

## **CMS future up for grabs in elections - Balance of power on school board could change in fall.**

Charlotte Observer, Eric Frazier and Ann Doss Helms , Sunday, June 12, 2011

With Superintendent Peter Gorman and two veteran school board members exiting, this fall's elections are shaping up as a referendum on his far-reaching and sometimes controversial reforms.

When Gorman announced his resignation last week, effective Aug. 15, school board chairman Eric Davis said it might take a year to find a successor. That means the task of picking a new superintendent likely will fall to the board that emerges from the Nov. 8 elections.

And with the current nine-member board narrowly divided on big issues, the fate of performance pay for teachers - perhaps Gorman's most polarizing initiative - could hinge on the new board's composition.

Gorman's backers, including local business leaders and much of the current school board, want to keep pushing the same kind of reforms he pursued during his five years leading CMS.

That likely means more tests for students, more staffing shakeups at schools, and more pressure on teachers and administrators to improve scores.

Three at-large seats on the board are up for re-election, and two board members - Trent Merchant and Joe White - have said they aren't running. A third, Kaye McGarry, said she is still thinking about it.

The filing deadline for candidates is July 15.

"Interest (in the election) was high already," said Bob Morgan, head of the Charlotte Chamber and the brother of school board member Tim Morgan. "I think it will be even higher with Dr. Gorman's leaving, because the balance of power is at stake."

But teachers' groups, and some education-minded community advocates, see their chance to swing the district toward a new course.

Judy Kidd, head of the Classroom Teachers Association, said her group will be letting the public know where candidates stand on House Bill 546, state legislation that would allow CMS to enact performance pay without a vote by teachers.

A 2007 bill authorized CMS to revise the state pay scale, provided a majority of teachers approve the new plan. But the current bill, originally drafted by Gorman's staff, upset many teachers and parents by killing that requirement.

Angry teachers packed school board meetings, and remain determined to fight the proposal. With roughly 8,500 of them on the CMS payroll, they could form a potent voting block in the fall school board elections.

Pam Grundy, a leader of the **Mecklenburg ACTS** parents' group, recalled that a recent school board motion to block House Bill 546 failed on a 4-5 vote. Departing members Merchant and White helped sink it.

"There's definitely a possibility the board could shift" with the election, Grundy said.

Many hats thrown in the ring

Gorman became the lightning rod for public debate in recent months. He proposed closing schools and laying off teachers to bridge a \$100 million budget gap, even as he rolled out more than 50 new tests designed to help evaluate teachers' performance.

But board members say the performance-pay plan and other reforms were expressions of their collective will, not some master plan crafted by the superintendent alone.

Davis and other board members say Gorman's moves have helped improve graduation rates while narrowing the achievement gap between minority and white students.

They say they have no intention of changing course.

"Charlotte-Mecklenburg is in the midst of the most significant and essential changes that have taken place in public education in more than half a century," White said. "Unfortunately, we have lost the major leader in presenting that (to the public). Hopefully, that doesn't mean we will back off."

Kaye McGarry, a board member who often criticized the superintendent's initiatives, believes Gorman drove the agenda, not the board. She wants a different dynamic with the next superintendent - a stronger board "to direct the superintendent rather than the other way around."

Grassroots activists who mobilized around the school closings, budget cuts and performance-pay issues are already throwing their names into contention for school board.

Among the first candidates to announce were DeShauna McLamb, a parent who fought the westside school closings, and Elyse Dashew, a co-founder of MeckFUTURE, a parents' group that lobbied for more money for CMS.

Hans Plotseneder, a West Meck teacher and previous school board candidate, has also announced plans to run.

Ericka Ellis-Stewart, a Harding parent who was part of the group that mobilized to fight the possible closing of that school, said she's considering a board run as well. But she said it's unclear whether all the grassroots activism that arose from various controversies will translate to a major force in this election.

"It's kind of tricky," Ellis-Stewart said. "For those of us whose schools were in the fray, we're tired. I think it's going to be a mixed bag."

A run on at-large seats

Even before Gorman announced his departure, District 6 board member Tim Morgan had begun considering an at-large run, saying it is essential to get those seats filled with people who support the board's current vision.

With the board often splitting on 5-4 or 6-3 votes, he said, each seat is crucial. If he were elected to an at-large seat, the board would appoint a replacement for the remaining two years of his term representing the south suburban district.

Gorman's departure makes that even more important, he said: "We need to keep moving in the direction we're going."

Kathy Ridge, former head of the nonprofit group Mecklenburg Citizens for Public Education, left that post last year partly to consider a school-board run. She says Merchant's announced departure is bound to spark renewed interest.

She had ruled out an at-large run because of the money required; some say it could cost as much as \$60,000.

If only one incumbent were stepping down, that would be a long shot. Two, she said, changes the scene.

"I think it's a much more interesting race with two of the three not running and the third not declared. I think it's going to loosen up some people."