

New CMS chief wants more test ideas from teachers

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After months of teacher protests over 52 new high-stakes tests, interim school Superintendent Hugh Hattabaugh on Wednesday used his first press conference to ask for more faculty feedback on the exams.

The tests, designed to test teacher effectiveness, have sparked concerns from teachers and parents who call them an unnecessary disruption to the learning process.

Meeting the press for the first time since he assumed command of schools last week, Hattabaugh said he intends to continue pushing former Superintendent Peter Gorman's major initiatives, including the new tests.

CMS rolled out 46 of the 52 tests this spring. (The others couldn't be approved in time.) But many teachers called them flawed and turned out to protest at school board meetings, fearing the board will ultimately use the tests in its still-unfolding plan to pay teachers based on how well their students perform.

They also were angered by the district's decision to push for new legislation erasing earlier rules that would have given them a vote on such plans.

Noting that there's been "a lot of discussion and even more misinformation about our local testing plan," Hattabaugh said he is asking principals to nominate teachers for new focus groups that will help refine the tests.

He specifically mentioned tests for K-2 in his opening remarks, saying he wants to seek ways to streamline the testing process for those grade levels. Teachers and parents have said one-on-one tests designed to take 15 minutes per child took up to an hour.

"That's a tweak, rather than a major change," Hattabaugh said. "We want to have the most effective, least disruptive assessments we can."

Chris Cobitz, the CMS testing official who will oversee the new focus groups, said additional teacher input also will be sought on tests for high school courses such as U.S. history, geometry, Algebra II and Advanced Placement classes.

Opponents of the new tests weren't impressed.

"It's not a communications problem, it's a flawed program problem," said Carol Sawyer, a leader with **Mecklenburg ACTS**, a parents' group critical of expanded testing.

Hattabaugh said he will stay the course on other Gorman priorities such as the strategic staffing plan that puts high-caliber educators in low-performing schools.

He said CMS is seen as a national leader on school reform, and he sees his job as keeping things running smoothly while the school board searches for Gorman's long-term replacement.

Hattabaugh will not be a candidate.

"My job is to keep the car on the road for the next year," he said. "I'm looking forward to the challenge."

Hattabaugh, CMS' chief operating officer since 2008, oversaw all nonacademic matters before he was appointed to a one-year contract as interim superintendent.

Board members have compared him with the telegenic, reform-minded Gorman by calling him a low-key, efficient caretaker who provides the stability CMS needs during the transition period.

The district is coming off a tumultuous school year, one marked by the teacher testing controversy, a \$100 million budget shortfall and the closings of about a dozen schools.

Hattabaugh said he's working on filling hundreds of once-endangered teaching positions saved by late-arriving state and county money. CMS also has a new slate of K-8 schools and other big campus changes to get ready by the start of school on Aug. 25.

Hattabaugh remains close to Gorman, who is working from home until Aug. 1 on an exit report on the district's progress and next steps.

Hattabaugh ran late for his press conference while on the phone with Gorman. After meeting the press, the new superintendent was spotted in South End having lunch with a shorts-wearing Gorman and another man.

Hattabaugh came to Charlotte in 2007 from Little Rock, Ark., where he was deputy superintendent. He first served in CMS as an area superintendent over schools in northern Mecklenburg.

During his press conference, Hattabaugh mentioned no large-scale new initiatives. He called Gorman a longtime friend, but said he doesn't plan to emulate his leadership style.

"He was right for the time," Hattabaugh said. "I'm not Pete Gorman, he's not Hugh Hattabaugh. You have to be yourself."