



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

STRATEGIC STAFFING FOR SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS: BREAKING THE CYCLE OF FAILURE IN CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG SCHOOLS

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Jonathan Travers and Barbara Christiansen

Context

There's a lot of work happening all over the country to "turnaround" schools. Federal stimulus programs, including Title 1 Improvement Grants and Race to the Top, have caused many states and school systems to focus on how to address schools trapped in a cycle of failure and "turn them around." On the school level, there are some shining examples. But on the system level, there are few stories that describe how to take action within the context of managing all the resources available, to turn around failing schools while maintaining the quality of all schools.

In this case study of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Strategic Staffing Initiative, Education Resource Strategies (ERS) and the Aspen Institute tell the important story of how one district is harnessing the critical levers of school leadership and teaching excellence to turnaround schools in the context of a larger school system. The system's top talent is now focused on their toughest challenges, the district leadership is actively supporting their efforts, and initial results are promising.

Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, this is the first of a series of case studies describing what Charlotte-Mecklenburg did. Here we see steps taken at the district level. Next, we'll explore what happened on the school level. The stories are instructive and inspiring.

Introduction

At the end of the school year in spring 2008, Sterling Elementary School in Charlotte, North Carolina was struggling. In state End-of-Grade (EOG) testing, student performance had plummeted over two years; in 2008, only 29% of students had tested at proficient or above in both reading and math compared to 52% in 2006.¹ And the school had challenges with its enrollment including a high level of poverty (nearly 90% of students categorized as economically disadvantaged), and a growing number of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students who required differentiated support.² Furthermore, as evidenced in teacher surveys (see below), Sterling's teachers were becoming increasingly unhappy with their jobs and with the school.³

Metric from teacher survey	2006	2007	2008
Teachers rating job satisfaction as 'average' or 'below average'	27%	26%	36%
Teachers rating overall effectiveness of school as 'average' or 'below average'	13%	21%	42%

One year later, in spring 2009, Sterling was on a new trajectory. 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 a retest).⁴ In addition to this improvement in student performance, the entire atmosphere of the school felt different; chaos had been replaced with orderliness. Transitions between classrooms during the school day went smoothly, and the new custodial staff maintained sparkling facilities. Teachers were accountable for regularly tracking student progress and sending reports to parents. And teachers were using their twice-weekly, 90-minute planning periods to write common assessments, review data, and discuss what needed to be done for further improvement.

What accounts for these dramatic changes? Sterling Elementary is one of 20 schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) where the district has employed Strategic Staffing, a critical and hard-hitting component of the district-wide turnaround approach. Given the current national focus on finding ways to lift the lowest-performing schools out of failure, the early success of the CMS strategy contributes some important lessons. While some solutions propose closing failing schools down or handing them to outside expert organizations to fix, CMS is evolving a differentiated strategy that begins with developing a comprehensive understanding of the needs of the lowest-performing schools, providing appropriate support, and taking dramatic action to change staff where needed. To fully understand Strategic Staffing, it is important to be aware of the district's process for developing this initiative, and what CMS learned from earlier turnaround strategies prior to Strategic Staffing.

¹ CMS website: profile for Sterling ES: <http://apps.cms.k12.nc.us/departments/instrAccountability/schlProfile05/profiles.asp>

² Ibid. Percent of LEP students went from 14% in 2006 to 27% in 2008.

³ Ibid.

⁴ With a retest, the increases in percentages of students at or above proficient were even higher: a 32% increase in math and a 24% increase in reading.

