, is "public education is not funded well for anyone, so you have people fighting over crumbs. You have to increase the pot (of funding)."

Erroneous information released by the district also has hurt the district's standing in the community, some said. One CMS executive pointed to the erroneous school performance information released by the district, calling it "a big gaffe." Another district executive agreed: "The district has made some very avoidable mistakes. You don't release bad data until you check it. You release bad data, and you have just severed the trust factor with a lot of folks. You can't make the mistakes over and over either. We've done that." A

community member echoed that thought, saying the school performance information mistake, related to graduation rates, “fed the mistrust.”

Some also acknowledged that CMS hiring practices have not engendered trust in the African-American community. There is, a district executive said, “a racial dynamic in Charlotte. There is a sense of distrust among (people of color). They don’t see people who look like them” working in much of CMS.

Overall budget cuts in recent years also have played a role in creating distrust, a CMS executive said. “In some ways the (distrust) is real. But if you talk to individual parents or high school kids, they love their own personal schools but will make a negative comment about the district as a whole . . . There are some concerns (in the community) but so much of the current ones were driven by budget cuts.” When the budget cuts included a reduction in force among educators, decisions were made suddenly by the district, a school principal said. “The RIF process created a lot of distrust . . . People felt like they had no time to talk. There was a lot of frustration among . . . colleagues who felt they never had (an) opportunity to advocate for their job,” the principal said. Another principal echoed the concern. “Internally there are a lot of decisions made and no transparency. You don’t know why it is. It just is . . . You don’t know if what happens is the right thing or the wrong thing,” the principal said.

Some parents backed up the claim that decisions regarding employees are not communicated. “I feel like they (CMS leadership) are patronizing us. Last year they pulled (removed from the job) a principal. We got a (phone message) from the district superintendent. ‘Hi, I’m so and so, this principal is leaving in two days, FYI.’ Parents went nuts because we knew nothing about this at all,” the parent said. After complaints, the superintendent “came out to the school, then took us through an exercise with note cards saying ‘write down (your) top three’ (thoughts.) The cards were patronizing to us. They ask, but they don’t seem to really care. It’s more lip service.”

Some believe the distrust is partially the result of district leaders not simply doing what community members want done on any given issue. A district executive said: “There’s some confusion between engagement and ultimately who makes the final decision. Yes, we are engaging you in a dialogue but ultimately we’re going to make a decision. Somehow the messaging has not been that people completely understand . . . There is a relationship between CMS and the community that has evolved over time. If I’m a community member that has felt I have not been heard, like on closing schools, I lose that battle; I lost a bunch of other battles. I think it’s then that people start to take on a crusade.” A school board member echoed the sentiment, saying a big part of the trust issue is school district leaders simply not doing everything a particular community member wants. “The citizen says ‘unless you do what I want you to do based on my definition (of what is right), I can’t trust you. It is not good enough for you just to listen to me. You will prove that you heard me if you do what I’ve told you you must do.’ I came into this with the naïve belief that as long as I listened and demonstrated that I had heard and make an independent judgment, at least we could move forward,” the board

member said. The board member continued: “Someone told me (about their expectations for the new superintendent) ‘my trust will have to be earned. We’ll find out who he’s listening to when he makes his first controversial decision.’ It’s not good enough just to listen. What they are really saying is ‘unless you do what I want you to do, I can’t trust you.’ That’s the basic issue around trust.”

But some parents interviewed said the distrust comes more from the district’s lack of communication about major initiatives and the appearance that it is not listening to community members at all. “It’s a communications problem,” a parent said. “If you are going to make changes, you’ve got to communicate those change and make sure people who are invested heavily in the system understand what those changes are. If you have to make a decision, rational people will say, ‘I understand why even if it’s not the best decision for me.’ A lot of times the decision gets made, then it’s told to parents and then there is a lot of hoopla. The distrust is based around a lack of communications success,” the parent said.

Another parent described another problem: “the manner (in which) parents are spoken to (at forums), then nothing is taken into consideration.” One parent explained, “half of it is communication, but a lot of people have been let down and have a reason to mistrust the district (because of the decision-making process.) They (parents) will participate in a focus group when it seemed like the decision was already made.” One parent pointed to the district’s handling of public input around a school bell-schedule decision. Hours were spent by parents working on the issue, the parent said. “But it was already decided. The work was null and void because it didn’t go anywhere. So why do I want to help the school district? They aren’t really listening.” Another parent added, “then they gripe when parents don’t want to be involved anymore. Why would we want to?”

That theme of lack of communication and distrust in the decision-making process was echoed among some CMS community partner organizations as well. “There is a perception that the district isn’t telling us everything,” a leader of a strong CMS community partnership organization said. “The perception is a lack of transparency . . . There are pockets in our community where there is real distrust, (such as) African-American neighborhoods. (On the) school closures, (there was) very little communication until they were about to make the decision. (Suburban parents say), ‘my child is funded at a significantly lower level than (students at higher poverty schools).’ But a significant number of suburban parents don’t understand, and they see a story in the paper and they get angry. That has created some suburban distrust . . . More transparency and more intentional communication can help buffer and even build trust,” the community supporter said. “If you just listen and make a decision, there is a missing step. It’s incumbent upon decision makers to communicate their logic in making decisions.”

The distrust among the community is well known by members of the media, who pointed to the school closures, student testing, budget cuts, and race as drivers of the problem. “It has really picked up. I (have) a sense there was this natural distrust,” one journalist said. Another said the distrust is “huge” and is driven “by race and class . . . As there have

been fewer resources, there has been a struggle and fight for who is going to get them. Are they going to the inner (city schools)? Are they going to the outer perimeter? I think you have groups or factions almost turning on each other,” a journalist said. Another journalist called it a “can’t-win factor.” “When they close schools, the poor and minority schools (are) affected the most,” the journalist explained. “If we do stories that say (schools in higher poverty areas) get the most GT (gifted and talented) resources per student, that pisses off the suburban population . . . CMS gets a raw deal sometimes there.” A journalist added, “CMS has its problems like every district. But having lived in cities where they really have bad districts, the public here doesn’t appreciate the good here.”

A number of school district employees interviewed, and news media as well, pointed to an issue in CMS that is common around the country – school districts tend to fail to give the public or staff information about sudden changes in school leadership, often calling such issues a “personnel matter” and refusing to discuss it. When high-profile leaders of schools are suddenly removed from their posts, a school district can cause anger among the public and confusion among employees by making the decision and refusing to give the public or staff information about that decision.

One journalist talked about the removal of a popular school principal: “He’s there for Christmas, then he’s gone. People say he retired, but people don’t believe he just retired without saying goodbye. So now parents say ‘what can we trust?’” Another journalist said the district’s only response to requests for information in such cases typically is “it’s a personnel issue, and we will not comment.”

Community members pointed to delays in responses to questions from the community. “They have got to streamline the process for answering constituent questions in a timely fashion,” one community member said. Another community member called it “a culture of the downtown Ed center. You get lost in this abyss of the Ed center . . . It’s not a business culture,” the community member said, but it should be. The district should acknowledge “we have customers who are students and parents, and we don’t treat them (poorly).”

A journalist added that Spanish-speaking families who receive letters from the school district in English tend to distrust the district. “For these people to receive a communication in English with a decision about their children, sometimes they don’t understand,” the journalist said.

Ultimately, the school district must work with residents to develop real community ownership of public education in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, a school board member said. “The school system has to foster a series of discussions in the community. The community has to own its school system. That’s where the trust has broken down . . . The issue of trust is an outgrowth of the lack of ownership. We have to foster a series of conversations – not the community talking to the school board, the community talking to itself,” the board member said.

- **CMS has no specific protocols for internal communications, and employees sometimes are left in the dark on significant issues.**

Any successful school district communications effort must start with effective internal communications. Employees cannot help inform, cannot embrace, and cannot become advocates for important school district decisions if they don't know about those decisions. CMS has about 18,000 employees – an enormous potential base for communicating with and engaging the community on vitally important issues. Yet despite CMS's long-stated concern for the importance of good internal communication, the district has no internal communications plan, no set of internal communications protocols that describe how key decisions and deliberations are communicated throughout the organization to every employee and how employees can provide feedback on those decisions and deliberations.

The lack of an internal communications plan or set of protocols leaves individual district leaders – executives, department heads, and school principals – to decide how, when, or even whether to communicate critically important information to the employees who are charged with carrying out those key decisions. “(Internal communication) protocols do not exist as far as I know,” one executive said. “A number of times major decisions (have been) made and . . . communications have been spotty at best at the discretion of the manager who either embraces the idea or not.” Another district executive agreed: “There is not a consistent system being implemented on how that happens. (At executive staff meetings, the executive director of communications) will talk about how to communicate on some things, but the past year (there has been) inconsistent communication from her office and from Human Resources that says ‘disregard (a previous communication)’ and then ‘disregard again.’” The executive said district officials are sometimes asked by the communications department leader at the last minute to lead community meetings even when such meetings have been on the calendar for some time. A school principal said, “some decisions (are) made so quickly, we get (information about the rationale) after the fact.” Another district executive noted, “people find out a lot of information in a lot of different ways,” including meetings, webinars, and Direct Line. “But there is a lot of information people find out informally, just by word of mouth, talking to other people, hearing from people who attended a meeting . . . The one thing that does seem to be missing is how you find out about what's going on across departments. (Information is) not sometimes shared between departments,” the executive said.

The evidence of a scattershot approach to internal communication at CMS is everywhere. “Internally there is a disconnect. Some employees get it, and some employees don't . . . Some departments do a very good job, making sure everyone is informed, some do not,” a district executive said. “It's all about who you know when it's about how much information you get.”

One principal pointed to the district's handling of the controversial market-rate adjustment salary increases as an example of failed internal communications. “We got a



talking points sheet (to use) to call each of our staff members who were on the list to get market-value increases and tell them about their raise and congratulate them,” the principal said. “I was delighted to do that. But something of that importance should have been presented in some type of meeting with questions and answers. Talking points (are) not sufficient in that kind of task.”

