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CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG SCHOOLS

Eyebrows up over CMS's pulled poverty report

Preview drew concern of lowered expectations

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Charlotte-Mecklenburg Superintendent Peter Gorman's last-minute withdrawal of a report on high-poverty schools this week has advocates and board members watching his next step with hope and wariness.

CMS staff had delivered more than 100 pages of data, but Gorman yanked the presentation from Tuesday's school board agenda after parents who previewed the report complained about errors and wording that hinted at lowered expectations.

Pamela Grundy, a CMS parent and advocate for high-poverty schools, says she was "thoroughly discouraged" by the report. As she and parent Carol Sawyer pored through it, they found problems ranging from lack of context to outright errors.

Another issue: "Equity," a word CMS has used for years to describe extra help for disadvantaged students, had been changed to "adequacy," which Grundy and Sawyer say smacks of minimum standards for poor and minority kids.

But Gorman's willingness to try again left some would-be critics hopeful.

"It seems to me that you folks are listening and do hear us," said Richard McElrath, a retired teacher and advocate for high-poverty schools, who came to the meeting ready to protest.

Gorman, who came from California in July, says the rebuff on "adequacy" reminded him that Charlotte's historic struggles left scars that newcomers don't always spot. He said he changed the label to mesh with his 100-day plan.

The assumption that he was signaling a lesser commitment to high-poverty schools reminded Gorman that he has yet to earn the trust of many who remember second-class segregated schools.

Board member George Dunlap, whose northeastern district includes many high-poverty schools, says he understands the skepticism. He said he suspects Gorman replaced "equity" to placate conservative critics who consider the term controversial.

"I give him the benefit of the doubt; he's still learning," he said. "But he's got a lot to learn."

Grundy says she's waiting to see what the revised report shows: Can the new leadership team compile accurate and meaningful data about the state of high-poverty schools? Do they really seem to care?

Board member Trent Merchant said the report, along with other erroneous documents and densely worded presentations at Tuesday's meeting, show that Gorman's staff must also communicate better.

"If we're getting that kind of presentation," Merchant said, "what are parents getting?"

Gorman said Wednesday that Chief Communications Officer Nora Carr will review staff presentations to make sure they're clear, concise and accurate.