# Center for American Progress

# Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Charlotte, North Carolina

## Redefining the principalship

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| **Total school buildings: 160 total** | **Total enrollment: 141,171 students** |
| High schools: 28 | Hispanic: 18 percent |
| Middle schools: 39 | African American: 42 percent |
| Elementary schools: 89 | White: 32 percent |
| Alternative schools: 4 | Asian: 5 percent |
| | Other: 3 percent |
| | Economically disadvantaged: 54 percent[1] |

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, or CMS, serves the larger Charlotte area and Mecklenburg County in North Carolina. CMS has 160 school buildings that serve an ethnically diverse population of more than 140,000 students, more than half of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Historically known for its implementation of desegregation via busing in the 1970s as a result of the ruling in the famous Supreme Court case, *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education,*[2] the district continues to be recognized for successful implementation of solutions to complex problems. After receiving recognition as a finalist for the Broad Prize for Urban Education in both 2005 and 2010, the district won the award in 2011 and was cited for notable achievement gains and a significant reduction in the achievement gap for students in the district. Important partnerships with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, the C.D. Spangler Foundation, and with popular singer Josh Groban—who donated $150,000 for music education—have enabled the district to focus additional resources on the improvement of student achievement.[3]

CMS Superintendent Heath Morrison, who joined the district in July 2012, set strategic goals for CMS to be reached by the 2017-18 school year, including a primary focus on maximizing student achievement geared to 21st century needs. The district's strategic plan includes a secondary goal of "recruiting, developing and retaining a premier work-

force."[4] Understanding the importance of teachers and principals to student achievement, CMS has made the selection, retention, and development of high-performing teachers and school leaders a priority and has allocated significant energy, resources, and time to the effort.

CMS has also implemented two important initiatives for teacher and principal evaluation: the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process and the North Carolina School Executive: Principal and Assistant Principal Evaluation Process. The evaluation programs, which are based on the premise that feedback and accountability for actions will improve instruction and student learning, were developed by the state in 2009 in collaboration with Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, or McREL. The plan was revised in August 2012 to include a value-added student-achievement measure in the teacher-evaluation process.[5]

The North Carolina State Board of Education based its teacher-evaluation system on literature about 21st century expectations for students. However, there are two teacher-evaluation standards that set North Carolina apart from other states, and they concern teacher leadership and reflective practice. The North Carolina evaluation process is focused on the development of professional practice, as opposed to traditional evaluation systems that tend to focus on compliance or checklists of qualities and behaviors that may or may not improve teacher practice. North Carolina's teacher- and principal-evaluation systems are also designed to inform educator-preparation programs by making sure that the experiences and course work of these programs align with the higher expectations required to be successful in the state's public schools.

In the 2010 school year, CMS implemented the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process, which includes the following six state standards:[6]

1. Teachers demonstrate leadership.
2. Teachers establish a respectful environment for a diverse population of students.
3. Teachers know the content they teach.
4. Teachers facilitate learning for their students.
5. Teachers reflect on their practice.
6. Teachers contribute to the academic success of students.

However, CMS enhanced the six state standards to include customized indicators of strong instructional performance to help principals identify teacher actions that support the standards during classroom observations. Stressing the importance of having clear standards, Rashidah Lopez Morgan, the district's then-executive director of talent management, and Valda Valbrun, the district's executive director of organizational development, explained that CMS added language about instructional practice and descriptions of what rigor looks like to allow evaluators to give more precise feedback to teachers.

The development of the indicators has been key to providing a common language for principals to discuss instruction with teachers and has been a significant factor in the implementation of the teacher-evaluation process in the district. According to Morgan and Valbrun, the refinement of the indicators is an ongoing collaborative effort with district principals as they expand expertise needed to support the evaluation process.[7]

Components of the teacher-evaluation process are different for the various contract status levels of teachers. Probationary teachers participate in the self-assessment process and have an automatic professional-development plan. They must have two formal observations with preconferences and postconferences and a peer observation with a postconference. At the end of the school year, probationary teachers receive a summative conference and a summative rating form.

