

Compete and cooperate: New direction for Mecklenburg schools

By Ann Doss Helms
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Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and area charter and private schools are gearing up to compete and collaborate at the same time.

The new year ushers in the season when families choose where their kids will go to school in August. The competition can be fierce – but leaders of all types of schools have launched talks about working together to benefit students and teachers.

Possibilities range from shared teacher training to letting other schools use the bulk purchasing power of CMS.

“It was pretty universal that people felt like it was worth exploring,” Cheryl Turner, director of Sugar Creek Charter School, said after an organizing meeting last week.

Heath Morrison, who became CMS superintendent in July, called the meeting, which drew about 40 heads of schools. His vision is to broaden the kind of partnerships that are already happening around Mecklenburg County.

For instance, teachers from CMS and Sugar Creek Charter have swapped visits to talk about educating low-income kids in a K-8 setting. The private Providence Day School sends reading buddies to CMS’ Rama Road Elementary and paid for a summer reading camp for those students. An engineering instructor from the private Charlotte Latin School brought his flight-simulation software to CMS’ McClintock Middle to bolster its robotics and engineering program.

While cooperation is common, especially among independent schools, the notion of a large-scale collaboration across public-private boundaries “seems like such a radical new concept for the group,” said Tom Franz, head of Trinity Episcopal School, who attended the organizing meeting.

Morrison has announced his intention to win back students from private and charter schools by offering more and better options within CMS.

But, he says it should be a “friendly competition,” recognizing that many families – and even individual

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students – use various types of schools in their quest to get an education. If the Charlotte area is to excel at creating successful young adults, the competitors must all play a part, he said.

“There was a good conversation,” he said of the first meeting. “What we all talked about is how do we look forward, not backward.”

Friction remains

CMS and charter schools have the most in common – and the most tension between them.

Charters are tuition-free public schools run by independent boards, authorized by the state. The N.C. General Assembly recently lifted the cap on charters, leading to a boom in the Charlotte region. Each Mecklenburg student who chooses a charter shifts county, state and federal money that would otherwise go to CMS.

Morrison and the CMS board recently voted to ask state lawmakers to shift chartering authority to local school districts.

Morrison says his goal isn't to take over charters, but to compel early conversations between would-be charter operators and CMS officials about how their plans to serve students might mesh.

The CMS proposal calls for applicants rejected by a school district to have the right to a state appeal.

That's still a bad plan, says Eddie Goodall of Waxhaw, a former state senator who heads the N.C. Public Charter Schools Association. He compares giving a school district authority over charters to letting Wells Fargo decide whether customers can switch to Bank of America.

“They have adversarial interests right now,” Goodall said. “That certainly wouldn't work.”

Common ground

But Goodall and others say there's room to work together. Goodall said it makes sense for school districts to do a preliminary review of charter plans. He'd also like to see a combined report on the success of all Mecklenburg students in public education, with results for CMS and charters.

“I don't want to continue this divide,” he said.

One of the most promising areas, many say, is for teachers from all types of schools to come together for training and consultation, especially when technology and educational standards are changing so rapidly.

For instance, Trinity Episcopal has already adopted a “balanced literacy” approach to reading and writing that CMS is embracing now. CMS elementary teachers have come to the uptown religious school to share in workshops, and CMS principals-in-training have visited to see the approach in action.

Franz cites the Teaching Fellows Institute as a prime example of working together for all kinds of schools. The institute, created in 2005 with a grant from the McColl Family Foundation, provides professional development programs to encourage and retain the best teachers in all types of schools in Mecklenburg County.

Public and private schools sometimes compete for hiring, Franz says, but having a strong corps of teachers throughout the county is “going to be good for kids in general.”

Morrison discussed the possibility that CMS could use its bulk purchasing power to help other schools, and perhaps even use its fleet of buses to help charter schools with transportation. Morrison said he's open to anything that helps other schools, as long as it doesn't take away from CMS.

A working group emerged from the first meeting to report back on practical options for moving ahead. The school leaders will continue their work in 2013.

Helms: 704-358-5033



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