Some CMS school principals said there could be a deliberate effort by CMS leadership not to share information with them as decisions are being made. “It’s almost like they (CMS leaders and the communications department leadership) don’t trust us with the information. We get it through an email (and the message is) ‘here are your talking points,’” a principal said. “I don’t think it’s (the) communications department,” another principal said. “I don’t think they are given the leeway (to communicate information to principals earlier). They are very helpful and very good at what they do.” Another principal questioned whether decisions are actually made at 4 o’clock, with no time for advance warning for principals, or whether the CMS leadership “made a concerted effort they are not going to share it.” Another said district leaders will make a “conscious decision” to share important information they have “next Thursday at 4 o’clock.”

Principals said they are especially concerned about the sudden departure of colleagues with no information provided to principals and other employees and no public effort to honor the service of those employees. A principal said: “There seems to be an overriding sense about the culture in the system that has changed in the last several years. There are (principals and other staff) who served (for many years) in this system who disappeared. They were (said to be) retiring or they transferred. It used to be that we celebrated them (with special honors when they left the district). Now, left and right, you call a department or a school and people have just disappeared. At our level that’s created a sense of distrust that trickles up and trickles down.” Another principal added, “It also sends a message that people are widgets instead of celebrating the contributions someone has made to the district.” “It’s part of the lack of transparency,” another principal said.

About a third of CMS principals are “unconsciously unconscious about what all is going on here, and when we go to a general principal’s meeting, you can look at the crowd and wonder ‘what happened to so and so?’ People have been disappearing into the black hole with no explanation. Sometimes new principals are introduced to us, sometimes not. Some of the young ones coming in don’t know what they don’t know,” a principal said.

A long-time district supporter who is very familiar with CMS communications said internal communications have lapsed in recent years, and the big turnover in principals coupled with the lack of internal communication has been damaging. The “constant churn in principals really hurt,” the district supporter said. Employee morale is “in the toilet among leadership and teachers and other folks.” The new superintendent has a “huge internal” communications and morale issue to confront, the district supporter said, adding, the “internal communications piece got away from them and backfired on (a previous administration.)” A member of the communications staff acknowledged that employees sometimes receive a school district news release, bound for the news media,



as their primary piece of information, saying, “Our way of communicating (information) internally is a news release.”

Employees and even school board members said they sometimes learn about important developments from the news media. “It would be really helpful to provide us with talking points . . . so we are all singing from the same page of the hymnal,” a board member said of the issue of consistent messaging with the news media. “I feel like there is not a lot of coordination (on the messages.) . . . We have some growing to do.” The board member said: “I don’t feel like I know enough about what’s going on in the system. . . . I don’t feel we (board members) are enough in the loop about what the staff is thinking about, deciding about,” and that board members often don’t know about an issue “unless a constituent is bringing it to us.” Another board member agreed: “My colleagues would say they are often surprised by things in the media as opposed to learning it from the district, and that has been indeed been the case. Some of that I put at the feet of (the) communications (department), some of it I put at the feet of the particular executive who was responsible. . . . We’re too protective in how we put things out. We’ll wait until 6:30 when our board meeting starts to put it out, as opposed to putting it out the day before or that morning. I think sometimes we’re too protective of news, particularly if we think it’s something internally people will have a negative reaction to.” But one teacher noted, “The district has done a better job getting information out before it comes to the media. I feel like they’ve tried to be straightforward with us first. They want us to know before the media gets a hold of it.”

The problems in internal communications protocols also affect the quality of the district’s external communications. District officials said the communications department has sometimes released to the media incorrect information based on the failure to accurately and adequately communicate across departments.

With some major initiatives, the district appeared to plan for communicating with the public before communicating with employees. A district executive pointed to the “talent effectiveness project” as an example. The communications department leadership began working on a communications plan to inform the public about the talent effectiveness project, the executive said. “Our staff (didn’t) even know what the talent effectiveness project (was). (The) executive staff couldn’t define it. How do we expect anyone to implement it?”

The communications office produces a well-regarded internal news publication called Direct Line. Teachers interviewed especially liked the Direct Line as an information source. “When important things are happening, we get access to Direct Line where we can go and look,” a board member said. But a district executive said Direct Line is not always useful for information about important decisions. “Direct Line is a more general information communications link, not something that is for managers to go to, or certain levels of employees to go to, to find out about key decisions.”

An effective way for a school district communications office to keep school board members, executives, staff members, and even community members informed about developments in the news that affect the school district is to share electronic news clips, including links to local television news stories. But district officials and others interviewed said they do not regularly receive information about district news that airs on local television. “We don’t get it pretty regularly,” a school board member said. However, the board member said district officials are good at communicating with board members about incidents on campuses: “We get that immediately.”

School principals expressed a concern that is common in school districts across America – they are bombarded by emails from various district departments directing them to take a variety of actions, sometimes in conflict with each other. The principals said CMS leadership needs to re-establish controls over when, how, and by whom principals are directed to take on tasks.

“There are too many emails coming from the same people saying ‘do this, do that, ignore this email.’ You’ll get 20 emails about environmental stewardship and then 20 emails from HR that ‘this is going on, forgot to send (an item) this year, we’re going to change what we sent.’” one principal said. Every principal interviewed reported being deluged with emailed directives. “Who’s our boss?” one principal asked. “Each department gives us deadlines and due dates.” Another principal said the message is clear: “‘This is due now. If you don’t do it, heads will roll.’” The crush of emailed communications and directives leaves principals confused. “It’s very hard to keep up with what’s due. I’ll call a group of principals and say, ‘what’s due today? Are we supposed to be somewhere?’” Another principal noted, “we’ll get meeting (notices that say) ‘we’re going to meet here; no, here; no, an hour earlier.’”

CMS is supposed to have procedures requiring that departments seeking to communicate with principals “go through the equivalent of an assistant superintendent to be approved, but that doesn’t happen,” a principal said. “There has to be a better way. If you don’t respond to the environmental stewardship people. Really?” a principal said.

Some principals also expressed a reticence to speak their minds at principals meetings.

Surveys are a powerful way for school districts to engage with employees and the community. CMS teachers reported they are regularly surveyed, but some teachers raised a concern that is common among teachers around the country – they are afraid to complete and return the surveys because their comments could be traced to them, and they could face retaliation.

One group of teachers interviewed agreed that teachers routinely do not respond to the surveys. “A lot of it has to do with how does the administration make you feel. ‘Be lucky that you have a job.’ I won’t be honest on a survey because I need to keep my job,” a teacher said. Another teacher agreed: “This is large district. There are a lot of people who want these jobs.” Asked how, then, the district can hope to get important feedback

with teacher surveys, one teacher in that group said, “it’s going to be very difficult. Some people will be more forthcoming with information than others.” Another teacher said, “some people have been here (for) 30 years. It’s going to come down to the new administration being more transparent with teachers. It will take him time to build that out.”

But interviewed separately, another group of teachers was more positive about surveys. “Yes, I do, always (respond to surveys),” a teacher said, “I take advantage of those kinds of things. That’s the only way my voice will be heard.” Another teacher reported filling out the surveys “religiously.” But another teacher in the group said there was a “backlash” against teachers at one school from the survey results. “It depends a lot on the school. But there is that ‘big brother is watching’ mentality across the district with different teachers,” that teacher said.

- **CMS’ once robust communications department has been stripped of much of its staffing, experience, and resources; the department that remains is not optimally organized.**

Many school districts have reduced the resources available for communications in recent years. Once numbering 27, the communications department staff at CMS has been reduced to nine professional employees.

But the communications issues at CMS are not only affected by staffing numbers. The department is not optimally organized for peak performance. The department’s most experienced writer, for example, is not routinely used as a resource for training writers who have been hired with less-than-optimal levels of experience. And the executive director of communications spends 40 percent of her time responding to requests for information filed under “freedom of information” or open records laws. Many of these requests are filed by community members and involve requests for copies of routine district documents.

According to statistics from a 2011 survey by the Council of the Great City Schools, CMS was among the 75 percent of big-city school districts responding to the survey that had between five and 20 people in public relations. CMS had 12 communications staff, according to the council survey. Among the 12 largest districts, two districts, Memphis and San Diego, were smaller than CMS but had larger communications staffs. CMS, in the council report, had one communications staff member for every 11,500 students. Six of the 12 school districts with more than 100,000 students had more communications staff members per student than CMS.

In addition to LaTazja Henry as executive director, the CMS communications department includes:

- Tahira Stalberte, director of communications and second in command of the department

- Kasia Thompson, media relations specialist
- Stacy Sneed, media relations specialist
- Dail Willis, senior writer, editor
- Donald Tate, multimedia specialist
- Judith Malveaux, multimedia specialist
- Phyllis Croutch, partnership coordinator
- Ana Brown, bilingual specialist

Stalberte manages media relations while Henry works with the superintendent and executive staff on big-picture issues and deals with major media calls, staff members said. Stalberte also manages the work of the media relations specialists Thompson and Sneed, who produce news announcements, are expected to produce three feature stories a week, and work on social media and special projects. Willis, a former journalist and the most experienced writer on staff, is generally assigned to write the major news announcements, while Thompson and Sneed write other news announcements.

One long-time CMS supporter who is very familiar with the communications department said the cuts have hurt, but existing resources could be better organized. The district has “cut the communications staff down to the nubs. That didn’t help at all,” the long-time supporter said. The previous administrations had “more resources” in communications than the current one does, so comparisons between the performance of the communications team then and now are not “apples to apples.” But the CMS supporter said the current communications leadership at CMS “still has to know more how to use resources. The board made bad moves and put pressure on (former superintendent Pete Gorman) to cut that staff, and it bit them in the butt.”

School principals generally praised the work of the communications department, especially its responsiveness to their communications needs. “They make a concerted effort to get positive things out there,” a principal said. “They are very helpful whenever we call.” A district executive added that the lack of resources affects the communications department “on the reactive side and on the proactive side.” Another principal said, like other CMS offices, the communications department “has been cut so much, it is so thin right now. I don’t think they are doing everything they can, but I don’t think they have the manpower.”

Leaders of several community partnership organizations were well aware of the budget difficulties in the communications department. “I don’t know how they are doing it,” one community partner said. “Staffing needs to be addressed.” Community partners expressed concern that positions supporting strategic partnerships and volunteers for schools had been eliminated.