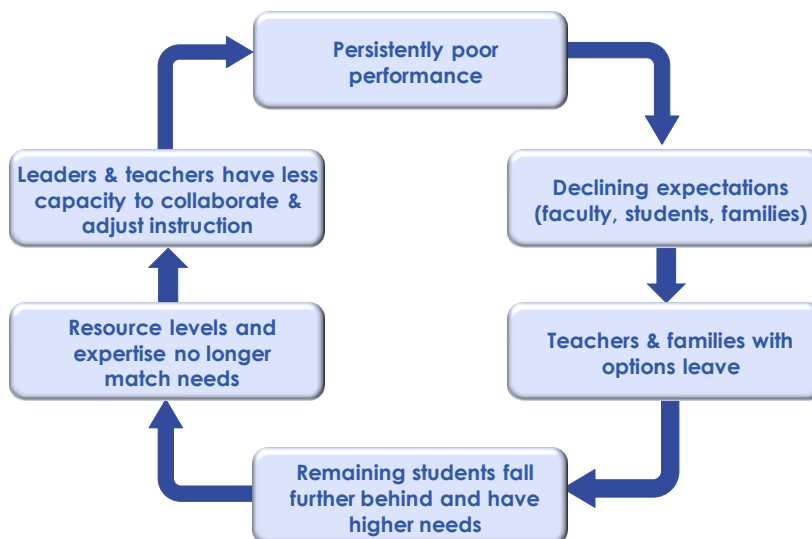
Background

In February 2006, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education decided to articulate a new vision and mission in order to focus the district's efforts:

- **Vision:** CMS provide all students the best education available anywhere, preparing every child to lead a rich and productive life.
- **Mission:** CMS maximize academic achievement by every student in every school.

In order to lead the district in the execution of that mission, the Board hired Dr. Peter Gorman as superintendent in summer 2006. Though CMS had a national reputation for high and improving performance, Gorman quickly recognized that this performance was uneven. Roughly one-third of the district's 165 schools had significantly lower student performance results and improvement seemed to be slowing, or even reversing, in many of these schools. Gorman assigned a team—including himself, the chief operating officer, the chief of staff, the chief academic officer, and the associate superintendent for K-12 curriculum—to analyze the characteristics and practices in these schools as the starting point for developing a strategy for turnaround. The team concluded that some of these schools seemed trapped in or on the verge of a cycle of failure that suggested a new approach for improvement⁵ (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Cycle of School Failure



⁵ The Parthenon Group's "Achievement Zone Planning Interim Update" (July 13, 2007).

Raising student performance to CMS' standards of excellence would require actions that would break the cycle as well as accelerate the pace of improvement. To do this the district needed a strategy for each school that included several "cycle-breaker" components:

- Strong leaders who build high expectations and ownership
- Effective teachers with a proven track record
- Collaborative teacher teams
- Removal of teachers who would hinder reform
- Expertise and resources to serve students who have fallen far behind their peers

As they worked to develop the specific strategies for addressing these critical elements, team members established several principles to follow:

- Schools must receive support over a period of time to ensure sustained improvement
- "One size **does not** fit all;" among low-performing schools, different characteristics might require different strategies
- Strategies must align with district priorities and state requirements
- Strategies should incorporate lessons from national and CMS best practice

Developing the First Turnaround Strategy: Achievement Zone

Based on these specific elements needed to successfully turn around low-performing schools, CMS' *Strategic Plan 2010: Educating Students to Compete Locally, Nationally and Internationally* included the establishment of the Achievement Zone (AZ): a non-geographically based cluster of schools with low student achievement. These schools would be first in line for resources, such as proven teachers and principals, public relations and volunteer assistance, support staff, and maintenance. This would mean that the AZ schools would go to the front of the line if they requested maintenance or called the technology help desk. Also, teacher vacancies at an AZ school would be filled before those at other schools.

The formation of the Achievement Zone was part of a district decentralization that also created six geographic areas, called learning communities. This enabled the district to structure the AZ staff in the best way possible to provide additional central support and oversight to AZ schools. An area superintendent was appointed to oversee the eleven schools in the Achievement Zone, whereas typical area superintendents oversee 20+ schools. The AZ central staff was assigned the district's highest performers in each department (e.g., transportation, human resources). Furthermore, the AZ staff was larger than that of other learning communities; it included a second executive director, a data expert, and a public relations/communications expert.

CMS leadership chose the initial AZ schools for various reasons: Some were in corrective action under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) while others were designated as low performing by the state of North Carolina. The idea was that the roster of schools in the Achievement Zone would be fluid, with schools being able to move in and out as their student performance changed. The

district felt an urgency to include several of the low-performing high schools in the Achievement Zone, because significant grant dollars had been invested in these schools prior to Gorman’s arrival, without any visible gain in student achievement. Therefore, the public spotlight was aimed at these high schools.

