



Strategic Staffing

Fourth in a series of six

‘The moral thing to do’

How do you fix a failing school? Public education across America has wrestled with this question for decades. The answers can vary, depending on how a school is failing, where it is located and the students it serves. But without intervention, any underperforming school can find itself trapped in a cycle of failure: Underperforming teachers and weak administrators lead to poor academic performance, which makes the school unattractive to the successful teachers and strong principals who could improve it. Successful students and their families also will move away from such a school, choosing another option. With the same staff and the same problems, poor results become the norm – and a culture of failure takes root.

Breaking that cycle of failure is an essential first step in leading a low-performing school to excellence – and that was the biggest challenge facing Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in 2008, when the district launched its Strategic Staffing Initiative.

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

But Dr. Gorman and CMS administrators also knew that one person acting alone would be unlikely to achieve the kind of transformative change needed in a struggling school. So they designed a Strategic Staffing Initiative to allow teams of staff – principals, teachers, administrators – to come to a school together. Using financial incentives and measurable standards of performance, the district chose new principals, who then chose their teams, for seven struggling schools in 2008, and another seven in 2009.

The results have been very positive. Academic performance, as measured by proficiency on state tests, has risen at nearly every

school – and at some schools, it has skyrocketed, jumping more than 20 points in a single year.

“We knew that staffing was the key to fixing these schools,” says Dr. Gorman. “But I don’t think any of us expected to see such strong results so quickly. We’re amazed and gratified by the improvements these 14 principals have been able to make in such a short time.”

This white paper explores how CMS created the Strategic Staffing Initiative, how it has been structured and the measurable improvements that have resulted at 14 struggling schools in the district.

Developing the initiative

Shortly after arriving in the district in July 2006, Gorman approached the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education about reassigning teachers. Board policy gives the superintendent the specific authority to move teachers against their will (involuntary reassignment). Dr. Gorman asked Board members for their thoughts on such reassignment. In protracted public discussion, Board members split on the issue, with some supporting involuntary reassignment and others strongly opposing it.

“This lack of agreement led me to look toward a ‘pull’ strategy, trying to entice teachers and staff to change schools, where needed, by their own choice instead of a ‘push’ strategy to forcibly move teachers,” Dr. Gorman said.

So he directed staff to develop a plan that would include cash incentives of \$10,000 to \$15,000 to lure teachers to four high schools with academic results so poor that they had come to the attention of a superior court judge in North Carolina. The schools’ abysmal performance, the judge said, was a form of “academic genocide.”

Viewed with the benefit of hindsight, Dr. Gorman said, the plan was naïve. “This did not work,” he said. “Incentives went unused and no strategic system was used to determine who was eligible for bonuses.”

So Dr. Gorman decided to tackle the problem from another angle. He consulted a Yale economics professor, Justine Hastings, who has studied consumer and worker behaviors.

“Justine debunked the myth that education was different from other professions,” Dr. Gorman said. The laws of large labor pools apply in education, just as they do in banking or industry, Hastings told him: People who are transferred against their will have a drop in performance and will look for work elsewhere. Dr. Gorman also talked to many principals and teachers at CMS about forced transfers, gathering a wide range of opinion on the topic.

With that research in hand, Dr. Gorman developed a theory of action for a new strategic staffing plan. It had five tenets:

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

With the essential tenets in place, CMS and Dr. Gorman were ready to begin building the initiative.

Creating the framework

The staff tasked with creating the initiative included Gorman, the district’s chief operating officer and members of the curriculum, accountability and communications departments, as well as human resources staff and school leaders. The group looked at several key issues, including how to choose a school for Strategic Staffing and how to choose a principal. The group also established standards for principals to use in choosing their teams for the Strategic Staffing schools. One strategy considered and ultimately adopted was giving principals the right to bring on board five new teachers and to send five teachers already at the school to another site. Communications strategy – explaining the initiative and building internal and external support for it – was also important.

The CMS initiative was built on the five tenets set out by Gorman. The criteria for school selection included a lack of academic achievement. Schools that the state had designated as low-performing, or schools that qualified for restructuring were

also eligible, as were schools where the district’s executive staff had lost confidence in the leadership.