In addition to touting the positive qualities of the executive director of communications, various district officials singled out Stalberte and Thompson for praise as staff members with great potential. One executive reported being “very impressed” with Stalberte. A principal said of Thompson, “Kasia is great.” Willis drew praise for her good writing and

was said by some to be underutilized by the communications department leadership. Malveaux drew praise for her work and was called by one executive “talented and underutilized.”

But overall, the department suffers from “a culture of complacency,” said a district executive, who added that organizational changes are necessary in the department. “They should make it clear who is in charge of what . . . Just organize the department.” The executive pointed to the communications leadership’s failure to develop a schedule for on-call staffing for early in the morning and on evenings and weekends. “Our high schools open at 6:30. If you don’t have a plan to have an early bird in the office to cover the shop,” communications needs go unmet, the executive said. “We’re operating without the advisement of our communications team.”

The current organization of the department and the inconsistency of internal communication within the communications department leaves some staff members not learning about developing issues. “I’ve gone from knowing every detail of what was going on to now saying, ‘I just don’t know that answer’ . . . If something big is brewing, I’ll sometimes find out about it in the paper,” a communications department staff member said. Another department staff member said less experienced writers in the department need regular training but don’t get it.

When the department was larger, there was an emphasis on employee and community events, internal communication, more work around community partnerships, and community outreach, staff members said. Former superintendent Gorman arrived to lead the district with a lot of energy and began having media briefings every week. “That was an exciting time” for district communications, one communications staff member said. When the recession hit, budget cuts were made and the communications effort shifted to an emphasis on internal communications, particularly to making sure employees received information from district leaders before they learned about it in the news media, the staff member said.

Under the previous organization of the department, there were three media relations specialists whose primary role was to “get the good news out,” with one of the three also assigned to receive and react to media requests for information. “Now we have two media relations folks. You can’t keep up. When something big like (school) closures happens, we’ve got to be on that,” a communications staff member said.

The communications department previously included an executive director of strategic partnerships and volunteers, but that position was eliminated when Stalberte’s position was created. A relations and outreach division of the department was eliminated and replaced by a single person as partnership coordinator.

One communications department staff member said the district desperately needs to ramp back up its grassroots community outreach. “We do well with getting information out there . . . We need those people to help inform us on how (to) change our messages (as

needed).” The staff member said the department needs at least 10 new positions, including community engagement and multimedia staff as well as staff embedded in the human resources, transportation and curriculum and instruction departments.

- **While the communications staff generates a large number of news and public announcements, the department develops too few timely news announcements about issues of district-wide importance and does too little to promote the work of the school board in setting the strategic policy direction of the district.**

Announcements about school events and student and team awards are plentiful on the district’s website and are well received. The department pointed to impressive statistics from the 2011-12 school year, including 19 television news stories and 61 print and online stories about CMS graduating seniors, and 357 stories on television and in newspapers about CMS staff, which included coverage of the superintendent search. The department has reason to be proud of the volume of its information output to the media, especially the stories about individual students and school-by-school honors and events.

But the department does not produce enough news releases and announcements, written in news-story style designed to inform and encourage news coverage, about significant, district-wide issues.

Board members and others reported the communications department does almost nothing to promote the work of the school board other than make copies of the school board meeting agenda available for the media and the public. No effort is made to develop and release full news stories to inform and encourage media coverage of the board meetings and public understanding of the meeting agenda items, in advance of, or after, board meetings.

It is vitally important that news releases and announcements be designed to inform and encourage news coverage by television and radio stations, newspapers and electronic sources. These announcements should be written in sharp, news-story style, providing easy-to-understand information that very busy members of the media can quickly use for news stories. For all its excellent work in promoting school and student feature stories, the CMS communications staff does not produce enough ready-to-use news stories on major district-wide issues.

For example, here is the news release, as posted on the CMS website, about the controversial market-rate adjustment decision:



## Market-rate adjustments, raise to take effect in CMS

7/25/2012

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools confirmed a three percent raise for all employees July 25. The district also said that some employees would receive salary adjustments to more closely align their salaries with market rates.

The market-rate adjustments completed an initiative that began in 2007 to bring employee salaries up to market rates. Similar studies and adjustments have been completed by the city of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County in recent years. CMS paused the multi-year plan for adjustments in 2008, when the national and regional economies began to falter and funding declined sharply.

The adjustment calculations were based on a Deloitte study done in 2007 and were included in the 2012-2013 proposed budget first presented to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education Jan. 10. District officials and the Board of Education said that the purpose of the adjustments was to keep CMS competitive and allow it to attract the strongest candidates.

The announcement followed unanimous approval of the 2012-2013 operating budget by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education at its July 24 meeting. An email announcing the salary increase and other changes was sent to all employees. The district also provided a full list of employees who received the market-rate adjustments and some frequently asked questions.

The news release fails to make clear what a market-rate adjustment is. Paragraph two is a circular reference, essentially saying the “market-rate adjustments” are to raise salaries “up to market rates.” The description fails to provide news reporters with a clear definition of the changes. The news release contains no quotes from district officials, explaining the decision. Following the news announcement, district officials, as noted in this report, complained about the news media’s failure to portray the market-rate adjustment in a more positive light. But journalists said they often have trouble getting clear information on big stories like this one. “I ask basic questions and get acronyms thrown at me. I’m not getting an answer,” one journalist said. “I had trouble understanding (some detail of the market-rate adjustment plan). Eventually you throw your hands up.”

A number of those interviewed, especially community members, said they knew little or nothing about a new district initiative called Project L.I.F.T. Several interviewed said they had heard CMS officials speak frequently about the initiative but did not understand what the initiative was.

This news release announces community involvement in Project L.I.F.T but never explains to the news media and the public what exactly the initiative is.

**MEDIA RELEASE**

For Immediate Release: May 8, 2012

**Project L.I.F.T.'s partners**

CHARLOTTE, N.C., May 8, 2012 —At the May 8 meeting of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education, the Project Leadership and Investment for Transformation team presented its list of community and business partners supporting initiatives to improve student achievement. The network of partners will contribute resources for talent recruitment and retention, after-school, mentoring and summer programs, technology and parental involvement.

"I believe we have the right model in place to be successful," said Denise Watts, zone superintendent and executive director of Project L.I.F.T. "Each of these organizations brings resources to our students that will help them at school and at home. It will be the synergy of all partners, the schools, and the community working together to ensure our students achieve at high levels."

The partners were strategically chosen. While some organizations were chosen based on national research and previous results, other interested organizations had the opportunity to submit an application and followed a request-for-proposal process. There were 53 applications in all. An advisory committee made up of principals, teachers, parents, community members and staff reviewed each application to determine how the organization's resources would align with Project L.I.F.T.'s strategic goals. A host of other partners that will not receive grant funding have also pledged their support.

The partnerships will provide quarterly reports and will be evaluated annually. Some of the evaluation measures include student behavior, student attendance, graduation rate, formative-assessment data and level of parent engagement.

Click [here](#) to view the full Project L.I.F.T. presentation.

This is another example of an important district announcement not being made in news-story style designed to inform and encourage media coverage and public understanding. The news release begins chronologically, which is not accepted news style, with "At the May 8 meeting . . ." The news release contains a quote from a district official but no comments from any of the community and business partners it says have lined up to support the effort. The news release says these important community partners were "strategically chosen," but the release doesn't name a single organization selected for this partnership. More importantly, the news release never takes the fundamental step of explaining what Project L.I.F.T is, who it affects, and why it is important to CMS and the community. This news release fails to provide useful information to encourage and inform news media coverage or public understanding of this important initiative.

School district communicators must work hard to avoid using "education speak" terms without explanation of their meaning when attempting to communicate with the public and the news media. For the media and the public to fully understand information about district initiatives, the communications staff must root out from their public announcements or else thoroughly explain, terms that are not generally heard by the public but are common in conversations among educators.

For example, any news announcement about STEM should explain that STEM means science, technology, engineering, and math and that such programs are designed to improve education in those subject areas as America seeks to overcome shortages of workers in those disciplines. The news release here is too filled with education language and does not adequately explain this issue in a way to best interest news media and the public.

## Fishing for ideas

6/28/2012 Teachers participate in STEM Institute



A group of teachers reached in a bowl filled with live gold fish to become better educators. The group voluntarily gave up part of their summer vacation to take part in the STEM Institute, a free course to learn more about teaching Common Core math and science Essential Standards.

The Institutes took place June 26-27 at Morehead STEM Academy and Nathaniel Alexander Elementary for elementary teachers and South Meck High for secondary teachers. Each grade-specific course was taught by a CMS teacher leader who brought ideas and resource kits for multiple lessons that can be taught throughout the school year.

At the session on Essential Standards, teachers learned how to incorporate Discovery Education tools in the classroom. Walking down the hall, visitors could hear Kindergarten teachers putting the water cycle to nursery rhymes. The first-grade teachers were reading "Rainbow Fish" and filling tanks with plants and fish to study eco systems. At the session on Common Core, Kindergarten teachers were in a circle playing games to teach students how to think algebraically.

Robin Hankins teaches first-grade at Torrence Creek. She was inspired by the session and looks forward to doing the same exercises with teachers at her school.

"I learned as much from the other teachers as I did in the activities," Hankins said. "We need to continue to create and take advantage of opportunities for teachers to share information and collaborate."

A second STEM Institute is scheduled for August.



STEM and Common Core are important issues for school districts and are subjects of significant interest to media across the country. But the news release is filled with too much "education speak" language and is not written in a way to grab the news media and the public's attention with sharp details about the initiative. The news announcement, as posted on the district website, does not explain STEM or Common Core so that the public and the media can understand their significance.

The news announcement below contains no information about why a seemingly important change is being made:



## Student placement office relocates to Smith Family Center

7/23/2012

The Student Placement office will relocate to the Smith Family Center, 1600 Tyvola Road (formerly Smith Language Academy). The office will close on Wednesday, July 25, at noon and reopen on Wednesday, Aug. 1, at the new location.

Beginning June 14, several CMS departments located at the Family Application Center moved to the Smith Family Center.

Pre-Kindergarten programs, English as a Second Language and the magnet schools office are now located at the Smith Family Center. The phone/fax numbers have not changed.

Contact information for the Smith Family Center is listed below.