The evaluation process for career-status teachers varies depending on whether the cycle occurs in their license-renewal year. If the evaluation cycle is not in the license-renewal year, there is an abbreviated process that includes the self-assessment, a professional-growth plan, and informal observations only focused on standards 1 and 4—leadership and facilitation of learning. The summative conference includes standards 1, 4, and will include standard 6—student-performance data—when that standard is fully implemented in the 2014-15 school year. Currently, standard 6 does not have an impact on a teacher's evaluation score because the state wanted three solid years of data before implementing it. However, student progress has always been part of the evaluation system, since student-performance artifacts and documentation are collected as part of the five standards that are measured during the observation segment of the evaluation process. If the evaluation cycle for a career-status teacher falls during the license-renewal year, then the process consists of the self-evaluation instrument; professional-growth plan; one formal observation with a preconference and postconference; two additional observations, which can be formal or informal; and the summative evaluation conference and rating form. Demands on principal time vary from building to building depending on the percentage of probationary teachers on the staff and the number of career-status teachers seeking license renewal.[8]

As it did with the teacher-evaluation standards, CMS enhanced the North Carolina School Executive: Principal and Assistant Principal Evaluation Process and exceeded state expectations by adding 13 competencies to the eight state standards. The added competencies allow CMS principal evaluators to give feedback on dispositional behaviors that align with district beliefs and expectation.[9] The 13 competencies were developed by a cross-functional group of district leaders, which included principals, using a process based on existing research focused on the behaviors of successful principals. All district principals participated in vetting the competencies, which were dubbed "super standards" by the group because of the leverage they give principals to drive overall school improvement. These super standards include:[10]

1. Building diverse relationships
2. Establishing a culture of high performance
3. Delegation
4. Succession planning
5. Resource allocation
6. Effective communication
7. Conflict management
8. Data-driven decision making
9. Results orientation/ownership of outcomes
10. Visionary
11. Change leadership
12. Innovation
13. Coaching

The 13 competencies, the so-called super standards, have been correlated to state standards for easy reference for principals and principal evaluators. (see chart in Appendix A)[11] The competencies strongly align to five of the eight state standards, which are:

1. Strategic leadership
2. Instructional leadership
3. Cultural leadership
4. Human resource leadership
5. Managerial leadership
6. External development leadership
7. Micropolitical leadership
8. Academic performance rating[12]

For the managerial and external development state standards, a principal evaluator can assume that other standards are met if competence is shown on the super standards. Standards subsumed by the managerial and external development standards include:

1. School resources and budget
2. Conflict management and resolution
3. Systematic communication
4. School expectations for students and staff
5. Parent and community involvement and outreach
6. Federal, state and district mandates[13]

According to Morgan, the super standards are used in several ways: in the selection process for new leaders, to inform principal-preparation programs about district priorities, and to drive principal-professional development.[14] School officials emphasize that the work that went into creating the super standards has been the most valuable step in successful implementation of the principal-evaluation system, as the dialogue led to a higher level of buy-in among school leaders.[15]

The steps of the principal-evaluation process include an orientation, a pre-evaluation plan and preparation for an initial meeting, an initial meeting with a superintendent designee, data collection, a midyear evaluation, and a consolidated performance assessment. The district has developed guidelines for evidence and suggestions of ways for principals to demonstrate the competencies and standards required by state and local guidelines. A variety of artifacts, from a building-improvement plan to the design of new school initiatives, can be collected and presented by a principal during the evaluation process as a way to document growth and progress on individual goals that were set during a self-evaluation.[16]

Furthermore, the district is designing and refining systems of support to help principals become stronger instructional leaders. The demands of the teacher-evaluation system require school leaders to understand what the curriculum should look like in practice and to conduct coaching conversations that help teachers grow.[17] For central-level administrators, two essential questions guide the planning of professional development for principals: "How do we coach principals to higher performance?" and "How do we identify the gap between skill and will?"[18] Based upon these guiding questions, CMS has instituted broad-based training initiatives to improve the quality of instructional leadership for the district from selection, induction, and continued development of principals and assistant principals.

