

## **GORMAN PROPOSES MAGNET CHANGES - LIST OF POSSIBLE MODIFICATIONS, CLOSURES MEANT TO OPEN TALKS**

Charlotte Observer, ERIC FRAZIER, Wednesday, May 21, 2008

Superintendent Peter Gorman on Tuesday offered Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board members a sweeping list of potential magnet program closures or realignments.

The recommendations, which apply to up to 40 campuses, mark the start of the board's effort to determine the future of programs that once served as the linchpins of Mecklenburg school desegregation.

The magnet programs, in 50 schools and serving almost 20,000 students, were created under desegregation orders no longer in force. They have been credited with pulling thousands of middle-class students into inner-city schools, attracting them with specialized programs centered on themes as varied as Chinese language immersion and the performing arts.

In recent decades, as suburban growth patterns threatened to resegregate schools, magnets helped fight the trend.

But in the aftermath of court-ordered desegregation, school board members say they aren't sure exactly what the rationale is for keeping the programs, and some suspect too many families are picking them simply to escape undesirable neighborhood schools.

Magnets have also contributed to an extensive CMS bus system that covers 24 million miles a year and costs \$60 million a year.

Gorman hoped his list would give them some ideas on what programs seem to be working, and which need tinkering.

"These are starting points," he told board members as he passed out the list. "Take things farther. Take things off the list. Please don't let this limit you."

The list mentions possibly:

Closing magnet programs at Oaklawn Elementary, Eastway Middle, Kennedy Middle, Waddell High, Hornet's Nest Elementary, J.T. Williams Middle, Beverly Woods Elementary and Sterling Elementary. The programs suffer from low enrollment or other problems.

Consolidating an undetermined number of learning immersion/talent development magnets. Officials say enrollment in such magnets has declined at Lincoln Heights and Barringer elementaries.

Deleting the "open education" magnet programs at Irwin Avenue Elementary, Piedmont Middle, Randolph Middle and West Charlotte High. The concept, which relies on laboratory or experience-based programs, isn't strictly followed at schools, officials said.

Adding new minimum requirements to strengthen the International Baccalaureate program offered throughout the district and push more students toward the IB diploma.

Strengthening the math, science and environmental studies magnet program by upgrading entrance requirements. Some board members expressed disappointment at math and science scores at math- and science-themed magnets, such as Harding University High.

Adding a Montessori middle school.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools created most of its magnets in the 1990s to comply with court-ordered desegregation. Before a legal challenge toppled that system in 2002, magnet seats were awarded to reflect

CMS's racial makeup - then 40 percent black and 60 percent "nonblack."

In recent years, CMS has added magnets to neighborhood schools in low-income areas trying to boost enrollment or attract high performers. Almost 20,000 students will be in magnet schools next year, and another 3,700 are on waiting lists.

One education advocate expressed fear that further divorcing magnet schools from their original diversity-promoting purpose will make them little more than tuition-free alternatives to private schools.

"If we're going to start killing magnets, let's kill all of them," said Carol Sawyer of **Mecklenburg ACTS**, a citizens' group advocating school reforms.

Lisa Moore, co-president of Harding's PTSA, expressed hope that the board keeps her school's magnet program and offers more support. She said magnets can promote diversity, but they also serve another worthwhile purpose.

"The magnet programs offer parents options in terms of customizing their children's education," she said. "It gives you a different way for your child to learn, if you think that's what will benefit them."

At the meeting, board members asked questions, but took no votes. That isn't expected until later this summer. They pressed CMS staff for details on which programs were drawing strong interest or making a difference for low-scoring or minority students.

Data presented by school administrators suggested magnet students perform better than district averages, and that parents are largely happy with the programs. But the statistics also show that schools with magnets, often located in high-poverty areas, still underperform compared with schools without magnet programs.

Administrators said magnet students pull achievement levels up at those schools, but some school board members questioned why magnet programs should exist if they, too, struggle with low-income students.

Chairman Joe White said he's inclined to keep any program that parents like, but added that when magnets do well, "I'm not sure it was the program that was successful. It was the students and the parents they were attracting."

Larry Gauvreau, a frequent critic of magnets, questioned the need for Smith Academy's Chinese language magnet program or the leadership and global economics magnet operating in two elementary schools.

"You're not going to ever get me to buy into some of those programs," he said. "We've gone narrow (with Gorman's list), but not narrow enough."