

MEMORANDUM

TO: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education

FROM: CMS Equity Committee

DATE: February 22, 2005 (as amended March 14, 2005)

RE: Equity Committee Reactions to Areas to be Reviewed as Part of Student Assignment Evaluation

Your CMS Equity Committee wants to make the Board of Education aware of our concerns and thoughts as the Board considers the priorities it wants to pursue in an evaluation of CMS's student assignment plan. Specifically, we have examined the "Areas to be Reviewed," listed below as provided by Dr. Pughsley and CMS staff, and we have examined them through an "equity lens" to try to determine which of these aspects of student assignment potentially could have the greatest impact on providing equity to all CMS students. Our thoughts follow.

As one of its ways to examine the "Areas to be Reviewed," our Committee tried to determine which of the Areas are most important – or could have the greatest impact – in providing equity in educational resources within CMS. We did so by rating each Area on a scale of 0 to 10 (10 having the most impact). From the Committee members participating in this process (8 of 11), we provide the averages of these admittedly unscientific rankings below. Not surprisingly, if you have read our prior reports to you, we rated Staff Effectiveness and Student Achievement as the two Areas that could have the most impact on equity. We rated Limitation on Percent of Economically Disadvantaged Students (*i.e.*, FRL population caps) and Impact of *No Child Left Behind* as the Areas that actually would have the least impact in promoting equity.

We provide you here our initial, collective thoughts about priorities to be pursued in student assignment. We do not provide a roadmap for how to achieve those priorities. We cannot pretend that as a Committee we have consensus on all aspects of what we tell you here – our Committee runs the gamut of those giving a "10" to the importance of maintaining Guaranteed Seats as a means ultimately to achieving equity to those giving it a "0." As you will read below, however, we do have virtual unanimity on the importance of Student Achievement and Staff Effectiveness for CMS to be able to achieve equity. We certainly have unanimity in our willingness to continue to advise and work with you as you evaluate student assignment. We want to continue to work with you in the months ahead to come up with a roadmap that takes into account all of the Areas listed below and that will guide our community to the best way to assign children to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools so that each child can achieve his or her full academic potential.

Magnet Programs

- 5.875 on a 10-point scale.
- Magnets can help *all* students reach *full* academic potential.
- Magnets must have appropriate resources and staff to be successful, and too often CMS's magnet programs do not have them.
- A small minority of our Committee would cut magnet programs entirely and focus on strengthening schools to which students are regularly assigned because magnets can effectively drain resources from other schools, and some perceive that magnet programs have not enhanced an equity platform.
- The majority of our Committee views magnets as a powerful tool for (i) providing needed options to lower performing schools, (ii) allowing families the opportunity to choose different types of diversity, and (iii) giving the opportunity for highly specialized instruction that can allow a variety of children to continue to reach their full academic potential.
- Some perception exists that not all magnet programs are as effective or as desirable as others. We suggest considering which magnets work and which do not, which are desired and which are not, and direct scarce resources to those that both work and are desired.
- Most of our Committee would advocate duplicating desired, successful magnets.

Diversity

- 6.00 on a 10-point scale.
- Perceptions exist that resources follow certain student populations and the only way to make sure that resources are distributed equitably is to have different student populations distributed more evenly. Not all of our Committee members embrace these perceptions, but history is a powerful teacher. The *EquityPlusII* program clearly directs additional resources where they are needed, but most of our Committee believes some *EquityPlusII* schools need even more resources and some non-*EquityPlusII* schools (those trending toward such status) also need some additional resources.
- Attempts should be made to foster diversity in our schools and classrooms, but there is reluctance to mandate it.
- For some on our Committee, the priority in improving student achievement should be a focus on socioeconomic diversity within all of our schools and all of our classrooms.
- Generally, our Committee believes strongly that student achievement is a more accurate barometer of equity than diversity, but diversity is important for its own sake and also may be a way to enhance overall student achievement.

Capacity and Facility Usage (Caps)

- 5.125 on a 10-point scale.
- Our Committee thinks it important to ascertain what capacity really is at each individual school and to work to reduce overcrowding anywhere.
- Attempts should be made at least to encourage “overflow” students at over-utilized schools go to under-utilized schools in the same geographic area or assignment zone.

- Some members of our Committee think that seriously overcrowded conditions at any school impede academic achievement and thwart equity such that enrollment at all schools should be capped at some percentage of capacity even if it means denying a home school guarantee.
- Other Committee members believe the answer to overcrowding is to build more schools in various geographic areas or create more attractive magnets close or adjacent to particular areas to lessen crowding because the costs of denying a home school guarantee could be the loss of a family from the CMS system.

Guaranteed Seats

- 5.75 on a 10-point scale.
- If capacity at schools is capped, guaranteed seats at particular schools become impossible.
- Some members of our Committee consider maintaining guaranteed seats at home schools to be of paramount importance lest some families choose to leave CMS or never enter CMS in the first place.
- Other members of our Committee consider guaranteed seats an insurmountable barrier to achieving equity because of the inequities that exist in the schools already.
- Still other Committee members express concerns that home school guarantees make it impossible at some schools (generally higher performing schools) for anyone except those with a home school guarantee to get in, thus denying many students any chance to “choose” to attend such schools. For these Committee members, opening up potential slots in higher performing schools is more important than maintaining a home school guarantee, even with the risk that a lot of CMS seats could be open from the loss of students exiting CMS if families no longer have a home seat guarantee.