- Student Placement Office (980-343-5335)
- Magnet Programs (980-343-5030)
- English as a Second Language/International Center (980-343-0432)
- Pre-K Programs: (980-343-5950 or Spanish line at 980-343-5138)

Many people interviewed for this report complained that CMS is not transparent in its communications about decisions, that it doesn't provide the public with enough information on why decisions are made and what the processes were for making them. The news announcement above is about a decision that will impact parents and students, but it fails to provide the public with adequate information. The news release does not state why the decision was made to move the Student Placement Office, pre-kindergarten programs, ESL programs, and the magnet schools office.

News-story style, ready-to-use news announcements are especially critically important on announcements of significant district-wide activities. As CMS embarked on its search for a new superintendent, the communications department issued this news release after a school board meeting:

### **Board of Education sets community engagement plan for superintendent search**

CHARLOTTE, N.C., Oct. 11, 2011 – At its Oct. 11 meeting, the Board of Education voted to approve the community engagement plan for the superintendent search process. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has partnered with University of North Carolina at Charlotte's Urban Institute to collect information from the public on desired qualities for the next leader of CMS.

Phase one of the multi-phase plan will begin with online and phone surveys for CMS employees, parents, students and community members. Participants will be randomly selected from a database. The Board of Education and the Institute will work closely to design the survey questionnaire. The group will develop one core survey; however, the community online survey will include a question asking respondents if they work in CMS or have a child enrolled in the district. The phone survey will be administered in English and Spanish.

Information about the survey will be distributed at schools and community sites, including the public library. Staff will also use social media and community organizations to inform parents and community members about the survey and encourage them to participate, if they are selected. Survey participants and responses will remain confidential.

Links to the survey will be posted on the CMS and Urban Institute's web sites.

After the community engagement project is complete, The Institute will compile data tables that will summarize survey results into one report that will be presented to the Board of Education.

The anticipated budget for the survey project is \$43,645. The Board of Education expects to complete the Superintendent search by mid-March.

The news release is not written in news-story style designed to make it easy for Charlotte media to quickly and easily use it to inform their news stories. Again, no news release should ever begin chronologically, as this one does when it simply announces “At its Oct. 11 meeting, the Board of Education . . .” News announcements should read and feel like news stories if the district wants to use them to inform and encourage news coverage. No Charlotte television news report, for example, would begin with “At its Oct. 11 meeting, the Board of Education . . .” The news release contains no quotes from any district leader explaining why these decisions were made.

To be sure, the district does produce some solid news announcements that do a good job of informing and encouraging news media coverage, such as this excellent news release about a graduate:

#### 2012 Graduates: Mallard Creek graduate is focused on flying

6/13/2012



current lifestyle.

Mallard Creek High graduate Brianna Pauser figured out what she wanted to do after high school in just a short time during her junior year. Her goal was to be accepted in the U.S. Air Force Academy. She researched information about the academy, applied, took the medical exam and completed the pre-candidate questionnaire, then waited patiently for a response.

Brianna earned a full, four-year scholarship worth \$414,000 to the academy, located in Colorado Springs.

Brianna's classmates and teachers found it odd that she was entering the academy, because she didn't participate in JROTC or other military activities in high school. Brianna earned accolades as a star on the track and soccer fields. She has been on the varsity soccer team for four years.

Brianna admits that she loves athletics and being challenged physically and mentally is what piqued her interest in the Air Force Academy. She eagerly awaits the discipline routines and physical activities she will face in basic training. She also knows that she will have to adapt to new rules that don't apply at home or in her

Reporters praised some of the news announcements from CMS. “I give them high marks on quality releases,” a journalist said. Another noted, “I think they do a very good job. They are, for the most part, thorough. I’ve been a reporter for (many years) and I have to struggle to figure out a way to say it better than they’ve said it.”

Journalists said the news releases could help generate more media coverage if they included photos of people featured in the releases. “Even when they send out news sometimes, there’s no photo accompanying it,” a reporter said, referring to announcements of appointments such as new principals. “No business would ever send out an announcement like that,” said the journalist. Another reporter added, “we’d run more (stories) like that, but if we don’t have a photo we’re not going to make (a trip out to the school). If they send a photo – we need stories – we would” report the stories, the journalist said.

An important news opportunity for any school district is the school board meeting. But CMS does almost nothing to promote, in advance of school board meetings, news

coverage and public understanding of important individual items of business in the school board agenda. CMS releases the school board agenda to the public and the media in advance of board meetings but makes no effort to generate news announcements about very important individual agenda items up for consideration. That leaves the news media and the public to go through the school board agenda and to try to learn about the important agenda items on their own, without additional information proffered by the district.

“I don’t think we get out in front of much of anything,” a school board member said. “I think that’s the mindset. I’m not sure the staff in communications understands the importance of it.” With the district not making news announcements about upcoming board meeting agenda items, and instead simply releasing the agenda, “as board members we start getting calls” from the public seeking information about individual agenda items, the board member said. “We often find out about things in the paper. That happens a lot.” One board member said the communications department has shied away from promoting the work of the school board. “Our communications department has tried in the past to guard against what the board might do – yelling against each other (at board meetings),” the board member said. The communications department’s attitude was “why highlight that?”

Communications department members said it can be very difficult to get information from some CMS departments as they work to inform the media and the public about important developments. But an executive who heads one department that was singled out by the communications staff for not providing timely information said the complaint is “new feedback for me. We’ve been Johnny on the spot. There’s not a single situation when a request comes through (from) the communications team that we’re not as fast as we can be.” The executive, instead, said the communications department does not proactively seek out information about important issues. The executive reported not having “a single proactive conversation from (the communications department), period. I’d go hire my own . . . marketing person if this were to continue.” The executive said, “as a practice, the communications team does not set out to say ‘what’s coming up?’” as a way of planning communications around future developments.

One district executive said CMS does not do a good enough job telling its story locally. “We do a better job of sending positive messages outside of Charlotte than we do inside of Charlotte. Externally (outside of Charlotte) we almost by default may be doing a better job communicating the great things going on, the innovations in play to try to change the game; but we’re not telling that story locally. We’re not telling that story to the media and the media is framing the perception of (CMS),” the district executive said.

Some said the failure to adequately communicate about major issues in Charlotte is not the fault of the communications department. “I think they do a good job with the resources they have,” another district executive said of the communications office. “I think they have an impossible task . . . A lot of times we have a lot of good news, but we step on ourselves . . . Even when they push (information) out in the communications



department, if you have the whole district talking about 12 other things,” good communication is inhibited. The district needs to be “squarely on the offensive, (and) make sure we have a coordinated message from the top,” the district executive said.

The communications department draws praise for its production of a regular “tip sheet” for information on news media stories. “Our goal is to generate story ideas that will get” coverage, a communications department staff member said.

But the communications department’s overall approach is too “unsophisticated,” one school principal said. “We’ve had a more sophisticated approach in the past . . . We’re at the mercy of the media because we don’t have that sophistication.” Another school principal added, “a more proactive approach (is needed) than reactive.”

While the department’s handling of the pay-raise issue drew criticism, it also drew applause, at least for its work before the market-rate adjustment issue arose. “There was an amazing video put together to help the public to understand why it was important that teachers got raises. It really connected with teachers,” a district executive said. “They are on the reactive (side) a lot but it almost feels like it’s because of things that happen that are out of their control.”

Community members want the district to get better at proactively communicating messages. “CMS is more reactive. We’re knee jerk,” a community member said. The messages need to be sharper and more specific, another community member said. “What bothers me is the message is very generic. ‘Every child a learner.’ What does that mean?”

The message development and communications are hampered by CMS not having “an agreed-upon definition of success as a community,” a board member said. The board members said some in the community define success in the school district as “giving the taxpayers a break.” Others say the purpose of the school system is to “overcome 400 years of racial inequality and inequity.” Still others, including the board member, define the school district’s purpose as to “educate kids.” We have a real hard time as a community in coming to agreement on what that definition (of success) is.”

The same board member said while the community has not come to agreement on the purpose of the school district or a definition of success, “we don’t do a very good job of getting our success stories out.”

One district executive added CMS has not “done a good job developing the relationship with the newspaper and TV and getting positive things out in advance. I think we’re pretty much reactive instead of being proactive.” A school principal underscored that thought with “maybe our communications office is more reactive and could be more proactive and initiate stories.” A school teacher noted there “has been more misinformation from the district for the last three years, whether it is accidental or incompetence. The district has not done a good job putting out information that is clear, easily understandable, and accurate.”

- **The district does not make strategic use of community organizations to help communicate with the public about the work of CMS.**

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg community has a number of active, influential nonprofit and business-sector organizations that could and should help the school district provide information to the public and facilitate two-way dialogue. Leaders of some of those organizations interviewed reported they have sought to engage the district's communications department to assist in communicating with the public, but those offers of help, they said, generally have not produced interest or action.

Communications department officials pointed to the reduction in staff assigned for such work as developing and continuing community partnerships. But leaders of some community organizations that badly want to help the district said it is difficult to get a response from the district.

“With the number of schools and the energy in this community of those who want to get involved, there either has to be some additional support within the district for the opportunity for community collaboration,” a community partner said. “There are a lot of people who want to volunteer, but people say, ‘I tried to volunteer and nobody at school responded, or the district.’ I didn’t know what to do when I got in the building. I just didn’t volunteer anymore.”

“There have been times when we’ve said (to the CMS communications department leadership) ‘how can we help? If we could have a set of talking points, if you want to send us key facts when you know an issue is coming down the pike, give (us) the heads up, get people and be ambassadors for you.’ I think that hasn’t been tapped into. There are so many potential ambassadors for the district that are not being tapped into,” the community partner said.

Another leader of a community partnership organization agreed. “The district communications department does not reach out to us for help. I’ve begged for that. I’ve had (leaders of our organization) tell us ‘if we’ll just have talking points’ . . . I have (key community leaders) willing to tell everybody every positive story.” That community leader suspects the problem is a lack of resources in the communications department. But the community leader reported speaking with the communications department leadership several times about providing such help in communicating with community leaders but is still not receiving needed information. “It goes back to being reactive rather than proactive. I do think there is a lack of visioning and coming up with a strategy for what communications ought to look like,” the community partner said.

