

WILL FEWER MAGNETS HELP OTHER SCHOOLS? - WITH 90% OF THE MOVES DISRUPTING MINORITY STUDENTS, SOME COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS FEAR CMS LEADERS ARE MOVING AWAY FROM A GOAL OF DIVERSIFYING SCHOOLS.

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As Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools dismantles magnet programs affecting thousands of students, the pressure is on to upgrade struggling neighborhood schools where some of those students will return.

The school board's vote Wednesday night to close, move or modify magnets at schools across the county will change the campus or curriculum for about 2,800 children - 90 percent of them minority.

The board softened the impact by allowing about 1,400 students at partial magnets to remain on their current campuses if their parents provide transportation. Still, the changes disheartened Vilma Leake, a departing African American board member who said the board is stripping enhancements from inner-city schools that already ranked among "the weakest of the weak."

Some community activists agreed.

"I'm disappointed that we're pretty much giving up on magnets as a means of diversifying schools," said Carol Sawyer, a member of a local school-reform group called **Mecklenburg ACTS**. "We could have made things better instead of worse with magnets, and we're not doing that."

The school district created its magnet schools in the 1990s in hopes of attracting white families to inner-city campuses. But since court-ordered desegregation ended in 2002, magnets have increasingly served as educational havens for minority families, many of them fleeing troubled neighborhood schools.

The list of magnet programs to be closed or moved include many on inner-city campuses. Sawyer noted that magnets serving predominantly white families, such as Myers Park Traditional and Elizabeth Traditional elementaries, were spared.

So was Villa Heights, a magnet for gifted children that was allowed to remain intact after its families, many of them middle-class African Americans, mobilized and bombarded school board members with phone calls and e-mail messages.

"We didn't touch those," Sawyer said. "I don't think that's a coincidence."

She said the school system's already troubling achievement gap between white and minority students will likely grow unless CMS further intensifies its effort to move high-achieving teachers and principals to struggling neighborhood schools.

Superintendent Peter Gorman said parents who mobilize on behalf of their schools do tend to have an impact on the board's decisions. "When communities voice their desire for something, our board listens," he said. "That's a reality."

He said CMS wants to make sure returning students are comfortable at neighborhood schools. However, he said, the new magnet plan won't necessarily cause CMS to do anything differently "because we've been working at those schools already."

Earlier this year, he switched principals at seven underperforming schools, replacing them with stronger leaders. More principal changes will come before next school year, he said.

He also plans to expand the "strategic staffing" initiative he used to entice 30 top teachers to move to

struggling schools. About 70 percent of those teachers came from other poor-performing campuses, however.

Gorman said he doesn't believe the magnet changes will worsen the achievement gap or increase racial isolation. He suspects some families weren't so much fleeing neighborhood schools as they were attracted to magnet schools; some, he added, might well move to other magnet programs rather than return to neighborhood schools.

School board member Trent Merchant said the board couldn't afford not to take action. About half of African American students in grades 3-8 are not scoring at grade level in math, he said. High-achieving magnet school students and their families will help stabilize neighborhood schools.

As magnet school students trickle back to their neighborhood schools, he said, perhaps the school system will be forced to stop relying on new, "whiz-bang" magnet programs and confront the underlying problems hindering students.

"It's harder. It's much harder," he said. "It takes more discussion and a hard look in the mirror. And it takes time."

At Randolph Middle School in southeast Charlotte, Principal Jackie Menser said stripping away her school's open and Paideia magnets will leave it as a full International Baccalaureate school. About 75 to 100 students will be affected by the shift.

"For us in a lot of ways it's a good thing," she said. "We will be able to focus on improving the IB program. We do have some disappointed parents, though." Staff writer Ann Doss Helms contributed.