CMS has also partnered with selected school-leader preparation programs. In collaboration with Winthrop University, the district has launched the Leaders for Tomorrow program, where aspiring school leaders complete a 42-hour master's degree program.[19] The School Executive Leadership Academy at Queens University, a partnership between the university's business and education schools, is a 14-month licensure program that has been aligned with CMS priorities for school leadership.[20] Aspiring High School Principals is an action-learning, problem-based preparation program for those who already have licenses but who aspire to high-school-principal positions.[21] CMS' New Leaders program—spearheaded by New Leaders, a national nonprofit that develops transformational school leaders—is consistent with the group's trainings in eight states around the country.[22] CMS' New Leaders program is focused on building the skills required to lead the district's highest-need schools.[23] Participants in these various principal-development programs still must successfully compete for positions in the district. For ongoing development of district principals, the preparation programs often provide follow-up refresher courses and coaching.[24]

There is a strong feeling within CMS that a district must take responsibility for the training of practicing principals to meet increased instructional-leadership demands. When CMS implemented the teacher-evaluation system in 2010, monthly principal meetings were dedicated to practicing the use of the evaluation and observation rubric. District principals and leadership expanded the list of behaviors that would support observation of the standards. As Valbrun explains, "We want school leaders to discuss with teachers what they saw in an observation, but we want them to move past that to share what they didn't see and to ensure change and growth in teacher practice."[25]
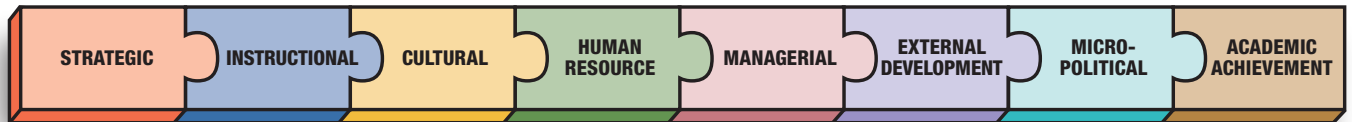
The district has added district-level professional development that is focused on coaching and how to have conversations with teachers about changing practice. Community superintendents, who serve as principal supervisors, reinforce instructional coaching during learning-community meetings and meet monthly in order to calibrate feedback and coaching strategies used with principals.[26] The community executive directors conduct walk-through visits and provide guidance and support to principals to make sure that everyone is clear on what good teaching looks like. Moreover, district principals have formed study groups to examine problems of practice, with many indicating that teacher observation, feedback, and coaching are their most pressing issues and expressing the need for further study and collaboration.[27]

CMS has also created a teacher-leader support structure to assist principals with instructional-leadership activities. With the support of Public Impact, CMS has implemented what it terms an "opportunity culture" across a subset of schools, where strong teachers assume formal leadership roles such as that of an instructional facilitator or similar roles. Teacher leaders can assist the principal in the observation process and provide coaching feedback to teachers. The point of the program is to have great teachers expand their reach to more classrooms. Sometimes, these teacher leaders might be responsible for the development of a small group of teachers or assist with the implementation of instructional-technology initiatives.[28] Selected school buildings have also added a dean of students position, which supports principals with student-related issues, such as discipline, interpersonal counseling, anger management, and substance-abuse intervention.[29]

In addition to the implementation of opportunity cultures, district efforts have been focused on building capacity and skill for principals and assistant principals. CMS is also working on professional development and capacity building for executive directors and community superintendents who are responsible for coaching and mentoring principals.[30] For district-level principal supervisors, meeting agendas focus on coaching strategies and ways to help principals organize observations and give teachers substantive feedback that will improve the delivery of classroom instruction. According to Morgan, as CMS continues to expand and develop principal support and training programs, the principal position is becoming "much more true to the title of instructional leader."[31]

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Leadership Competencies
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# North Carolina Standards for School Executives

| STRATEGIC | INSTRUCTIONAL | CULTURAL | HUMAN RESOURCE | MANAGERIAL | EXTERNAL DEVELOPMENT | MICRO-POLITICAL | ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT |

## CMS Competencies, Skills and Beliefs for School Leaders

► **Belief in children:** Believes all children can and will achieve. Draws attention to equity gaps and works urgently to close gaps.