Overview of the Achievement Zone

- Eleven schools, not in a geographical cluster.
- Mix of high schools, middle schools and elementary schools, but a disproportionate number of high schools (five) compared to other learning communities.
- Schools can move in and out if performance changes.
- Schools are first in line for resources.
- More central support and oversight than other schools; area superintendent and his staff support the schools in curriculum and instruction, discipline, professional development, communications/partnerships, human resources, Exceptional Children, transportation, maintenance and discipline.

The AZ strategy went into effect for the 07/08 school year, with a mix of elementary, middle, and high schools (but a disproportionate number of high schools compared to other learning communities). These schools had characteristics that differed from the district average: higher percentages of LEP students, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students.⁶ Because all of these schools had high rates of poverty and were thus designated as FOCUS (Finding Opportunities; Creating Unparalleled Success) schools, a CMS designation for high-needs schools, they were already receiving additional teacher resources⁷ beyond the district average.

Over the course of the Achievement Zone’s first year, many of the schools showed increases in student proficiency on reading, math, and science assessments. However, Gorman and his team realized that the Achievement Zone could not be CMS’ only turnaround strategy, for one strategy did not fit all low-performing schools. For example, some had strong leadership but needed more central support, while others had weak leadership and/or high leadership turnover. Gorman had entered CMS believing that the principal was the key lever for change, and he continued to point to the research about the importance of strong leadership in turning around schools. Although AZ schools had first priority for receiving proven teachers and leaders, the AZ strategy did not place proven principals in schools, nor did it emphasize a core collaborative team.

Therefore, Gorman and his staff decided to develop another turnaround intervention focused on strong leadership and teacher teams that worked well together. The intervention would be called the Strategic Staffing Initiative, and it was based on the idea that high-performing staff—both leadership and teachers—were needed to turn around low-performing schools. Great principals attract great teachers, and having both in place meant that they could support each other in reform.

⁶ The Parthenon Group’s “Achievement Zone Planning Interim Update” (July 13, 2007).

⁷ Schools receiving additional teacher resources had the option to swap out teacher FTEs for instructional coaching FTEs.

Key Questions

The remainder of this case study will explore the following questions:

- What is the Strategic Staffing Initiative model and what refinements has CMS made to it?
- How does Strategic Staffing work to turn around schools in the context of an overarching accountability strategy?
- What are the key success factors for implementing Strategic Staffing?

Developing the Strategic Staffing Initiative

In order to put in place a strategy that included the placement of several high-performing employees at a struggling school, Gorman knew that the district would need to move principals and teachers between schools. Early in his tenure as superintendent, in the context of much discussion about inequity in the district, Gorman had sought the Board's opinion regarding the reassignment of principals and teachers. Although the Board policy gave the superintendent the right to make involuntary reassignments, the Board was divided on the issue. This led Gorman to reconsider how effective involuntary reassignments would be. "This lack of agreement," he said, "led me to look toward a 'pull' strategy, trying to entice teachers and staff to change schools, where needed, by their own choice instead of a 'push' strategy to forcibly move teachers."

Gorman conducted additional research on the topic of push-versus-pull strategies. A conversation with Justine Hastings, a professor of economics at Yale who had studied worker and consumer behaviors, confirmed the importance of a pull strategy; Hastings told Gorman that people who are transferred against their will have a drop in performance and will look for work elsewhere. Based on further conversations with principals and teachers exploring how to create these incentives, Gorman developed five tenets for the CMS Strategic Staffing Initiative model (see inset at right).

Tenets of the Strategic Staffing Initiative

1. 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.
2. A team 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.
3. Staff members who are disruptive and not supportive of reform need to be removed from the school.
4. Principals must be given the time and authority to reform the school.
5. Not all job assignments are equal in difficulty and compensation should be varied to match.

In order to launch a Strategic Staffing Initiative based on these five tenets, many decisions needed to be made: how to select schools and principals for the first cohort, and how to time the process and communicate it to stakeholders and the public. Gorman assembled a team of people to further develop the strategy, including members of the curriculum, accountability, and communications departments; human resources staff, and school leaders.

