

Surprise CMS draft endorses neighborhood schools, income-based magnet priority

HIGHLIGHTS

Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board reveals draft assignment plan in last-minute addition to Tuesday's agenda

Students would continue to be assigned to schools near their homes, with family income as a priority for magnets

Board members say it's a big step forward, but tough details remain



Orange-shirted supporters of school diversity showed up at Tuesday's Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board meeting, joining green-shirted neighborhood schools advocates. **Ann Doss Helms** - ahelms@charlotteobserver.com

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A draft outline for student assignment changes, which Superintendent Ann Clark presented to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board Tuesday night, affirms that students would continue to be assigned to schools close to home, a move many parents and suburban elected officials have been clamoring for.

The draft also calls for family income to be taken into account in drawing boundaries and placing students in magnet schools, a theme other families and activists have pushed. Board members hailed the document as a major step in a review that has consumed and often polarized the community, though they acknowledged the toughest steps lie ahead.

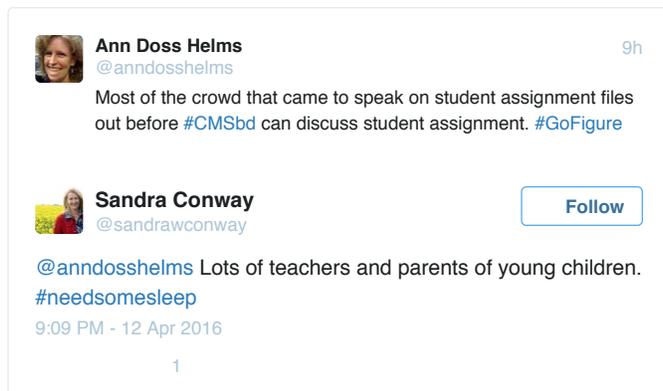
[Read the CMS draft of guiding principles]

"This document is a uniting document," said board member Rhonda Lennon, a proponent of neighborhood schools.

“We have been climbing a mountain and we’ve hit a peak. I am so relieved,” said Vice Chair Elyse Dashew, who has spoken about the need for school diversity. “We have more mountains to climb.”

A new group wearing orange “Our Community Our Kids” T-shirts turned out Tuesday to speak in favor of revising the district’s assignment policy to break up concentrations of poverty and increase racial and economic diversity. They joined a few green-shirted members of a group called All CMS Kids, which has turned out by the hundreds at past meetings to speak for neighborhood schools and against busing for diversity.

Neither group expected the board to discuss student assignment. The report was added after the meeting began, a little after 7 p.m., and many speakers filed out before it came up at 9:30 p.m. Board Chair Mary McCray urged the crowd to stay, but some tweeted that parents and teachers were trying to get home on a school night.



Board members will continue the discussion at a policy committee meeting at 10:30 a.m. Thursday. McCray proposed a public hearing on the guiding principles at 6 p.m. Wednesday, April 20, with a vote as early as April 26. Specific assignment decisions would come between May and November, taking effect in 2017-18.

The draft calls for:

- All students to have an assigned “home school within proximity to where he/she lives,” similar to what CMS currently does. Travel distance, school capacity and keeping neighborhoods intact are listed as factors to be considered for boundaries. The report also calls for “constructing attendance boundaries especially for newly established schools that contribute to a socioeconomically diverse student population.”
- Using magnets and other opt-in schools, such as high schools on college campuses, to offer families choices, with priorities for admission based on socioeconomic status. Students in persistently low-performing schools would get priority for alternatives, and magnets could be used to help improve low-performing schools.

Clark said she prepared the draft after talking extensively with board members and reviewing community views expressed in meetings and an online survey. Administrators Scott McCully and Akeshia Craven-Howell, who have led the assignment review, also helped create the draft.

McCray said student assignment wasn’t listed on earlier versions of Tuesday’s agenda because Clark and the board were still working on the report. “Even today Ann was calling people,” she said after the meeting Tuesday night.

As word got out on social media, neighborhood school advocates voiced relief and support. Matthews Mayor Jim Taylor, who has formed a task force to study splitting from CMS if it didn’t protect suburban neighborhood schools, tweeted “good call” and “the public has been heard.”



Jim Taylor
@jamesptaylor

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The public has been heard by @CharMeckSchools Board. About time & thanks for reaffirming this important principle twitter.com/anndosshelms/s...

9:47 PM - 12 Apr 2016 · Matthews, NC, United States

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8h

.@ElectPaulBailey on draft: Very good work. Voice of the public has been listened to.



Bill James
@meckcommish

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@anndosshelms so - we (neighborhood schools) won? @CharMeckSchools sides with us? Better late than never I guess

9:45 PM - 12 Apr 2016

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But more questions are bound to arise – including one raised by board member Ericka Ellis-Stewart, who asked how this move affects the board’s process for hiring a consultant.

Several board members urged everyone who has gotten involved to stay active in the discussion. Eric Davis said he hoped to see the orange shirts and the green shirts get together.

“We really need our constituents to talk to each other,” he said. “My child’s future is directly related to yours, regardless of what zip code we live in.”

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Lynn Wilson · Southern Methodist University

As someone on another forum so succinctly put it: "Beware of greeks bearing gifts. " (And, before the speech police attack full bore, no, this was not meant to demean Greeks, but rather to invoke the sage advice from a passage from classical literature.)

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Sharika Lucky

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