One community partner said the lack of outreach from the district to willing community partners could be “a function of the structure of the department . . . There are lots of people who are well-meaning who want to do lots of things. Maybe the district really needs to communicate better what the district needs and how people can help,” a

community partner said. Another immediately agreed: “(The district) is more in (a) reactive mode than (on the) strategic offensive . . . I’m guessing they are undermanned, dealing with reactive issues and it’s hard to get ahead of it . . . It’s a good school system that has a perception problem.”

The communications department captures reports on news media stories about the district, including television stories, but communications department officials and community organizations confirmed the district does not share those clips with the community organizations as a way of keeping those leaders informed and involved.

School leaders said they definitely want the partnerships. “I really appreciate the MeckED partnership,” a school principal said of one organization. “(The school) really felt valued. That’s a model of what we’d like to see more of.”

- **The district’s local cable-access television channel uses outdated programming because the district eliminated the communications department’s television production budget, but the department has not sought to restart the cable channel programming, using existing employees who are trained and ready to produce television programming.**

Interviews indicated school board members sought to eliminate the funding for the district television channel to save money and avoid duplication of services with other local governments. But when the district eliminated the funding, and therefore new programming, for the TV channel, it also eliminated an easy-to-access source of public information.

Two members of the current communications department team – including the former manager of the district TV operation who was laid off but then was rehired by the current communications department leadership for another role at the department - have the necessary training to produce television programming. But the executive director of communications has not asked that the district TV channel be re-launched with new programming because of the perceived school board opposition to any district-run television effort.

A number of people interviewed for this report said eliminating the CMS TV channel was a strategic mistake by the school board.

Of the decision to eliminate funding for the TV channel, a board member explained “there were those of us who felt it wasn’t a priority,” saying that other local governments already had cable TV programming and that taxpayers were being asked to fund them all. The board member was “not opposed” to restarting the CMS channel but “would have to see the benefit in the budget and see if there is overlap” with the other cable channels in the community already funded by the taxpayers.

Another board member pointed out the channel still operates with mostly old programming, except for live coverage of school board meetings. “We saved \$350,000 in the TV (budget), but I don’t think we could afford to do that,” the board member said of the communications consequences of gutting the TV channel budget.

One district executive called it “a poor decision on the part of the board. I think we should put that (channel) back up . . . We’re sitting in the prime location on the dial. Everybody has to go by our channel, and we’re really missing a huge opportunity,” said the district executive, who also noted the TV channel has instructional value for students. Another district executive agreed, saying CMS TV “used to be a venue. We could tell positive stories, but that went away. It’s a great tool that we’re not leveraging.”

Some parents also miss the CMS TV channel. “Local media would pick up on TV 3 filming. Local media actually showed it,” a parent said. Another parent said, “the TV station was good information for parents,” and another added, “yes, it was awesome. That’s a missing component right now.”

Communications department officials said the two multimedia specialists on staff now can produce video for television and for the web. The issue of restarting the TV channel is “a conversation for (the new superintendent),” the communications department official said.

### **CMS employee morale is low.**

The morale of district employees was generally described as low by many of those interviewed for this report. Similar communications reviews in other school districts have shown that low morale among school district employees can be affected by poor internal communications and the steady drumbeat of negative media coverage that can occur when a school district does not effectively communicate proactively with the media and the public about its work. Low morale can also inhibit a district’s ability to communicate effectively internally and externally.

The morale problem has eased somewhat with the new superintendent’s statements about not making staffing cuts this year, a board member said, coupled with the recent pay raise. “I think people are breathing a little easier, but here we come with those market adjustments that nobody could explain,” the board member said. “So we’ve taken a step backwards.”

The town hall meetings held by the new superintendent with employees have helped, a school board member said. “We had teachers who said it was really good to get a lot of things off their chest because for the last three or four years people haven’t been able to do that. Honesty can get you on a list to be out the door. People have been hesitant about speaking out.”

Some CMS employees talked about how bad publicity negatively affects morale. “When there is a positive piece (in the media), you feel proud of your department,” a district executive said. But that turnaround must start with better internal communication, the executive advised. “Decisions could be made faster and more communication about them.”

Many believed the primary cause of low morale among employees was the budget situation that limited pay raises. But those interviewed frequently mentioned the district’s decision-making process and internal communication about those decisions as key factors in creating the morale problem.

One district executive described morale as being very low among auxiliary services employees because they have gone four years without a pay raise and have had to accept new requirements for clocking in for work with a fingerprint scanning system. “The perception is they are being held more accountable and at same time not getting the benefit of more money,” the executive said. The same CMS executive called morale among school teachers “horrible.” Among the overall causes of low morale, the executive said, is “poor communication by us on key initiatives,” specifically the pay-for-performance initiative.

“The last three or four years have been tough years. The budget has driven much of (the morale problem). No pay increase, the reduction in force,” a district executive said.

One district executive, while pointing to the budget cuts as a major factor, said morale is affected by media coverage. “It’s hard to come to work every day and you read everything in the paper about how terrible the employer is.”

School principals interviewed said a lack of trust, sudden removal of colleagues from jobs, and fear of losing their own jobs are key factors in low morale at CMS.

### **CMS principals’ comments on morale**

- It’s in the gutter, across the organization.”
- “What I’ve said to my staff is . . . let’s just focus on (our school) . . . The feedback (teachers) have given me is our morale is higher than the school system’s. I keep telling them not to think about other places (in the district), just to think about where we are if we want to be successful. We can’t raise the water level for the whole system. We’re very deliberate and direct about it because it’s so negative and defeating. Teachers will come back (from being with colleagues at other schools) and talk openly about things that are going on. It’s downright depressing.”
- “People disappear.”
- “(A) past administration had a very ugly streak to it. Decisions were made based on whether somebody liked somebody’s style . . . It has been proven time and again that they don’t like you if you are not deemed supportive even of unethical decisions. They get rid of you.”
- “The fear is you don’t know what it was that you could get gone for. You don’t know if you are doing a good job or not doing a good job.”
- “(Morale is) unrecognizable.”

- “We used to know each other. Principals would (socialize), so you had somebody to support you. You could call somebody because you felt like there was somebody you could talk to. We need that camaraderie among principals. I think that’s been missing for years.”
- “It would have been great if they could have found in the budget cuts (some form of) recognition at the end of the year for award-winning staff, retiring staff and teachers. Things as small as we used to come to the principal’s meeting early and get a bagel and juice and network and interact. Then we do dumbass things like the (market-rate salary adjustment) that came out. A secretary of mine got a 30-cent-an-hour raise, while (another employee got a \$17,000 raise). Where was the communication at the highest level?”
- “If Dr. Morrison really laid out the red carpet for just one principals meeting, some type of retreat where principals felt valued and honored and it was a privilege to be principals once again, it would be a huge thing for morale. All of us have been principals long enough so we know where we were and how far we’ve fallen.”
- “The reduction in force really hit people (teachers, staff at schools). That was probably the hardest thing for me. It impacted teacher morale and mine . . . There was a decision at the end of last year to change the criteria for the way teachers are renewed. Teachers had gone all year thinking this was the standard, then in April or May it came up that we were going to raise this bar; if they don’t have this we’re not going to be renewed. It impacted a lot of folks. The principals’ leadership team tried to tell HR you can’t change the rules at the end of the year, but it was decided to go ahead and raise the bar . . . Things like that shoot . . . the trust piece in the foot.”

A number of CMS officials and staff interviewed said morale also has been hurt because the district doesn’t do as much to celebrate employees as it did in the days when budgets were in better shape and the district devoted more resources to employee recognition programs. “Our school houses aren’t feeling recognized, rewarded. They feel like their work isn’t appreciated,” a district executive said. The same executive said the local media coverage that leads local residents to believe CMS schools are not as good as many around the country believe they are is also a factor. “Reading the paper, I thought we were an awful school district. You would (see) in other places outside the county how (people) would think CMS walks on water.”

Teachers interviewed in groups said the pay raise definitely will help morale and that going into a new school year, “this time of year we are very positive and optimistic,” one teacher said. “We’re getting a raise, which is positive,” another teacher added.

However, some teachers felt that their enthusiasm is usually short-lived. After Christmas, “morale really starts going down. The administration says ‘we’ve got to start getting ready for teaching,’ as though we haven’t taught this year,” a teacher said. “All the pressure starts building in January and February.”

### **CMS teacher comments on morale**

- “The district is trying to do better to elevate morale, but teachers as a whole are very disenfranchised and disillusioned.”
- “We don’t feel like we are treated as professionals. We’ve very micromanaged.”
- “We give a lot of our time that we’re not paid for. We feel that’s taken advantage of.”



- “When we have a colleague who does ridiculous stuff, (it hurts.) My kids found three of our staff members’ mug shots on (a law enforcement) website. Those people are making poor decisions, and that brings shame to my profession.”
- “It’s the lack of appreciation. It’s not the media doing that to us. The businesses in Mecklenburg County really try and give us the appreciation. My (students’) parents are all about trying to help. I do feel appreciated, but it doesn’t come from administration.”
- “There are people in my building (who) would do almost anything if they could wear jeans on Friday. To me, that’s such a small thing.”
- “Treat others the way you want to be treated. Then morale will go up.”
- “Morale went down the tubes (after a principal was replaced with a less experienced one.) We lost outstanding teachers we didn’t want to lose. Until they stop doing those kinds of things, you’re not going to see morale improve across the district.”
- “I don’t know how I’m going to send my son to college. I’m going to have to take a second job.”
- “So how will teachers feel appreciated in that case when they effectively make less than a person on welfare?”

One district executive said it’s not so much that morale is negative, but “I think people are tired. They need glimmers of hope. They need to feel appreciated and valued and respected. They need to trust. I think that skepticism is there.”

Some staff members also mentioned the absence of a permanent superintendent at CMS for more than a year as a factor.. “Part of it was having felt leaderless over the last year,” a district executive said.

Members of the communications staff at CMS see evidence every day of poor morale around the district. “It’s horrible,” one communications staff member said. “The people want information, want to feel like they have a voice. It’s a school-based problem,” another communications officer said. “We don’t have as much of a push around employee recognition because of staffing issues as we had in the past,” a communications official added.

- **The district’s social media presence does not resonate well enough with the public and employees, and CMS does not employ tools to comprehensively measure public usage of its website.**

CMS is active on such social media platforms as Facebook and Twitter, but that active presence in social media does not seem to grab the attention of employees or members of the community, according to many interviewed. Those interviewed generally said they are aware CMS has a social media presence but do not generally follow the district’s social media feeds.

