

The Charlotte Observer

Great schools in hard times

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Dec. 19: Great schools in hard times

Making CMS schools great will require community investment

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' plans to close several schools and make other dramatic changes next year to save money as it faces a possible \$100 million budget shortfall sparked anger and divided this community. Marches, civil rights complaints and threats of lawsuits ensued.

Savings from those changes, about \$6 million at most, are small. To tackle the lion's share of that expected deficit, deeper cuts will have to be made. That will likely mean teacher and other staff layoffs, and cuts to significant programs - if funds are not found elsewhere such as in increased taxes, grants or gifts.

Those kinds of reductions could be devastating to the academic progress we've seen at CMS. They would have dire consequences for all of us - both in the short-term and long-term. The percent of students dropping out of school - which is declining - would almost surely go back up. Student learning among all groups, now robustly improving, would likely hit a roadblock. A lot of teachers would join the unemployed. A lot of students would get on the wrong track, winding up in jail, on drugs or on the public dole - or all three.

Even in hard financial times, this community can't afford those consequences. This is a community that has shown it values education. The public understands and embraces the stable social environment and prosperity that a well-educated populace engenders.

The comments of the cross-section of Charlotte-Mecklenburg residents we asked to help us launch a community conversation on what would make Charlotte-Mecklenburg a great school system underscore that. They also show that despite our differences, we agree on a lot of what should be a part of the school system we desire. Now is the time to work together for that school system, letting public officials know what we value and what to protect, and helping to make the decisions about how to find the resources to keep what we value safe from the chopping block.

CMS superintendent Peter Gorman has said "this is going to be a tough time for our community for the next several years." But that doesn't mean we have to give in and accept changes that will be detrimental to all of us. It means it's time to roll up our sleeves and work harder, more creatively and more collaboratively to preserve the progress we've made and build on it.

These are issues that Gorman and the CMS board cannot and should not tackle alone. County, city and state policymakers must help. Businesses, foundations and philanthropists must too - as must we, the general public. Education is the best investment any of us can make. Poor choices have huge costs.

Get involved. We'll be providing opportunities over the next several months for the public to join our conversation.

But you can have great impact by talking directly to policymakers. Call or write state legislators, county commissioners, and city council and school board members. Tell them what you value. Help them make the right decisions. We all benefit when they do.

Last week, we launched a community conversation about the challenges Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools - and this community - face in a faltering economy. We continue that dialogue today with more voices. The depressed economy has forced education budgets to be slashed, and more cuts are on the way. Academic gains at CMS are at risk with such cuts. The system's 10-year plan that aims to build on those improvements is also in jeopardy. We asked a cross-section of people how schools can continue to improve under such challenging conditions and what would make CMS a great system. Here are their responses.

Get students involved

From Amy Farrell, executive director, Kids Voting Mecklenburg:

Imagine we are in the year 2020. Over the past decade, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has become widely regarded - in our community, state and nation - as a truly great school system. Charlotte residents are proud of CMS. Parents are moving to Mecklenburg County to enroll their students in CMS. What made CMS great? How did we get here?

In 2010, CMS faced significant challenges due to the economy, public perception and other factors. Teachers: unhappy. Students: discouraged. Parents: uninvolved. Politics: ugly. Between 2011 and where we are today, in 2020, that changed. What made the difference? Getting the students involved in determining the success, and future, of their schools and community. The steps were simple, and transformational:

Civic learning was restored as an essential CMS priority. Instead of focusing only on math, reading and science with just a touch of civics, government and history in 10th and 11th grades, students were given dedicated time, resources and learning opportunities to begin the civic learning process in kindergarten and continue it through graduation. We understood that just as we must learn to read, write, add and subtract, we must learn how our governments and communities work, the roles of leaders and citizens, and the impacts of policies and decisions. That knowledge built interest, commitment and trust.

Ownership of CMS and its future was shared with all students. Smart people recognized that all students have the potential to be leaders, and gave them good opportunities to develop and practice their skills at school and in the community. It was clear that students cared and wanted to make a difference. They helped to evaluate teachers and give them thoughtful suggestions. They met with school and city leaders to make decisions and share ideas and solutions. They watched out for and encouraged one another, making sure that the class that entered 9th grade was the same class that graduated four years later.

Students were given a permanent seat at the table. Having teens, even as unelected advisors, sitting alongside elected officials on dais during school board, county commission and City Council meetings kept the focus on students and the future. It gave young subject experts a chance to weigh in on the decisions affecting them. It significantly increased the quality and tenor of the political dialogue, which became civil and productive.

So what happened in 2011 that kicked off this change? As a community, we struggled with scarce resources and difficult decisions. Then, it dawned on us. We had the resource the entire time: our students.