

Testimony

“Fostering Innovation in Education”

Congressional hearing

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Good morning, Senator Hagan. Thank you for the opportunity to tell you and your colleagues about some of the innovative work we’re doing in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. I’d like to tell you about three important initiatives now under way in CMS.

All three of the initiatives are focused on improving the performance of adults, rather than children. That’s deliberate. We know that if our teachers, principals and administrators do a great job, then our students will achieve more. Every student can learn – as educators, we know that. We just have to do a better job of teaching every student. Strategic Staffing, Measuring Teacher Effectiveness and Pay for Performance are three CMS initiatives intended to increase the performance of teachers, principals and district employees.

Strategic Staffing

The Strategic Staffing initiative began in the 2007-2008 school year with seven schools and has increased each year. As of the 2009-2010 school year, we have put it into place at 20 of our most academically challenged schools. Without intervention, any underperforming school can find itself trapped in a cycle of failure: Ineffective teachers and weak administrators lead to poor academic performance, which makes the school unattractive to the successful teachers and strong principals who could improve it. With the same staff and the same problems year after year, poor results become the norm – and a culture of failure takes root.

Strategic Staffing addresses this challenge by putting some of our most successful principals and teachers into some of our most struggling schools. The results have been remarkable, with student achievement in some schools increasing by more than 20 percentage points on state tests in a year. Strategic Staffing is based on five tenets:

- A great leader is needed, a principal with a proven track record of success in increasing student achievement. Also, great teachers will not go to a troubled school without a great leader as principal.
- A team with a track record of success needs to go to the school so a person is not alone in taking on this challenging assignment; there is strength and support in numbers.
- Staff members who are not supportive of reform need to be removed from the school.
- Principals must be given the time and authority to reform the school, and be freed from the district list of “non-negotiables” that constrain autonomy.
- Not all job assignments are equal in difficulty and compensation should be varied to match.

Let me tell you about one school in CMS that has benefited from Strategic Staffing: Sterling Elementary. At the end of 2008, student performance on state tests had fallen dramatically over the preceding two years. By 2008, only 29% of students had tested at proficient or above in both reading and math compared to 52% in 2006. Sterling also had enrollment challenges. Nearly 90% of students were categorized as economically disadvantaged and Sterling’s students with Limited English Proficiency were increasing. Furthermore, surveys showed the school’s teachers were becoming increasingly unhappy with their jobs and with the school.

A year later – in spring 2009 – the picture was very different. Sterling was moving in a new direction. The percentage of students scoring at proficient or above on EOG tests had risen dramatically, far exceeding average district increases in math and reading: a 23% jump in math and a 14% jump in reading (without retesting). The school had become orderly, with smooth transitions between classrooms and sparkling facilities. Teachers tracked student progress and sent reports to parents, and the teachers were using twice-weekly, 90-minute planning periods to write common assessments, review data, and discuss what needed to be done to help student achieve even more.

As Sterling Elementary shows, Strategic Staffing can turn a struggling school around. Academic performance, as measured by proficiency on state tests, has risen at nearly every school where we have employed it. Leadership at a school matters because the principal is the key lever for change. With the right principal and a strong core team in place, achievement rises and the school improves in other ways as well.

Measuring Effective Teaching/Pay For Performance

For too long, many people have casually assumed that teaching can be done by anyone willing to assemble a lesson plan and show up in class. The truth is, it can't. Great teachers bring enormous amounts of skill and heart to the job. Not everyone has the ability to be a great teacher – a point once made by the great violinist Jascha Heifetz. After a brilliant career playing the violin, Heifetz took a job as professor of music at UCLA. Someone asked him what had prompted his move to teaching, and he replied, "Violin-playing is a perishable art. It must be passed on as a personal skill. Otherwise it is lost. I remember my old violin professor in Russia. He said that someday I would be good enough to teach."

At CMS, we believe that every child deserves a teacher who is good enough to teach. Every child deserves an effective teacher because it's so directly linked to achievement: The most important school-based factor in student learning is the classroom teacher. Great teaching doesn't benefit just one group or one kind of student. Great teaching lifts every child in a classroom – and when that happens, student achievement goes up.

So CMS is working to recruit and retain great teachers by reshaping the way we train, evaluate and compensate our teachers. This is a very broad-based reform initiative that is being launched in multiple ways.

We began this work two years ago with a Teacher Incentive Fund-Leadership for Educators' Advanced Performance initiative that is helping us pilot measures of teaching effectiveness using student learning objectives as a measure. CMS has also partnered with nearby Davidson College and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to create a Charlotte Teachers Institute, which will train CMS teachers in scholarly content using the Yale National Initiative as a model. In addition, we have been invited to take part in a national two-year study to measure effective teaching funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. That study, which will look at several districts across the United States, is part of the Gates-funded Strategic Data Project at Harvard, a national education initiative to help education leaders use data effectively to improve instruction and increase student achievement.

CMS is the focus of another study by the Strategic Data Project that is the most in-depth research done on our teachers to date. The Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard, led by Dr. Jon Fullerton, examined teacher performance in the district as well as recruitment, retention, development and credentials. The study used results in reading and math for grades four through eight for the period from 2003-2009, and it

found very little correlation between teacher effectiveness, as measured by student performance, and advanced degrees.

Some positive effects were detected for teachers with National Board certification. Other factors affecting teacher performance that were evaluated by the study included which undergraduate institution the teacher attended and whether a teacher was hired late (after the school year began). The study also found that nearly all of the improvement that occurs as teachers gain experience comes in the first three years of teaching. It also found that how a teacher enters the profession makes little difference in performance after five years – non-traditional routes to certification do not affect performance.

At CMS, we are finding that great teachers are diverse. They come in all shapes and sizes. Some have master's degrees. Some don't. Some have National Board certification. Some don't. Some are veterans. Some are in the second or third year of teaching.

That diversity makes it impossible for us to accurately predict who's going to be a great teacher and who isn't. But we are learning what is not an accurate predictor: National research and research done by Harvard on CMS in particular shows that degrees and experience are not predictors of teaching excellence.

Therefore we are focusing on managing teachers' performance by evaluating them based on student learning. Pay for performance allows teachers to set high goals and be promptly rewarded for attaining them. This is a more equitable system than seniority or degree-based compensation because it is focused on student outcomes. What matters most is how well the student is educated, not the teacher!

For teachers, pay for performance is actually a five-part plan. The five parts are:

Define it: Clearly define and measure teacher effectiveness.

Hire it: Base teacher recruitment on effectiveness.

Develop it: Provide access to training to help teachers improve.

Manage it: Provide accurate, timely and relevant data on teacher performance

Pay for it: Revise the compensation structure so it is aligned with performance.

Standards of effective teaching must be based on effectiveness in the classroom and student outcomes – how much students learn. We are using five core principles in the development of standards to measure effective teaching: We will work with our employees on this new way to measure performance. We will approach this work in a

thoughtful, deliberate way. We will be truthful and transparent about this work. We will communicate clearly and regularly about this work. We are going to be innovative and creative, and we will resist false either-or choices.

We are beginning with teachers, but ultimately, all employees in CMS will be managed using pay for performance. We will develop a system of multiple indicators of effectiveness for each job in the district and use it to measure and compensate all employees.