The district does not employ tools to measure what information on the CMS website the public most wants to access and how to improve the delivery of that information to the public.

CMS does a solid job creating and updating its Facebook page. As of September 15, 2012, the CMS Facebook page had 6,065 “likes.” But the CMS Twitter feed is more sporadic and less effective. As Twitter grows in importance as a source of news and information for the media, community leaders, and others, CMS has not yet hit on a consistent approach to using the micro blog as a way to inform and engage the community.

At CMS, Twitter is overused on some occasions and ignored at other times. For example, on August 22, 2012, the day of a back-to-school media briefing by district leaders, CMS posted a significant number of Twitter messages, called “tweets”—51 in just an hour and 25 minutes, from 9:07 a.m. to 10:32 a.m., on one of its Twitter feeds. That’s far more tweets distributed by CMS in less than 90 minutes on that one day than the district distributed in all of August up to that day on that one Twitter feed. (CMS delivered just 14 Twitter messages in all of August up until August 22 on that feed.) The district posted another 34 tweets on the first day of school, August 27; but after that day, from August 28 through September 14, the district distributed only seven Twitter messages on the feed, called “CMS-MR.”

The district also failed to use Twitter to provide live updates for the public from school board meetings. A number of districts around the country have begun using Twitter to distribute information live to the public as school board members consider important issues at regular board meetings. Many news media outlets across the country also “live tweet” from board meetings, which means the followers of the news outlets’ Twitter feeds get fast information from the viewpoint of the media but not, in this case, from the viewpoint of CMS.

CMS appears to have two regular Twitter feeds: one called “Char-Meck Schools” and another called “CMS-MR” for media information. The “Char-Meck Schools” feed had 1,170 followers on September 16, 2012, and the “CMS-MR” feed had 113 followers. A review of the Twitter feeds indicates the district did not distribute a single Twitter message during any school board meeting at least since May 22, 2012. The CMS website listed these dates for regular school board meetings during that time: May 8, May 22, June 6, June 26, July 24, August 15, August 28, September 11. A review of the CMS Twitter timeline showed no tweets from any board meeting on those days. But the media was not silent on Twitter at those board meetings. A *Charlotte Observer* reporter distributed three tweets with information about the district during the September 11 board meeting, 35 tweets from the August 15 board meeting, and 19 tweets from the July 24 board meeting. Anyone in the CMS community seeking information from Twitter about those board meetings could get media-edited information but could not get information directly from CMS because CMS did not distribute any information on Twitter from those board meetings.

Employees point out that one big shortcoming of the district’s social media efforts is that many employees cannot access Facebook while at work, so they can’t see information

updates from CMS posted to Facebook. “I’m not going to spend my time at home looking at the CMS Facebook page,” a district executive said.

Some school principals said they could access and make use of Facebook for communications at school, but others said that capability is just coming online. “We’ve been lobbying for Facebook and now we are getting into Facebook and are very restricted in what we can do right now,” one principal said. But another principal quickly said, “We have Facebook and Twitter and the option to use it.”

One principal said, “teachers are still blocked” from Facebook, and only some administrators have access to the social media tool. In some cases, schools don’t have the internet capacity for social media. “At our school, we don’t have the bandwidth for Twitter and Facebook and have to step outside our buildings to do it. We need upgrades to our building,” a principal said. Another principal noted that at a school training session for employees on the Common Core standards, “trainers were going to use YouTube but the bandwidth wouldn’t allow it to come through.”

Teachers talked of being warned by CMS officials against using social media. “We are warned against participating in social media places like Facebook. (CMS officials) tell us our Facebook is going to be checked . . . We are very much discouraged from using them,” a teacher said. Another noted, “all those (social media outlets) are blocked from the school computer.”

Some teachers don’t want access to Facebook as a communications tool. “If a teacher says something that a student or parent takes (the) wrong (way), you can be fired. You’d have to be crazy to do it,” one teacher said. Another teacher said, “One teacher posted on Facebook she had a difficult day at work. She was disciplined by the leadership for doing that.” And a teacher added, “sometimes they treat us like kids. We have limited access because (some teachers might not act in a professional manner). We don’t even have access to iTunes, so I can’t even download or upload a podcast for my (students).”

One district executive said it is time for CMS to end the arbitrary, district-wide blockade of social media and embrace a “web 2.0” approach to communication to generate more interaction with the public. “We could be much more transparent with some of what we’re doing; and if we’re going to use Facebook and Twitter we also have to remove the blocks for those so my desktop computer should be able to log on and use that technology,” the district executive said. “I don’t see the (CMS social media) feeds because I can’t access them with my district technology. We could really take advantage of that. We could be using (social media) in so many positive ways.”

One indication of inadequate marketing of the CMS social media efforts is that a number of district officials and key community partners, all of whom should be knowledgeable of important information coming out through social media from the district, don’t usually look at CMS information from the social media feeds. “I do not look at the social media

feed. It might be the best place to find information, but I don't do it," a district executive said.

A group of active CMS parents interviewed in one session said they know nearly nothing about CMS social media. "I didn't know they had it," one parent said. "I don't follow it," another parent said of CMS social media. Asked about the CMS Twitter feeds, none of the parents interviewed knew anything about it.

In the end, a parent said, regardless of what communication platform the district is using, "we're not getting it. Outside my own school, I get nothing except what I read in the paper."

But members of the CMS communications staff said they believe the CMS social media messaging is effective. "We're getting a great reception," one communications officer said of the CMS social media platforms.

One district communications department staff member had heard the district was looking at changing its social media policy, but the communications officer did not know details of that idea.

CMS has an active and information-filled district website, but does not use metrics available to help determine what information the public most wants from the website and how successful high-priority district website messages are at reaching the public. A number of those interviewed were critical of the usability of the website. "There are numerous examples of outdated information on the internal and external (web) site. If we're going to place those eggs in that basket, we've got to make sure it's current," a district executive said.

Communications department officials acknowledged the department does not measure the effectiveness of the district website using available metrics. "We don't have very many evaluation tools," one communications official said. "We need to move forward and . . . come up with some sort of analytical things that allow us to measure page hits and links. (CMS does not have) a comprehensive evaluation system of the website . . . We have a metric system but it's very basic and incomplete. What are they (the public) interested in (seeing on the website)? How can we tighten it up?" the communications officer said.

Community members interviewed generally were not fans of the CMS website. "The website consistently stinks," one community member said. "I can't find a general (phone) number on the website," another said. One community member added, "it's like they hide stuff." "It's totally outdated," said another community member.

Parents also were critical of the CMS website. "I avoid the website at all costs," one parent said. "It's way too busy," said another, and "not user friendly," added yet another parent. The website "hasn't been updated. (The site has featured) the same kids' pictures

for years,” one parent noted. “If it’s a simple thing I want to find, I can’t find it,” a parent said.

One of the parents noted that those taking part in the group interview were all active parents. “There are a lot of parents who really don’t have the time to dive in (to the website). We’ve still got education-ese on there, acronyms that would be confusing to parents,” the parent said. A school board member echoed the concern that the district must do a better job of ridding its communications of “education-ese.” “This edu-speak – the moms in my PTA don’t understand (it). The average person doesn’t understand when you say ‘our deliverables are going to be . . .’ That means nothing to them. I would like to see everyone . . . use a language that everybody can understand. (The district must not) retreat into a professional jargon,” the board members said.

A board member also was critical of the district website. “Our information is old, it’s not up to date, it’s difficult to navigate, it’s not very user friendly. It’s clunky. That feeds the whole perception of our school system,” the board member said.

But others believe the district website is just fine. “It’s easy to navigate. It’s a good place,” one district executive said the CMS website.

- **The district has an automated phone messaging system for messages to the community and employees, but the district does not regularly monitor the quality and uniformity of the system usage, does not regularly use the system for internal communication; and communications department officials do not review the phone calls made for information to promote to the public.**

CMS employs a powerful automated notification system to provide information to the public via telephone and email. Interviews indicated most schools make regular use of the system, but the quality of phone calls can vary. And schools are still plagued by wrong numbers in the phone number system.

If the communications department regularly reviewed the messages being delivered from the district to the public, the department could learn about important and interesting activities happening throughout the district and could use that information as the basis for interesting news stories for the media. But communications department officials said they do not regularly review the messages sent by the district to the public.

The message system does not appear to be regularly used for internal communication, a missed opportunity for a school district that needs to improve how it interacts with, and informs, employees.

School principals called the phone message system a powerful tool for communication and one they use regularly for attendance calls, information about school events, and emergency information for parents. Some schedule regular phone calls with information on a certain day each week. Principals have also used the system to conduct quick

surveys of parents to get instant feedback on issues such as decisions on school uniforms, topics for parent-night meetings, and student clubs.

Parents generally reported receiving plenty of information from the district through the phone message system. While most liked getting the phone calls, some noted the phone calls can be too long. And the district needs to make a better effort to get an accurate list of phone numbers for parents, one parent suggested. “I know last year I must have gotten 37 calls about a child attending school, and it wasn’t my child,” the parent said.

- **Employees and community members expressed hope and positive feelings, but also a “wait and see” attitude, about the arrival of the new superintendent,**

The arrival of the new CMS superintendent has generated plenty of hope and excitement among district employees and community members, but there also is a healthy “wait and see” attitude among many who want to believe better things are on the way for CMS.

Dr. Morrison’s charisma is infectious. Many of those interviewed for this report genuinely liked what they have heard and seen from the new superintendent, and they are anxious to see and believe he will lead the district with transparency, care for employees and the community, and urgency for improvement.

“Bringing in new blood has got some interest piqued among the community. He seems very energetic,” one district executive said of the new superintendent. “There is hope since he got here. He has done a phenomenal job to say that he is here to listen,” another district executive said. Dr. Morrison’s effort to visit every corner of the community, including conducting a series of town hall meetings, “gives people hope he is being very authentic about the importance of communication and embedding that into the (district plan), the executive said. “His challenge will be setting the expectations for how long it will take to shift that culture here.”

School principals were very hopeful but also cautious. “He has a honeymoon period,” one principal said of the superintendent. “I’m waiting to see when he finishes listening and learning what shoe is going to drop, what is it that we are going to have to do,” another principal said. “He seems very approachable. People say it seems really different, a real positive difference, his taking an approach of knowing who you are,” another principal added.

