

CMS magnet plan will propose more seats, better busing in 2016-17

HIGHLIGHTS

Superintendent Ann Clark says Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools needs more magnet seats

Proposal to expand magnet busing appears likely

Board discusses role of magnets and neighborhood schools



Morehead STEM Academy, a K-8 school that specializes in science, technology, engineering and math, is one of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' popular magnets. **John D. Simmons** - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

BY ANN DOSS HELMS
ahelms@charlotteobserver.com

More seats in Charlotte-Mecklenburg magnet schools and better busing to get students there appear to be on the horizon, as Superintendent Ann Clark prepares to recommend changes next month.

At a Thursday meeting to discuss student assignment, Clark dropped broad hints about elements of her plan, which she'll present Oct. 13.

"We will be looking to expand high-demand magnets with waiting lists, which could be adding new magnets or adding seats at existing magnets. The goal is to increase magnet seats," Clark said in a follow-up email.

The timing is designed to approve changes for 2016-17, but Clark said some proposals could play out over several years.

The idea of letting more students into the specialized academic programs met with approval from several board members, who have said they want to break up concentrations of poverty and ensure all students have options for strong schools.

“Let’s face it, people, we are in a marketplace educational environment,” said board member Ruby Jones, who said magnets can keep families from leaving for charter and private schools.

“We’ve sort of had this idea that if we expand our magnets, we hurt our home schools,” board member Eric Davis said. “Throw that out the window.”

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CMS Superintendent Ann Clark

Clark talked about the upcoming magnet recommendations at a meeting of the board’s policy committee, which is considering guiding principles for a broader review of student assignment.

Consultants from Magnet Schools of America studied CMS magnets last school year. They presented an overview to the board in July, but members said they have yet to see a full report that includes findings on individual schools and programs.

Clark said she hopes to give them an executive summary next week.

End to shuttle stops?

Clark told the committee she plans to recommend changes to magnet busing based on the consultant’s report. The overview was critical of what board member Ericka Ellis-Stewart, a former magnet parent, has dubbed “the dreaded shuttle stops.”

During the recession, CMS cut transportation costs by requiring students at some magnet schools to gather at central locations for bus pickup and dropoff. The consultant’s report says that restricts access, a theme other board members have sounded as well.

If Clark proposes restoring neighborhood pickup for all magnet students, additional transportation spending would likely be part of her 2016-17 budget.

Clark declined to discuss details of her upcoming plan, including whether she will call for eliminating any magnet programs. But she said her overall goal is to increase, not decrease, the total.

For many years, magnet enrollment has been flat at about 20,000 students (CMS expects almost 148,000 total this year). The district limits seats in magnets, using a lottery if there are more applicants than spaces. Clark told the committee that CMS could expand magnets, using mobile classrooms as needed.

Big questions still ahead

Thursday’s talk is part of a broader review of student assignment, with a goal of making changes that would take effect in 2017-18. The committee talked about guiding principles but took no action.

The board’s current policy says that home schools – nonmagnet schools where assignments are based on geography – are the first priority, with every student guaranteed a seat “within proximity to where he/she lives.” It spells out standards for magnet schools, including a record of “high student achievement,” academically distinct programs and a diverse student population.

Davis noted that Wake County’s policy doesn’t make a distinction between neighborhood and magnet schools. Instead, he said, it calls for minimizing high concentrations of poverty and low-performing students at all types of schools. Davis spoke approvingly of changing the focus to “how do we create healthy schools,” but noted that defining “high concentrations” would be a challenge.

Even measuring student poverty has become increasingly difficult, as CMS changes its approach to offering subsidized meals. Eligibility for those meals has long been the standard, but 74 of the district's 168 schools now offer free meals to all students, which means they no longer have a count of qualifying students.

At Tuesday's full board meeting, Davis and board member Rhonda Lennon said the poverty level in CMS was about 61 percent last year. Scott McCully, the administrator in charge of student placement, said Thursday the correct tally is 56 percent (numbers for 2015-16 won't be available until November).

Ann Doss Helms: 704-358-5033, @anndosshelms

STAY ENGAGED

Next meetings

- **Oct. 8:** Policy committee discusses student assignment principles, 10:30 a.m., Charlotte-Mecklenburg Government Center, 600 E. Fourth St.
- **Oct. 13:** Full board meeting, including report on proposed magnet changes, 6 p.m., Government Center.
- **Oct. 15:** Policy committee discusses student assignment principles, 12:30 p.m., Government Center.

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