First, the team had to establish the criteria for selecting the pilot cohort. Team members determined that eligible schools were those where students demonstrated low academic achievement, and where student achievement data was declining or flat. This could include schools that the state had designated as low performing, schools that qualified for restructuring, schools that were moving through the levels of NCLB sanctions, or schools where CMS executive staff had lost confidence in the leadership. Also included in the selection process would be a look at the leadership: turnover rates, principal evaluations, and so forth. The team also determined that the Strategic Staffing Initiative would focus on elementary schools, and to a lesser extent, middle schools. The rationale for this decision was that the Achievement Zone was already targeting several of the low-performing high schools.

The Strategic Staffing team next turned its attention to the selection of principals. Team members decided that eligible principals must have shown gains in student achievement that surpassed a year's worth of growth in a year's worth of instruction.⁸ Furthermore, principals selected would need to commit to staying at Strategic Staffing schools for at least three years.

It was determined that principals would be able to choose their own teams, which could include several key positions (see inset at right). Teachers with proven success were defined as those with successful past summative evaluations, and with demonstrated growth in student achievement.⁹ Teachers would also be expected to make a three-year commitment to the Strategic Staffing school. The rationale behind including an assistant principal and a literacy facilitator in the team was that these roles would be key contributors to a powerful collaboration to improve instruction; these roles needed to be filled by people who shared the principals' philosophy and could immediately begin implementing his/her approach. In addition to choosing a team to enter the Strategic Staffing school, the principals would be able to choose as many as five teachers to leave the school for reassignment elsewhere in the district, as outlined in the tenets of the model. Area superintendents were asked to support principals in the reassignment of these teachers to other schools.

Cohort I Strategic Staffing team members

- Principal
- Assistant principal
- Literacy facilitator
- Behavior management technician (only at schools that lacked this position)
- Up to five teachers with proven success

From the beginning, the group knew that one potential challenge would be attracting proven principals and staff to participate in the Strategic Staffing Initiative. These teams would be taking on tremendous reform challenges in schools that had experienced consistently low performance,

⁸ The bar was set at an average growth score of at least .04 over two years, based on the academic change formula in the State of North Carolina's ABCs Accountability Model. A score greater than zero roughly means the student has gained more than a year's worth of knowledge and skill for a year's worth of instruction.

⁹ Ibid.

and the results of Strategic Staffing would be closely scrutinized. Therefore, the group tasked with developing the initiative knew that the right combination of incentives would be important in building the best teams. They concluded that principals, assistant principals and literacy facilitators would receive a 10% pay supplement to their base salaries, which would also be factored into retirement. Teachers would receive an initial recruitment bonus of \$10K plus retention bonuses of \$5K in the second and third years, for a total of \$20K in bonuses. Therefore, the incremental cost of salaries and bonuses¹⁰ to implement Strategic Staffing at one school—for a principal, assistant principal, literacy facilitator and five teachers—would be less than \$175K for the three-year period.

Putting Strategic Staffing in the Context of an Overall Accountability Framework and Reform Strategy

The Strategic Staffing Initiative is complemented by CMS' overall accountability framework. The three elements of this framework are¹¹:

- **School Progress Reports** include test scores, an explanation of testing measurements, parent and student survey results, safety-audit results, and a letter from the principal. They also include an assessment of the school's progress towards the goal in the district's strategic plan.
- **School Quality Reviews (SQRs)** are conducted by review teams (led by an external reviewer from Cambridge Education) which evaluate a school's student achievement, teaching and learning, curriculum, leadership and management, learning environment, and involvement of parents and the community.
- **School Improvement Plans** build on the information from School Progress Reports and SQRs. They outline a needs assessment and an action plan for the school to attain certain outcomes.

Having in place these mechanisms to account for school performance—and identify successes and challenges particular to each school—supported the district's development of differentiated turnaround strategies, such as the Strategic Staffing Initiative.

Additionally, CMS uses other reform practices in tandem with Strategic Staffing. In particular, CMS has in place a practice called Freedom and Flexibility with Accountability (FFA) in which principals with a strong record of results receive the freedom and flexibility to try instruction-related practices that may not work at all schools, but might work in their particular school. For example, some principals have shifted schedules, divided classrooms by gender, or combined classrooms for parts of the day. All of the principals at Strategic Staffing schools are also

¹⁰ Not including costs for retirement and any other benefits linked to salary level.

