

No clear push to revamp - But some school board candidates favor changes in CMS assignment plan.

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Of all the emotional topics in education, few send blood pressure soaring like student assignment.

Even relatively minor changes in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools boundaries or magnet programs have mobilized hundreds of irate parents. In Wake County, recent school board elections have brought massive changes in student assignment.

There's no clear push to revamp the CMS plan, which combines neighborhood and magnet schools, from the 12 active candidates seeking three at-large seats Nov. 8. But about half indicate willingness to make changes, from preventing concentrations of poverty to re-emphasizing neighborhood schools.

"Now is a good time to revisit the student assignment plan to ensure we are as efficient and strategic as possible," said candidate Aaron Pomis, who offered no specifics to change.

Others say the public yearns for stability after years of changes driven by the opening of new schools, followed by budget crunches and school closings.

"While the current system is far from perfect, in general, we should strive to avoid adjusting school assignments unless absolutely necessary," said candidate Elyse Dashew.

The lack of specifics isn't necessarily reassuring to voters.

"If you can't give a clear answer on this, how do I know if I want to vote for you?" said Christine Mast of Huntersville, a neighborhood-schools advocate who says she's heard "rumblings and rumors" that there could be a push to change the assignment plan. She sent her own six-question survey to candidates.

Even after getting answers from most, she said she isn't sure where everyone stands.

Concentrations of poverty

Today's approach has evolved from the 2002 "choice plan," created after a long legal battle ended court-ordered desegregation and race-based assignment.

The choice plan allowed families who didn't like their assigned school to request placement in magnets and other neighborhood schools - an approach candidate Hans Plotseneder would like to see return, with seats reserved in each school for students who want to switch.

However, CMS leaders backed away from letting students select other neighborhood schools when the choice plan created crowding in the most popular schools. Now, for the most part, CMS families choose between their assigned neighborhood school and magnets.

Many of the close-in Charlotte neighborhood schools are populated mainly by nonwhite students from low-income homes. Most current leaders and candidates say that poses academic challenges: In high-poverty schools, test scores and parent involvement are often low, and top teachers can be difficult to recruit.

But figuring out how to deal with that is the stumper.

This summer, the Swann Fellowship and **Mecklenburg ACTS**, local nonprofit groups that want CMS to break up those concentrations of poverty, polled candidates on whether they believe the district can meet its constitutional mandate to provide a sound, basic education "if the district continues to assign students such that the bulk of children are separated by race or socioeconomic status."

Five candidates - Ericka Ellis-Stewart, Mary McCray, Darrin Rankin, Lloyd Scher and Jeff Wise - said no (interview videos are online at www.swannfellowship.org). But when interviewers pressed on what the candidates would change, none offered a clear alternative. Ellis-Stewart talked about the importance of Charlotte's struggle to desegregate, and said "it's important to make sure we preserve that." McCray talked about getting more volunteers into high-poverty schools. Scher said he supports more magnets to increase diversity.

Rankin, after repeated questions, said diversity does "come down to student assignment, boundaries," but offered no specifics. In response to the Observer's questions, he said he doesn't support significant changes but would look at "well-needed adjustments" to boundaries.

Wise says he likes "the idea of neighborhood schools" but worries about lack of diversity. After a follow-up about whether he would use student assignment to create diverse schools, he replied, "I think so, but it goes back to having a lot of discussion."

In a recent opinion piece in the Observer, departing at-large board member Kaye McGarry wrote that "many candidates advocate revisiting student assignment and moving CMS from neighborhood schools to assigning students based on socio-economic diversity, which would mean a return to busing."

When asked for specifics, McGarry said, "I won't name names. You can just feel it and read between the lines."

Former board member Louise Woods, who helped conduct the Swann/ACTS interviews, said she was perplexed by McGarry's conclusion. "I didn't really hear anyone say they were going to undo the assignment plan and do something else," Woods said.

Defining "neighborhood"

The current CMS plan strives to balance diversity with schools close to home. Every student is assigned to a neighborhood or "home" school, but that may not be the closest school.

Tim Morgan, a district representative seeking a countywide seat, defends that plan as striking the right balance - plus providing stability by spelling out that the board will review the plan every five years.

Ken Nelson says boundaries should be redrawn to send kids to the closest school. In the Swann/ACTS interview, he said the idea that concentrations of poverty or minority students keep students from learning is "racist and disgusting."

Nelson, who has a preschool daughter, noted that his southeast Charlotte home is zoned for Rama Road Elementary, which has a 71 percent poverty level that does not reflect his neighborhood.

"I'm not happy about that," he said. "They have downgraded my property value. They have downgraded my child's potential future."

Keith Hurley said he, too, wants students assigned to the schools closest to home, with a backup assignment in case some schools get too crowded. He told the Swann/ACTS interviewers he doesn't think CMS should have schools that are "90 percent minority based, or 80, or 60," a description that fits many current schools. Asked later to clarify, Hurley said he has no problem with such concentrations if they reflect the neighborhood.

Larry Bumgarner is campaigning for more neighborhoods to have charter schools, which are public schools that don't report to CMS.

He'd also like to split the district and create separate "suburban systems."