When the first seven schools were chosen, Gorman began selecting new principals to lead them. At a minimum, principals had to have an average growth score in student achievement of more than .04 over two years, indicating more than a year’s growth in a year’s time. (CMS used a calculation system that set zero as the point at which a school showed expected growth. A negative number indicates a school did not meet standards for expected growth; a positive number indicates the school exceeded the standard by making substantially more than one year’s growth in a year’s time.)

The seven principals chosen had to make a three-year commitment to stay at their new schools.

“They were also told that we expected substantial increases in student achievement, more than one year’s growth in one year’s time, and we expected them to transform the culture of the school to one in which high academic achievement is expected and achieved,” Gorman said.

Principals were also allowed to choose a team to bring to the new school if they wished. The team could include one assistant principal, a literacy facilitator, a behavior management technician, and up to five teachers with proven success. Principals could not only bring a new team in, but they were given some latitude in pruning existing school staff. Each principal could have as many as five teachers removed from the school’s staff (these teachers were reassigned).

To qualify for selection by a principal, a teacher had to meet several standards, including successful past summative evaluations. Teachers also had to have shown growth in student achievement of .04 minimum average growth in reading and minimum average growth in math at the elementary level, and reading and math for middle and high schools. This represents substantially more than one year’s growth in one year’s time.

Financial incentives were structured to recognize that the principals, teachers and administrators were taking on a serious challenge. Principals, assistant principals and behavior management technicians who were part of the Strategic Staffing Initiative received a 10 percent pay supplement to their base salaries, added to each monthly paycheck. The incentives were also factored into retirement.

The teachers received a \$10,000 recruitment bonus with a three-year commitment plus a \$5,000 retention bonus in the second and third years.

Six elementary and one middle school were chosen for the first year, and six CMS principals and one from another district were selected to lead the schools.

“We think we hit the right mix of incentives and standards,” Gorman said. “In two years, I’ve never had a principal refuse to participate in the Strategic Staffing Initiative.”

In fact, the reverse happened – some principals not chosen for the initiative wanted to know why they had been passed over. But CMS decided to expand the program slowly in order to be sure that only principals who were up to the challenge were chosen.

Ready, set, reform

With a plan and process in place, and principals chosen for the first year, CMS was ready to announce the initiative to parents and the public. This was a delicate issue, because the Strategic Staffing Initiative touched many schools in the district, not just the seven targeted for improvement. The principals chosen for the initiative were among the district’s most successful educators and led some of the district’s most outstanding schools. Parents at Strategic Staffing schools, as well as schools losing principals and teachers to the initiative, would need to be fully informed about the reasons for the initiative.

Gorman, who has a media briefing each week, decided to announce the initiative at a briefing. All seven principals chosen the first year joined him at the briefing to talk about the initiative and how they planned to improve their new schools.

“To raise student achievement across the district, we must work together as a district. Moving principals is not a step we have taken lightly,” he said at the media briefing. “We have given this a lot of thought and consideration, and we have concluded that it can advance student achievement. We all have the same goal – helping kids learn. This Strategic Staffing Initiative is designed to help kids learn by improving the learning environment in some of our lowest performing schools.”

He also emphasized the importance of a district-wide commitment to having schools improve.

“This plan may make life tougher for some principals, who may lose a good teacher or gain a weaker one,” he said. “But it’s important to remember that our struggling schools belong to *all* of us. We are one district and we share our successes and our failures. So all of us must work together as a district to improve our schools and our scores.”

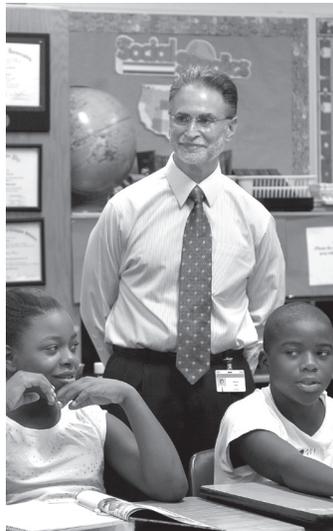
The principals chosen for the initiative also made a strong case for it at the media briefing and in other forums within the district. Every student deserves a good school – and for some schools, that means leadership changes, the principals said. As Steve Hall, one of the first seven principals in the initiative,

said, “It’s the moral thing to do. This is the single most ethical educational initiative I’ve ever been involved with as an educator.”