Limitation on Percent of Economically Disadvantaged Students

- 4.75 on a 10-point scale (the second lowest ranking of any of the Areas reviewed).
- Our Committee feels strongly that CMS needs to minimize the numbers of schools at extremely high FRL populations, but we have little, if any, consensus on the best way to achieve this goal.
- Some members of our Committee strongly believe that FRL caps at schools are essential to achieve equity. They urge serious consideration of an assignment plan that would cap FRL populations at 40%, 45%, or even a higher percentage if necessary in each school. Such a proposal hopefully assures that no students attend any schools with extremely high percentages of FRL populations and better allows all students, especially FRL students, to achieve their academic potential.
- Other Committee members believe that the overall percentage of FRL students within CMS (45%) makes it mathematically and pedagogically impossible to set FRL caps at levels at which overall student achievement increases. These Committee members believe that capping FRL populations at too high a level offers no hope that overall student achievement will increase, rather data appears to suggest that such caps effectively “lock in” the levels of FRL to non-FRL student ratios that decrease overall student achievement. For these Committee members, any student assignment plan

- that imposes such a “FRL cap” also threatens to alienate further segments of CMS’s population and cause them to leave the system altogether.
- At least one Committee member believes that FRL caps might be phased in incrementally and that such caps might be tried first at magnet schools.
 - Our Committee collectively hopes for, but is not aware of, other strategies that could be employed to reduce very high (80%+) FRL concentrations in some schools and enhance achievement at such schools.
 - Our Committee sees no way at this time to balance guaranteed seats, capacity issues at individual schools, and FRL caps successfully at the same time.

School Size

- 8.00 on a 10-point scale.
- Our Committee is generally uniform in its beliefs that schools should not be too big and that when student populations rise too much at individual schools, all of the students at such schools suffer in some way.
- CMS needs better planning so that schools are not already at capacity when built and are built in the best locations to foster the goals of the student assignment plan.
- We urge CMS to manage current student population within schools better to minimize to the extent possible the need to build more schools, including special “school within a school” programs to take advantage of existing space.
- We especially urge the Board to look at “school within a school” and “multiple curriculum models on a single campus” models at the high school level. We hope that such steps could better balance numbers of students at each high school and enhance academic achievement among different segments of student populations at each school.
- As one of our Committee members puts it, “God only made elephants so big.” Even large institutions, like schools, can only be so large to be effective. To be clear, however, our Committee does not extend that analogy automatically to the size of CMS as a whole.

Staff Effectiveness (Teacher Quality, Deployment, Hiring, Retention)

- 9.00 on a scale of 10 (all but 1 Committee member rated this Area a 10).
- As we have repeatedly stressed to the Board, we believe that having effective principals and teachers at every school is of paramount importance in providing equity in our schools. Please note that “staff” effectiveness has to include strong principal leadership, and we would add “Principal Quality” to the parenthetical list above.
- Overall staff effectiveness can be enhanced by not requiring teachers to perform too many roles, such as by making effective use of parent advocate positions at schools where the principal believes such positions are needed.
- Our Committee does not have a consensus reaction yet to Dr. Pughsley’s proposals potentially for moving staff to lower performing schools. Our Committee generally prefers enticing principals and teachers to schools with very significant “carrots,” (radically lower class sizes, exceptionally generous compensation packages, educational opportunity incentives, greatly improved teaching environments,

enhanced safety, greater disciplinary discretion, etc.), but members of our Committee worry that not enough resources have been – or can be – allocated for the size “carrots” CMS needs to attract staff to some schools, and so it could be time to consider using “sticks” along the lines urged by Dr. Pughsley. Other Committee members worry about a drain of some of our very best teachers from CMS if those teachers, for whatever reason, do not like the assignments they are given. Some of these same Committee members worry about having teachers in any school where the teacher really does not want to be and want even more emphasis put on creating overall cultures of significant learning and teaching that attract teachers to particular schools. As a Committee, we expect to consider these issues further and respond specifically to them in the coming months.

Boundaries for New Schools

- 8.50 on a 10-point scale.
- It is important to balance out FRL populations to the extent possible by where attendance zone lines are drawn, especially when new schools are opened.
- It is important to use attendance zone lines better to maximize diversity, particularly socioeconomic diversity, in CMS schools.
- We urge the Board to be open to redrawing lines to minimize high concentrations of poverty in individual schools and to maximize sustainable, long-term stability in school assignment.

Student Achievement

- 9.00 on a scale of 10 (all but 1 Committee member rated this Area a 10).
- Your Equity Committee urges the Board to assign students to schools in a way that allows each student to maximize his/her academic achievement, and if CMS is assigning students in a way that demonstrably inhibits achievement, then no longer assign students to schools in that way.
- It seems clear to the Equity Committee that some student assignment decisions create and enhance barriers to equity, specifically high concentrations of poverty in too many schools. CMS either needs to eliminate those barriers or provide the radically different resources needed to overcome those barriers to equity.

Impact of No Child Left Behind

- 4.25 on a 10-point scale (the lowest ranking of any of the areas reviewed).
- Our Committee understands NCLB to provide a “trump card” to override student assignment policies if a school is failing students for an extended time.
- Any student assignment plan needs flexibility so that students and families taking advantage of NCLB have real options and choices for schools where they can go.

Ranking of Equity Importance of Areas to be Reviewed in Student Assignment

Student Assignment

Ranking

<u>Student Assignment</u>	<u>Ranking</u>
Staff Effectiveness (Teacher Quality, Deployment, Hiring, Retention)	9.00
Student Achievement	9.00
Boundaries for New Schools	8.50
School Size	8.00
Diversity	6.00
Magnet Programs	5.875
Guaranteed Seats	5.75
Capacity and Facility Usage (Caps)	5.125
Limitation on Percent of Economically Disadvantaged Students	4.75
Impact of <i>No Child Left Behind</i>	4.25

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