¹¹ "School Quality Review: Frequently Asked Questions" (www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/accountability/cfsi/Documents/SQR%20Frequently%20Asked%20Questions.pdf).

operating under this FFA initiative, which gives them the latitude to make the changes that they deem necessary at their schools.

With Strategic Staffing, CMS created a turnaround strategy that works in the context of its solid accountability framework and builds on the data and knowledge captured in School Progress Reports, School Improvement Plans, and School Quality Reviews. Additionally, the district has augmented the Strategic Staffing Initiative by creating overlap with additional reform practices, such as FFA. The district continues to adjust the initiative to ensure that Strategic Staffing works in concert with other reform practices.

Implementing Strategic Staffing

The group anticipated that the Strategic Staffing Initiative would launch in the 2008-09 school year, and so the next task was to apply the various criteria developed to select the first cohort of schools and principals. To select schools, the team created a matrix that included the selection criteria. Populating this matrix for schools in the district made it apparent which schools most needed Strategic Staffing. Seven schools were chosen for Cohort I of Strategic Staffing: six elementary schools and one middle school. Average enrollment at these schools was 618 students, and the schools had significant numbers of students testing below proficient on assessments (see Figure 2 for detail on the schools selected).

FIGURE 2: Schools Selected for Cohort I of Strategic Staffing Initiative

School name	Enrollment (07-08)	Econ. disadv. (07-08) ¹²	Reading: % proficient or above (07-08)	Math: % proficient or above (07-08)	Science: % proficient or above (07-08)
Briarwood Elementary	605	86%	31.8	45.7	9.8
Bruns Avenue Elementary	522	96%	18.8	43.8	1.1
Devonshire Elementary	549	93%	33.9	54.2	24.6
Ranson Middle	1 148	75%	32.0	39.0	21.1
Reid Park	560	93%	22.8	30.8	2.2
Sterling Elementary	600	88%	34.6	52.4	19.6
Westerly Hills Elementary	340	90%	32.4	41.7	12.1

The group next used the criteria for principal selection to identify the pilot cohort of principals. By December 2007, seven principals—six from within the district and one from another district—had agreed to participate in Strategic Staffing. CMS leadership had worried that it would be difficult to recruit principals, but that was not the case. As Gorman explained, “We think we hit the right mix of incentives and standards; in two years, I’ve never had a principal refuse to

¹² Percentage of economically disadvantaged students, from profiles for each school on CMS website (<http://apps.cms.k12.nc.us/departments/instrAccountability/schlProfile05/profiles.asp>).

participate in the Strategic Staffing Initiative.” Indeed, principals from Cohort I talked about the compelling prospect of leading a Strategic Staffing school. As Principal Kendra March of Westerly Hills Elementary School explained, “When the superintendent calls you about something, you know that it’s important. I knew that he was serious about working to improve Title I schools. The initiative was a bold step, and I was excited to be a part of it.”

With principals slated to begin their work in Strategic Staffing schools in June 2008—in order to give them a few months to develop an understanding of the school before their teams joined them in the fall—the district needed to find the best way to communicate the strategy to affected schools and the public. The executive staff knew that this would be a sensitive issue, because seven schools would be losing excellent principals to struggling schools. Internal communication was the first important step; the initiative was communicated to principals, and CMS leadership met with teachers who were eligible for selection by a Strategic Staffing principal.

To communicate the initiative to interested external stakeholders, Gorman presented and explained the initiative to the Superintendent’s Teacher Advisory Council at its monthly meeting, and then shared the strategy with the public at one of his weekly media briefings. The seven Cohort I principals joined Gorman as he explained:

To raise student achievement across the district, we must work together as a district. Moving principals is not a step we have taken lightly. We have given this a lot of thought and consideration, and we have concluded that it can advance student achievement. We all have the same goal—helping kids learn. This Strategic Staffing Initiative is designed to help kids learn by improving the learning environment in some of our lowest-performing schools... This plan may make life tougher for some principals, who may lose a good teacher or gain a struggling one, but it’s important to remember that our struggling schools belong to all of us. We are one district and we share our successes and our failures. So all of us must work together as a district to improve our schools and our scores.

At the briefing, the principals shared their plans for turning around the schools in which they would be working. And in following weeks, the principals had many other conversations in various forums to explain the initiative and the reasons for its importance. Also, area superintendents met with the faculties of all affected schools—those losing or gaining a principal. Additionally, the communications department prepared a toolkit that included letters to parents and the community.