► **Building relationships and influencing others:** Positions oneself as a leader among various stakeholder groups. Influences and motivates others to get results. Actively listens to others and creates team-oriented, cooperative and engaged culture. Effectively manages conflict. Has excellent communication skills.

► **Establishing a culture of high expectations:** Sets ambitious goals and continually monitors progress towards goals. Holds others accountable to expectations.

► **Instructional leadership:** Understands research-based instructional school practices and focuses attention on teaching and learning. Uses observation and student-performance data to accurately assess levels of student learning. Effectively facilitates professional learning communities to promote increased achievement.

► **Integrity:** Aligns actions with beliefs. Promotes, models and exhibits high standards of honesty, integrity, fairness, stewardship, trust, respect and confidentiality. Exhibits ethical and moral behavior in everyday business conduct. Is self-reflective and uses feedback to improve performance.

► **Stamina, initiative and persistence:** Persists to overcome challenges. Goes above and beyond what is expected to achieve desired result. Responds calmly and rationally in high-stress situations.

► **Strategic decision-making and problem-solving:** Develops clear vision, and develops logical priorities, goals and strategies to achieve vision. Is adept at problem-solving. Analyzes relevant data and stakeholder input to identify the problem; generates suitable solutions that address the problem; chooses the best course of action among options. Makes sound and timely decisions. Effectively generates and utilizes resources needed to meet goals.

► **Talent management and development:** Accurately assesses effectiveness of staff and effectively coaches staff to improve performance.

# Endnotes

1 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, "Fast Facts," available at http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/mediaroom/aboutus/Pages/FastFacts.aspx (last accessed March 2014).

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3 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, "History of CMS," available at http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/mediaroom/aboutus/Pages/History.aspx (last accessed January 2014).

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5 Public Schools of North Carolina and McREL, "North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process" (2012), available at http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/effectiveness-model/ncees/instruments/teach-eval-manual.pdf.

6 Ibid.

7 Rashidah Lopez Morgan and Valda Valbrun, phone interview with authors, November 22, 2013.

8 Ibid.

9 The Wallace Foundation, "Recent Leader Standards From Six Principal Pipeline Districts: 2013" (2013), available at http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/principal-training/Documents/Recent-Leader-Standards.pdf.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "North Carolina School Executive: Principal Evaluation Process" (2008), available at http://www.ncpapa.org/forms/Evaluation%20Instrument.pdf.

13 Ibid.

14 Morgan and Valbrun, phone interview with authors.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Winthrop University, "Master of Education in Educational Leadership," available at http://www.winthrop.edu/coe/edleadership/ (last accessed June 2014).

20 Queen's University of Charlotte McColl School of Business, "School Executive Leadership Academy," available at http://www.queens.edu/Academics-and-Schools/Schools-and-Colleges/McColl-School-of-Business/School-Executive-Leadership-Academy.html (last accessed June 2014).

21 Morgan and Valbrun, phone interview with authors

22 New Leaders, "Charlotte," available at http://www.newleaders.org/locations/charlotte/ (last accessed June 2014).

23 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, "Principal Pipeline Initiative," available at http://cmsppi.com/ (last accessed January 2014).

24 Ibid.

25 Morgan and Valbrun, phone interview with authors.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 OpportunityCulture.org, "Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and Project L.I.F.T.," available at http://opportunityculture.org/our-initiative/participating-sites/cms-project-lift / (last accessed January 2014).

29 Rashidah Lopez Morgan, phone interview with authors, January 21, 2014.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.