

CMS hopes Morrison can bring unity as leader - Board votes to hire Nevada leader with 'a certain charisma' Charlotte Observer, Friday, April 20, 2012, Ann Doss Helms

Hoping that fresh leadership can rally a fractured community, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education Thursday offered its superintendent's job to Heath Morrison of Reno, Nev.

Details are being negotiated, with a formal vote on the job offer expected Tuesday. But Morrison, who was recently named national Superintendent of the Year, said he's eager to sign on.

"I am deeply honored and very excited about coming to one of the premier school districts in the country," he said.

Memphis Superintendent Kriner Cash withdrew his candidacy Wednesday, as the board met in a two-hour closed session where Morrison, 46, ended up the unanimous choice. Ann Clark, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools veteran who also vied for the top job, pledged her support and said she'll stay with CMS.

"I'm excited by the opportunity to be on his team," said Clark, the district's chief academic officer. "I am deeply committed to Charlotte. This is my home."

Morrison called himself "a huge Ann Clark fan; I have tremendous respect for her leadership."

The three finalists made public appearances last week. Each generated support in the community and among school board members, but members said they think Morrison can unite the many views and interests.

"He will be a superintendent who can bridge the gap between the different populations and ethnicities in CMS," said member Joyce Waddell.

Despite its strong national reputation, CMS has been bruised by local controversies over layoffs, testing, teacher ratings, school hours and faulty data. Some suburbanites complain that higher spending on urban schools has left their schools straining with huge classes, while urban neighborhoods felt targeted by last fall's school closings and discipline problems at newly merged schools.

"He's really committed to getting us to work together toward a common goal," said member Rhonda Lennon. "I think he's gifted at working with people from all walks of life."

'A certain energy'

None of the three finalists offered dramatically different visions and strategies for CMS, so the choice came down to experience and style. Since 2009, Morrison has led a majority-Hispanic district that's struggling with deep budget cuts. It's less than half the size of CMS, but before that he held a top administrative post in Montgomery County, Md., a large, diverse district near Washington, D.C.

Morrison, who said he was happy in his Reno job, originally hesitated to go public with his quest for a job he might not get. Some districts and search firms advocate confidential searches, where no one meets the public until they've been chosen.

But Morrison's personal appearances may have clinched the job. He spoke with authority on CMS issues and worked the crowds, shaking hands and making connections.

"He brought a certain charisma, a certain energy, an academic excellence that this district needs to move forward," Chairman Ericka Ellis-Stewart said.

Member Tim Morgan said he understands why superintendents might be reluctant to go public, but

"absolutely, it was very important to engage the public."

Commitment or career step?

As a little-known outsider who dazzled audiences with his energy, Morrison has invited comparison to Peter Gorman, who followed a similar path when he was hired in 2006. That's a plus for some but a negative for others, who soured on Gorman as he made unpopular decisions, then resigned abruptly after five years.

Morrison is leaving his current district after three years, raising questions about whether CMS is a long-term commitment or a career step.

Like Gorman, Morrison is a graduate of the Broad Superintendents Academy. Ties to the Broad Foundation and philanthropist Eli Broad have become controversial among those who say the group promotes overreliance on data and corporate management styles in school systems. But Morrison said he attended the Broad program when he started getting superintendent offers, to learn more about education reform. He said it was valuable, but he learned more from his time as a teacher.

He said the most important measures of success are the graduation rate and whether students are ready for college or a job when they graduate.

Board members reviewed thick stacks of feedback forms on all finalists. They said each pulled strong support from some groups.

Loyalties remain

Many employees and residents were rooting for Clark, who has spent almost 30 years in CMS. Wednesday night, business and community leaders held a dinner to honor CMS principals and top administrators for the 2011 Broad Prize for Urban Education. When Foundation for the Carolinas President Michael Marsicano called Clark up to speak, citing her role in the district's accomplishments, the crowd burst into cheers and applause.

Judy Kidd, president of the Classroom Teachers Association and a Clark supporter, said there was "absolutely a sense of bitterness" among people who emailed her after the board chose Morrison. Some were even talking about a walkout, a move Kidd said she doesn't support.

"Any professional would have to smile and go on," Kidd said. "Let's hope that he will work with the people that are here to the best of his ability and the best of our ability."

Clark also had local detractors. Some blamed her for the departure of longtime principals and teachers, or linked her to the frustrations and controversies of recent years. Her buttoned-down personal style contrasted with Morrison's more ebullient persona.

Neither of CMS' two teachers groups rallied for Morrison. Randolph Frierson, president of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Association of Educators, said this week that an informal poll of members showed them split between Clark and Cash.

Cash, the only African-American finalist, had fans among those who saw him as the strongest advocate for struggling students and schools. He also had harsh critics in Memphis, Tenn., where teachers and community members gave him low grades on a recent survey. Commenters peppered online articles in Charlotte and Memphis with anti-Cash remarks.

Kojo Nantambu, president of the local branch of the NAACP, said after interviewing all three he was impressed with Morrison as well as Cash. He said Morrison gave a "very strong presentation" and has a history of working with low-income and minority groups.

Ellis-Stewart said Cash cited family reasons for withdrawing his application for the Charlotte job.

Morrison said he'll start his Charlotte job with 90 days of "intense listening."

He'll no doubt get an earful from a community that has passionate views about what's right and wrong with CMS.

Mecklenburg ACTS, a parent group that opposed Gorman's push to create new tests and use student scores to rate teachers, emailed members Thursday urging them "to welcome our new superintendent and let him know - in as much detail as possible - the kind of education you want Mecklenburg County children to have."

Ellis-Stewart and board member Eric Davis say the arrival of a new superintendent provides a chance for the community to renew its commitment to public education.

Morrison said he's eager to make that happen: "Now it's just time to roll up our sleeves and get to work."

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What's next?

Morrison's starting date, salary and benefits are among the contract items being negotiated.

Board Chairman Ericka Ellis-Stewart wouldn't disclose the salary range offered. Morrison currently makes \$238,000. Former CMS Superintendent Peter Gorman had a base salary of \$267,000, with supplemental retirement and potential bonuses that brought his total compensation close to \$300,000 a year.

Morrison is likely to start work this summer, around the July 1 start of the new budget year. Interim Superintendent Hugh Hattabaugh has a contract that runs through June 30.

Heath Morrison

Career: Superintendent of Washoe County Schools, Reno, Nev.; former area superintendent in Montgomery County, Md. Named Superintendent of the Year by American Association of School Administrators.

Family: Wife and two children, 12 and 14, and an adult foster daughter.

Education: Bachelor's degree, College of William & Mary; Master's degree, Ph.D., educational policy and planning, University of Maryland.