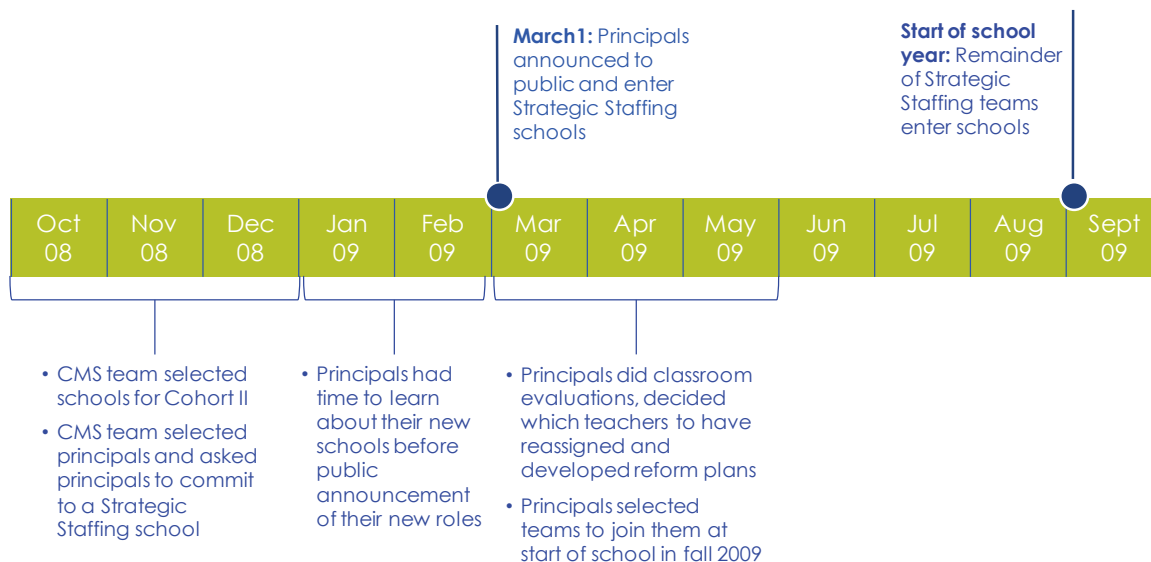
Refining the Strategic Staffing Initiative Model

After fully launching Cohort I in fall 2008, CMS began to plan for the launch of the second Strategic Staffing Initiative cohort. The district sought input from principals participating in Cohort I: What could be improved?

One major piece of feedback from principals was that they would have liked more time to become knowledgeable about their new schools and determine which teachers would be on their teams;

principals in Cohort I started at their new schools in June 2008, just as the school year was ending, and had little time with school in session to develop an understanding of the school’s particular challenges and strengths. Given this timing, Cohort I principals had also been unable to use their own classroom observations as a basis for choosing which teachers to have reassigned. As a result of this feedback, CMS adjusted the timeline so that principals in Cohort II started at their new schools on March 1, 2009. The former principals left the school on the same day; they were either demoted or dismissed. This adjustment to the timing gave the new principal about six months before the start of school to adapt to the school and formulate a reform strategy. The other members of the principals’ teams joined their new schools in fall 2009, when schools opened for the new academic year. (See Figure 3 for a visual timeline of Cohort II’s selection and introduction to the Strategic Staffing schools.)

FIGURE 3: Timeline of Selection and Launch for Cohort II of Strategic Staffing Initiative



The district also made a couple of additional refinements for Cohort II. The position of behavior management technician was no longer included in a principal’s team. (This position was eliminated from the district entirely.) Also added was a requirement that only teachers on improvement plans could be reassigned elsewhere by a Strategic Staffing principal, meaning that the selection of reassignments was subject to a principal having followed the formal process of first placing a teacher on an improvement plan. This modification may present challenges if principals find that there are teachers who deter reform yet do not have low performance that merits an improvement plan. Another change was in regards to a principal’s selection of his or her team. For Cohort I, there had been no limit to the number of teachers moving from any one school to a Strategic Staffing school. But for Cohort II, CMS leaders decided to make sure that no single school lost more than three people; district leadership did not want the initiative to injure other district schools. This requires central monitoring, because each Strategic Staffing principal chooses team members separately, and does not know whether other principals are also requesting people from

the same schools. Therefore, as these principals submit their requests for team members, the office of the chief academic officer ensures that no school loses more than three people.