Principals have been impressed by Dr. Morrison’s genuine approach. One principal was excited that Dr. Morrison has shown “a sincere effort to be an administrator who cares about the district. Something he said was essentially ‘I am not a person who surrounds himself with yes people. I need . . . feedback,’” a principal said. “That’s a different approach.” Another said, “he seems very genuine and has a beautiful spirit, for lack of a better term.” One principal noted, “one of (Dr. Morrison’s) principals (from his former district in Nevada) was at a conference I (attended). (The Nevada principal) said ‘he will know everything about you and your school.’” And another principal added, “my



counselor was so impressed. She saw him at the gym. She introduced herself. That makes such a huge difference.” “My (assistant principal) said ‘he talked to me!’” one principal said.

Principals said schools are anxious to make progress and are looking to Dr. Morrison for signs that progress will be a priority. “We desperately want to get back to teaching and learning. Everyone is almost afraid because they don’t know what his next step will be,” a principal said. But two principals said Dr. Morrison’s decision to keep Deputy Superintendent Ann Clark, who had been a candidate for the superintendent’s job, on his team was a meaningful decision. “One of the things he’s done to build trust is he and Ann Clark have gone from competitors to working together,” one principal said. Another said, “that was a key decision that was symbolic. How many superintendents would hire their rival? He’s made some key decisions to let people know he is listening. It allowed people who were loyal to her to say he might not be so bad after all.”

Community members expressed excitement about the new superintendent but also are anxious to see results. “If things start to change and move ahead, that will be huge,” one community member said. Another added, “if he takes too long to start making changes, people are not going to think he’s doing anything.”

One community member who had attended two town hall-style meetings with different audiences was struck by how well Dr. Morrison understood the audiences and the issues. “He answered questions well,” the community member said.

Teachers also were hopeful but waiting to see what steps the new superintendent takes. Some said they were excited about the superintendent’s plans to visit every school but they are waiting to see if he will.

“I’m optimistic,” a teacher said. “I’m going to give (the superintendent) a chance. His persona, the way he has come across, is very different from (the previous superintendent). That’s a breath of fresh air.”

Some of the district’s more active community partner organizations are excited and pleased with the new superintendent’s approach so far. “I hear positive buzz. He’s doing many of the right things,” one community partner said. “He not only is a great communicator, he uses no notes, he’s extremely eloquent, extremely sincere,” another community partner said.

At one public meeting, someone asked Dr. Morrison about rumors of an effort by some to split up the district. “He knocked it out of the park with his response. You could feel in the room his response, that unifying message, the fact that he can articulate that,” a community partner said.

Parents interviewed were also excited. “I’m absolutely encouraged,” one parent said. “He’s said he will listen but can’t make everybody happy, but will make the best decision

for all children. I like that,” another parent said. “He really embraces parent engagement. (Morrison said) ‘I don’t want just parent involvement. I want them to be engaged in the learning process,’” a parent added.

## Recommendations

- **Appoint a chief communications officer to lead CMS communications efforts.**

The district should create the post of chief communications officer as a cabinet-level position and appoint a highly skilled, experienced communications leader to head the district communications effort. This new position should have the full authority from the superintendent to staff and organize the communications department for more optimal performance.

The new chief communications officer should be charged with rightsizing the communications department; ensuring appropriate training of staff; creating an aggressive, proactive approach to communications with the general public and the news media; restoring the focus on internal communications; breaking down internal barriers to a free flow of information between district department leaders; and re-establishing strong communications links with external community organizations that want to help.

- **The district should create an overarching strategic plan for communications and individual communications plans for major initiatives and issues, and develop a specific calendar for communications.**

The new chief communications officer should lead the department and the district in creating a strategic plan for overall communications, with a long-view strategic focus for communications, all while maintaining and strengthening successful tactical communications efforts.

The chief communications officer also should lead the communications team to create and execute strategic communications plans for each major initiative of the district. The strategic communications planning for major initiatives should begin well in advance of public and internal announcements of major initiatives. The planning should include specific timelines for communicating with the public and internally as well as specific guidelines for feedback opportunities. The plan also should include tactical activities for each major initiative to ensure that employees and district leaders, community members, and the media have a maximum understanding of the initiative.

Even before a chief communications officer is appointed, the existing communications department should immediately develop a very specific calendar for upcoming news and information opportunities and begin planning right away for media and public communications around issues and events its knows will be coming on certain days on the calendar. This kind of strategic communications planning around known upcoming

dates for important news is a priority and should already have been done by the communications department.

For such strategic and tactical planning for each major initiative to succeed, the district must, with the full authority of the superintendent, require that CMS departmental leadership communicate in a timely and thorough fashion with the communications department and with each other. The CMS leadership must make an aggressive effort to break down the silos of information that sometimes inhibit proper communications planning and execution. It should never be acceptable for individual departments, or any district leader, to withhold important information for communications planning until the last minute, nor should it ever be acceptable for the communications department to strategically and tactically plan for external and internal announcements of major initiatives, developments, and decisions on issues without collaboration with appropriate departments.

- **The newly reorganized communications department should make aggressive, proactive communication of information to the news media a top priority; and, in doing so, it should improve responses to the media and share media stories with members of the public and internal audiences.**

Complaints that the news media does not treat a school district fairly, that coverage is overly negative, are common around the country. Usually, members of the public and school district staff tend to remember and focus on negative media coverage but often don't see or don't remember much about positive coverage.

CMS no doubt has many more positive stories about its good work to tell than it has negative stories for media to cover; after all, CMS is one of the top-performing urban school districts in America.

The news media will indeed provide positive media coverage of good work by school districts if information about that good work is provided proactively and regularly to the media in an interesting and newsworthy way.

The newly reorganized CMS communications department should meet with representatives of the news media and discuss its desire to have more consideration of fair coverage of the substantial positive work of the school district. The department should let journalists know it wants to work aggressively and effectively to make sure that the media has ample opportunity to provide news coverage of the many newsworthy potential stories that exist involving the critically important work that educators are doing with and for children every day.

The communications department must commit itself to timely and thorough responses to requests by the media for information. It must plan to provide appropriate district officials for responses to breaking stories as appropriate or provide timely and thorough written statements on other occasions in which a comment is desired. The superintendent

should charge department leaders throughout CMS with ensuring that timely information will be provided to the communications department for responses to news media questions and that timely, accurate responses are always a priority.

Currently, the district does not routinely capture news media coverage, especially broadcast coverage, for sharing with community members and employees. The communications department should immediately establish email and other communications channels with parents, community organizations and others in the community, and CMS employees; and it should regularly share news media coverage, including positive stories of the great work of students and educators, with those community members and with CMS staff. This includes sharing links to local television news stories. Sharing the coverage electronically will amplify the good news about educators' excellent work and allow staff and community members who did not see the coverage initially to see it.

- **The new superintendent, with the newly reorganized communications department, should acknowledge the deep divisions within the community about the district and make transparent decision making and communication about those decision-making processes a top priority.**

The new superintendent clearly inherits a sharply divided CMS community, which has grown to strongly distrust district leadership. CMS leaders face the task of becoming more open and transparent in their decision-making processes while maintaining their obligation to ultimately make final decisions in the best interests of students.

As part of the strategic communications planning for each major initiative, it is incumbent upon the CMS leadership to carefully plan announcements that major initiative are being considered, plan for real feedback opportunities from the public and staff about those initiatives, plan reasonable timeframes for making final decisions, and communicate aggressively and transparently about the decisions and the reasons for the decisions.

A number of people interviewed for this report speculated that no decision-making and communications process will ever satisfy those in the community who oppose a particular decision. But to restore trust in the CMS leadership, the district must make a legitimate effort to always be transparent in the decision-making process and open and honest in completing thorough, two-way communication about those decisions.

CMS should regularly survey members of the public and CMS staff to seek real feedback and two-way engagement around its work. This survey work should be ongoing so that CMS leaders are always talking with the community about ideas and initiatives and always getting recommendations and feedback from the community. The district also should aggressively communicate with the public and internal audiences the results of such surveys so that the staff and members of the community see that they are being heard, even when an ultimate decision goes against the position of some.

The new superintendent should lead the district in having ongoing and honest discussions about racial divisions in the community. Interviewees for this report said all parents and community members want the same things for children: an opportunity to learn, grow, and succeed. The district should lead community discussions around the topic, acknowledge the differences of opinion and viewpoints in its various communities, and seek common ground around the best interests of all children.

CMS should embark on a new effort to communicate thoroughly with its community about how schools are funded. The district should make an aggressive effort to help all its communities and its own employees have a good understanding of the laws and policies that direct how and where revenues will be spent in support of schools. The district should engage the community to seek recommendations for ways to fund schools at an optimal level while providing appropriate financial support for every student in every school. The interviews for this report provided clear information that community members are very sharply divided in their understanding of and opinions about how some schools are funded differently from others. Until CMS addresses that issue with real communication and engagement, the community could remain sharply divided on that issue.

- **CMS should create an internal communications protocol to make sure every employee knows about and has an opportunity to provide feedback on key district decisions.**

In years past, CMS had a strong emphasis on internal communication, understanding that the district cannot hope to successfully communicate with and engage the public if its own employees don't know about key decisions and initiatives.

But the district is being significantly harmed in its communications efforts by its failure to have an internal communications plan, a specific set of protocols that describe how the district will communicate with every employee, from the top district executive to principals to teachers to food service and transportation workers, about important issues.

Without internal communications protocols, district leaders have been left to communicate internally within the organization through a variety of formal and informal ways or to not to communicate at all. The failure to have specific internal communications protocols has had disastrous consequences for the district and has no doubt contributed to low morale among employees. It's time for CMS to get very serious again about internal communication.

The new chief communications officer should lead the department and the district to establish these internal communications protocols in writing and to insist that every key initiative and important decision result in very deliberate and consistent internal communications. The result should be that every CMS department head, every principal, every organizational leader communicates with staff in the same way, on the same time

schedule whenever a key decision is made or whenever important information should be distributed.

But communicating the information is not enough. The internal communications planning must create opportunities for staff to weigh in on important decisions as they are being made so that the leadership of CMS has the benefit of the thinking of its thousands of employees, all who have great experience. And the internal communications planning should include regular surveys of employees to determine whether the internal communication is reaching the employees and whether the feedback loops are working.