Hall also worked to reassure the school he was leaving, telling students, staff and parents that moving to a new school to help it improve was something that he wanted to do and that the incoming principal deserved their support.

Early returns

The first group of principals began work at their new schools in the summer of 2008. Based on feedback from them – several said that they’d like to have been in place before the end of the school year – CMS put the second group of seven principals chosen for Strategic Staffing into the new schools earlier. The second group began in March 2009 for the 2009-2010 school year.



In June 2009, the district received the results of the North Carolina state tests for the year. The End-of-Grade and End-of-Course tests measure student proficiency in reading, math and science for elementary school, and in 10 specific courses for middle and high school students.

When the results were released, the first group of principals had been in place for a year. The second group had been in place for less than four months.

The state tests showed substantial growth at 13 of the 14 schools, ranging from five- to 23-point increases in student proficiency.

Scores in reading rose at all of the seven schools where the Strategic Staffing Initiative had been in place for a full year. One school had a 14-point increase in reading proficiency, and two others had 10-point gains.

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

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

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

Results from a second set of Strategic Staffing schools – seven additional schools that got new principals toward the end of the 2008-2009 school year – were even more astonishing, although slightly less consistent. Gains in proficiency at those schools ranged from one percent to 20 percent, with four instances of

double-digit gains. In all, the seven schools were measured in three areas – science, reading and math – and scores rose in 16 of 21 areas tested.

For CMS administrators, the rising scores support the rationale for the Strategic Staffing Initiative: Better leadership improves schools. Hopes are high for continued improvement at these schools for the next two or three years.

“These are really remarkable results, particularly when you consider the short tenure of these newer principals,” Gorman said. “It suggests that leadership may be the most important factor at a school and that results can improve even in a short time with the right leaders.”

Strategic Staffing Schools (Set 1)

cms	READING			MATH			SCIENCE		
	2007-2008	2008-2009 <i>without retest</i>	2008-2009 <i>with retest</i>	2007-2008	2008-2009 <i>without retest</i>	2008-2009 <i>with retest</i>	2007-2008	2008-2009 <i>without retest</i>	2008-2009 <i>with retest</i>
	Briarwood Elementary	31.8	33.5	41.6	45.7	42.6	57.1	9.8	25.3
Bruns Avenue Elementary	18.8	28.8	36.4	43.8	48.7	56.8	1.1	15.3	22.2
Devonshire Elementary	33.9	43.1	54.9	54.2	69.8	77.3	24.6	46.1	51.3
Ranson Middle	32.0	37.0	48.5	39.0	56.1	64.0	21.1	24.9	32.4
Reld Park Elementary	22.8	24.7	35.0	30.8	36.7	46.6	2.2	14.0	18.3
Sterling Elementary	34.6	48.3	58.9	52.4	75.6	83.7	19.6	22.7	24.2
Westerly Hills Elementary	32.4	33.5	43.9	41.7	47.0	54.9	12.1	7.5	24.5

Strategic Staffing Schools (Set 2)

cms	READING			MATH			SCIENCE		
	2007-2008	2008-2009 <i>without retest</i>	2008-2009 <i>with retest</i>	2007-2008	2008-2009 <i>without retest</i>	2008-2009 <i>with retest</i>	2007-2008	2008-2009 <i>without retest</i>	2008-2009 <i>with retest</i>
	Albemarle Road Elementary	34.3	43.1	53.2	47.9	57.9	66.8	29.1	49.6
Allenbrook Elementary	31.1	28.3	32.3	53.8	47.6	55.6	10.5	9.3	20.4
Ashley Park Elementary	25.2	27.8	36.5	33.9	36.5	51.6	4.4	10.3	17.9
Bishop Spaugh Middle	18.1	21.6	27.9	24.1	29.3	37.3	12.4	16.7	25.4
Druid Hills Elementary	23.5	28.3	38.9	39.8	53.9	62.8	9.4	5.5	9.1
Paw Creek Elementary	47.7	48.3	60.4	56.5	63.0	70.1	32.2	33.5	41.9
Thomasboro Elementary	23.6	24.1	35.3	34.6	44.4	52.2	9.2	6.8	10.2

About Us

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

CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG SCHOOLS

P.O. Box 30035 • Charlotte, NC 28230 • Phone: 908.343.3000 • Fax: 980.343.3647 • www.cms.k12.nc.us • CMS TV

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