In anticipation of launching Cohort III for the 2010-11 school year,¹³ CMS leadership turned its attention to formalizing the training and preparation process for principals. Some elements of the preparation process have evolved organically. For example, principals in Cohort I offered to act as mentors to principals in Cohort II, and they established these relationships without any formal oversight from the district. However, CMS leadership also wanted to create a more structured process for principals to prepare to enter the Strategic Staffing schools, with the idea that such training would increase their ability to turn around low-performing schools. CMS decided to partner with Education Resource Strategies (ERS) to design this process. The project aims to provide principals with several elements of preparation before they start at Strategic Staffing schools in March: context, vision, and design. Figure 4 gives additional detail as to these elements.

FIGURE 4:

Element of preparation	Detail
Context	As much information as possible about their new school
Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A solid grounding in the school turnaround research • A solid grounding in strategic resource use • Knowledge of the lessons learned from prior Strategic Staffing principals • Inspiration and ideas from seeing successful turnaround schools in action
Design	A Strategic School Design draft that fits the school context Team members who fit the vision and the Strategic School Design

In order to provide principals with context, ERS assembled dossiers on each selected Strategic Staffing school, including data such as student demographics, staff lists, class size, budgets, student performance (by grade, subject, and student type), and teacher indicators (e.g., years at CMS and student test-score growth). To support principals in developing a vision for reform, ERS provided a summary of research on school turnarounds, case studies describing previous CMS turnaround efforts, and a training session on strategic resource use. To spark networking and ensure the transfer of lessons from earlier strategic staffing efforts, Cohort III principals participated in panel discussions with current Strategic Staffing School principals. And to help principals develop a Strategic School Design draft,¹⁴ ERS will have a series of discussions with principals to review design elements and decide on trade-offs. The result will be two to three Strategic School Design templates (for each principal) that include schedules, staffing templates and intervention models

¹³ In February 2010, CMS announced the six principals that would participate in Cohort III; the principals moved to their Strategic Staffing schools on March 1.

¹⁴ Strategic School Designs are templates for how to organize a school, including elements such as the master schedule, staffing plan, class sizes and teacher loads, teacher teams and collaborative planning time. Every school makes trade-offs in how resources are used, and the key to Strategic School Designs is that they make these trade-offs in informed and deliberate ways based on a school vision and theory of action.

for serving struggling students. Lastly, ERS will assist principals in thinking through how to pick teams that support their vision and school design.

CMS leadership anticipates that this more formal training and preparation process will better prepare principals to enter schools equipped with critical resources: the knowledge of how best to turn around a low-performing school, lessons learned from experienced Strategic Staffing Initiative principals, and designs for best utilizing the resources available to them.

For Cohort III, the district is also implementing a variation on the typical Strategic Staffing Initiative model, because CMS leadership noticed that there were some low-performing schools that already had a high-capacity principal in place, based on prior track record and district leadership judgment. Therefore, two of the principals participating in Cohort III are staying put at their schools, but are bringing in Strategic Staffing teams to support reform, and receiving the financial incentives related to the initiative.

For future cohorts, CMS is considering another variation on the model that would not deplete the district's school leadership ranks: a new principal trained through New Leaders for New Schools would be combined with an assistant principal from the Leaders for Tomorrow¹⁵ program and a team of new Teach For America corps members. As Ann Clark, chief academic officer, explained, "Strategic Staffing is an evolving model that builds on learning from the previous year. No two years have looked alike, and that's by design."

Recognizing Key Success Factors

CMS leaders identify several key success factors at the district, state, and national levels. Gorman noted that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education had adopted a Theory of Action in 2006 that strongly supported reform and accountability. This provided much of the momentum required to implement an initiative such as Strategic Staffing. Clark observed that one of the most important elements of success in Strategic Staffing is a courageous superintendent who is willing to communicate the compelling argument for such a strategy and accept criticism of it. Clark explained, "In my mind, it's an easy argument to make: We need to put our best talent into our neediest schools. The banking industry wouldn't hesitate to put a new leader and team into a struggling branch to turn it around. The same practice is relevant in schools." However, although the argument may sound rational, it still requires the conviction and strength of a superintendent to back it up.