The district should reestablish the requirement that communications to school principals go through a central source. District leaders should hear and act on the concerns of principals who say they are being bombarded with emailed directives and information from various central office departments. School principals certainly should be kept well informed, but the district should make a deliberate effort to provide timely, clear, and succinct information to principals and to clear out the bureaucratic clutter of information to allow principals to focus on their most important job – making sure children learn.

The superintendent should make clear to the entire organization that, under his leadership, principals and other employees will be encouraged to speak their minds and provide real feedback and that employees will never be intimidated or punished for providing their opinions to district leaders about the work of the school district. The superintendent should make a special effort to allay the fears of some teachers who believe their responses to surveys will be held against them.

- **CMS should reorganize and appropriately staff the communications department.**

The reduction in the number of communications department staff members from 27 to nine professional staff clearly has affected the work of the department. But the reduction in staff isn't the only problem. The department is poorly organized to provide the communications support the district needs.

The new chief communications officer should reorganize the department and decide what the optimum level of staffing should be. At the very least, the department should add positions for outreach and communication with community organizations and for proactive communication through social media and traditional media.

The new chief communications officer should arrange for appropriate training for newer staff members and should assign experienced writer Dail Willis to provide regular writing training for the less experienced writers on staff.

That the executive director of communications spends 40 percent of her time working to respond to freedom of information act requests is a significant problem. No top communications department leader should spend so much of his or her time on work that is more appropriately handled by other staff. CMS should create an office of records



management, staffed with administrative support personnel, to manage the collection of documents needed in response to public information act requests. The communications department leadership and CMS staff attorneys should still review materials before they are released, but the collection of the documents and the management of the process should be done by administrative support personnel and not by the executive director of communications.

The communications department should more narrowly focus its work on internal communications by removing some of the other responsibilities from staff who currently direct internal communications. Internal communications must be made a priority at the district again; therefore, organizational changes must be made to allow staff members who work on internal communications to focus more intensively on that responsibility. The communications department must also improve its own internal communications. For example, it is unacceptable for professional staff members in the communications department to not know about key decisions being made, to not know what other department staff members are working on, and to not to know whether the district is developing a new social media policy. The new chief communications officer should develop very specific guidelines for internal communication within the communications department itself.

It is inconceivable in a big city school district communications department that employee work schedules are not arranged so that early-morning, evening, and weekend requests for communications support are not met. It also is inconceivable that top communications department leadership is simply not reachable after hours and on weekends. Staff members who accept the assignment as communications leaders for the district must be available for work at virtually any time and must plan for communications resources to always be available to the district leadership when needed. The new chief communications officer should establish before and after-hours work schedules and should establish the expectation that department leadership will be available before and after business hours to assist district leaders with their communications needs.

- **CMS should significantly increase its production of news and information for the public, especially about issues of district-wide importance, including the work of the school board.**

The new communications leadership should require a substantial increase in the amount of news and information for the public about the district, especially issues of significant, district-wide importance. The communications department should always produce for the media and the public fully developed news stories and detailed information about important announcements, decisions, initiatives, and developments at the school district.

The communications department should redouble its efforts to create news announcements in news-story style to help busy members of the news media to get the information they need immediately for use in news reports. News announcements about staffing decisions should include photographs of new appointees, for example.

Every school board meeting should be preceded by a flow of news announcements about important school board meeting agenda items. The communications department should issue these fully developed news stories to the public and the media and then should report to the media and the public about the board decisions on those items during and after each board meeting.

In all its news announcements, the communications department must make a better effort to rid the announcements of “education speak” language, and make information about important issues and opportunities for children and families much easier for parents and community members to understand and for members of the news media to use for important news stories.

- **The communications department should engage community organizations with a regular flow of information, and plan strategically to make use of the organizations’ offers of communications help.**

Department officials should immediately schedule meetings with leaders of community organizations to discuss and put into effect strategies for immediate support from those groups in communicating important information to the community. The department should schedule a weekly telephone conference call with leaders of those organizations to update the community groups on district developments and how they can support communications planning.

The new communications plan should have a strong component for engaging with such community organizations and working with them to distribute information from the district and encourage community involvement in and support of the district as it continues to move forward with major initiatives.

CMS also should establish a district-wide, online clearinghouse for information for parents who want to model successful parent involvement programs being used at some schools. The district should canvass schools to determine which local parent involvement programs are working well, place that information into the clearinghouse, and encourage parents across the district to learn about those successes and duplicate them.

- **CMS should re-launch its cable television station with new programming.**

The communications department already has on staff two professionals with expertise in producing video and programming for television, one of whom is the former manager of the CMS TV station. Without the immediate need for additional funding and staffing, the district should restart production of programming for the TV channel and begin using that excellent resource again to inform the community about important initiatives and developments at the school district.

Through surveys of the community and staff, the district should determine what the audience (and potential audience) for the TV channel is and dedicate resources to the channel accordingly. The district should, however, keep a close watch, through surveys and other feedback, on the audience's needs and wishes for CMS TV programming to make sure that material being produced for the channel is desired and being well received by the public.

- **The district should research further the reasons for low employee morale and begin a deliberate initiative to improve morale.**

From focus group interviews, information in this report indicates some of the reasons for low morale among district employees. But CMS needs to delve further into the issue to determine all of the drivers of that low morale and how best to respond. The district should launch intensive employee opinion surveys and additional focus groups to better identify the reasons behind the morale issue.

The superintendent should clearly signal to employees that he is concerned about the morale issue, that he understands some of the reasons for it, and is anxious to learn more to determine the best ways to help. He should let employees know the district intends to communicate more transparently and regularly in the coming months and years and that he expects administrative leaders throughout the organization to make improving employee morale a top priority. The superintendent should make clear to all employees that their participation in the surveys is needed and their comments will be used solely for the purpose of improving the district. He should reiterate that no employee will face any kind of retribution for responding to such a survey.

CMS should dedicate resources to restarting employee appreciation programs and have as part of the internal communications plan the regular recognition of employee work in a variety of means. The district should strive to make employee meetings more welcoming with an emphasis on collegiality and networking.

The superintendent also should make sure he completes his schedule for visiting all schools and continues his laudable work in meeting with staff members throughout the district, talking directly with them about their work and any issues they face.

CMS should make very deliberate plans to communicate with employees about changes in school leadership and other official job assignments so that these changes are not made suddenly without informing the staff.

- **The communications department should ratchet up its regular use of social media feeds, update outdated material on its website, and commission a full review of the organization of the website, using metrics to measure public use.**

The communications department needs to immediately begin more regular use of social media, especially its Twitter platform, to keep the public informed. Communications staff

members should issue information via Twitter live from every school board meeting and other important events. The staff should distribute information via Twitter, Facebook, and its other social media platforms daily, making sure the information is significant and important and merits review and consideration by the community and the media. More regular use of these social media platforms with information of district-wide and school-by-school importance will strengthen the district's social media presence and improve the flow of information to the community.

CMS should communicate directly with community-support organizations and leaders who also use social media to help the district distribute important information to their social media connections as well.

In addition, the communications staff should regularly monitor the social media feeds of local news media and provide additional information to them for their social media connections regarding CMS issues, as needed.

CMS needs a full-scale review of its website by content and style experts and should immediately update phone numbers and other contact information on the site. CMS should begin using available metrics to analyze traffic on its website and begin structuring the website front pages around the needs of visitors in addition to providing key messages to promote important district-wide initiatives. The district should also survey website users for input on future improvements.

In addition, the surveys should determine where the public gets information about the school district and how parents and active community members most want to receive that information from CMS. Such a survey will help the district target its outreach to parents and the community.

The district also needs to quickly conduct a formal review of its social media policies and develop a consistent policy for social media use district wide. CMS should plan to make social media tools available for administrators and staff at schools to use more often as a way of continuing engagement with the public.

- **CMS should formally review its use of the automated telephone messaging system to ensure consistent communication by schools throughout the district and to ensure high-quality messages and accuracy of phone lists; the district also should begin using the phone message system more often for internal communications with employees.**

Those interviewed for this report indicated the automated phone message system is used to deliver a variety of information to parents. Some schools make weekly phone calls, some do not; and schools contact parents with many different types of information.

The school district should formally review the message system usage and encourage uniformity of usage throughout the system. Since school principals are well positioned to

know the types of information that parents seek most from the district, principals' input and recommendations should be used to establish district wide standard outreach protocols for the phone messaging system.

CMS should work with the notification system provider to identify schools that have larger percentages of wrong numbers in their phone call logs and should work with schools to update those numbers with new information from parents.

The communications department should immediately begin reviewing phone calls made through the automated notification system not only for quality control but also for information about the good work occurring in the schools to promote in news stories for the media and updates for the community. Schools that use such systems across America often communicate information to parents about interesting school activities that should generate good media coverage for the school district. The communications department should be looking for just such news-story opportunities every day.

- **The new superintendent should continue his aggressive community outreach and inform community members in a deliberate fashion about that outreach and resulting plans.**

With many community members expressing excitement about the prospects for improvement at CMS under the new superintendent, Dr. Morrison should continue his aggressive schedule to visit all CMS schools and talk with school staff members, parents, and community members. The district should continue to update the community, as it has thus far, on the progress of the superintendent's visits to schools and should be sure that schools know when to expect a visit from the superintendent or if there is a change in the scheduled visit.

The superintendent should communicate first with school district employees about preliminary steps on initiatives as he completes his listening-and-learning tours of the district. The superintendent should take the time to meet with groups of employees at schools and in central offices to discuss in detail the findings of this listening-and-learning tour and his planning for next steps.

Dr. Morrison should regularly appear at community group meetings and gatherings to keep the public updated. These meetings would be in addition to the more formal presentations at school district events. He should conduct sit-down interviews with community newspapers and radio stations and on-set television interviews to continue to connect with the public and to keep the flow of information moving directly to the public and the news media.

The interviewees for this report clearly indicated the public and CMS staff members are hopeful for significant accomplishments under the leadership of the new superintendent and the board of education. The leadership must significantly improve its overall



communications effort as part of the plan to build the system of community schools that CMS employees and citizens of the community alike want for their children.