This strong district leadership was also important to principals at Strategic Staffing schools. Cohort I principals articulated the importance of having district support. They meet with Gorman every other month, and feel like they have a direct line to the superintendent if needed. Principals

¹⁵ Leaders for Tomorrow is a program that trains educators to become school principals. The program is a partnership between CMS and Winthrop University, supported by local business funding.

also referenced the importance of support provided by area superintendents. Nancy Guzman, principal at Sterling Elementary, said, “The area superintendent was wonderful about backing me when there were complaints. He never second-guessed me; he had confidence in me.”

At the state level, North Carolina is a right-to-work state, meaning that required union membership is prohibited. This makes it easier for CMS to implement an initiative such as Strategic Staffing. And at the national level, Clark points to the fact that the time is right for such initiatives. For example, the U.S. Secretary of Education is focusing on teacher effectiveness and an independent national study to measure teacher effectiveness is being funded by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Also, some of the funding being distributed as part of the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009* (ARRA) will invest in turning around low-performing schools. As Clark says, “The energy of the country is moving in this direction, so districts can ride the tide.”

Identifying Challenges in Implementation

Implementing an initiative like Strategic Staffing, which requires movement of many different positions between schools, presents certain challenges. One is the issue of principal supply; the success of Strategic Staffing is largely reliant on the caliber of the principals, and there is a finite pool of principals within CMS. For this reason, CMS is exploring other models (as mentioned earlier in this case study), such as using new principals trained by New Leaders for New Schools.

A related implementation challenge is that there are ramifications on other schools of leadership turnover. One example of this turnover is Bain Elementary, which will have three different principals in three years due to Strategic Staffing: Bain lost one principal to Cohort I (starting in June 2008), and then lost the new principal to Cohort III (starting in March 2010). Moving an exceptional principal out of a school, even if it seems to be stable and high performing, can impact intangible factors, such as school culture, and tangible factors, such as student test scores.

Measuring Impact of Strategic Staffing Initiative

The Strategic Staffing Initiative was designed with the understanding that the new principal has three years to operate in a no-pressure environment, meaning that the district will hold those principals accountable at the end of the three years, but will also recognize that it takes time to get traction and create real turnaround. Principal Steve Hall of Bruns Avenue Elementary School (in Cohort I) commented on this approach: “It’s beneficial to have breathing space with respect to trying new strategies to improve student performance; this allowed us to work for long-term transformation as well as short-term gains.”

However, the district has been tracking a range of metrics along the way to assess the progress being made and to improve the Strategic Staffing Initiative from year to year. The most important of these are student achievement metrics, but additional data gathered includes—but is not limited to—the following:

- Student attendance
- Number of disciplinary occurrences (e.g., suspensions)
- Teacher retention
- AYP status
- Teacher survey results

Although Cohort I principals are not yet being held accountable for results, their schools are already seeing significant gains in student achievement. In Cohort I schools, students were tested in spring 2008, prior to new principals entering the schools in June 2008 and full Strategic Staffing teams arriving in fall 2008. By testing in spring 2009, all schools were showing an increase in the percentage of students at or above proficient (Levels III or IV) in at least two of the three subjects (reading, math, science) assessed. The average increase (across all Cohort I schools) in percentage of students at or above proficient was about 6% for reading, 10% for math, and 9% for science, without retesting.¹⁶ Figure 5 shows this data in full, and indicates where schools improved (green shading) and declined (yellow shading).

FIGURE 5: Percent of Cohort I Students at/above Proficient in EOG testing: 2008 vs. 2009¹⁷

Cohort I Strategic Staffing schools	Reading 2008	Reading 2009 (w/o retest)	Math 2008	Math 2009 (w/o retest)	Science 2008	Science 2009 (w/o retest)
Briarwood Elementary	31.8	33.5	45.7	42.6	9.8	25.3
Bruns Avenue Elementary	18.8	28.8	43.8	48.7	1.1	15.3
Devonshire Elementary	33.9	43.1	54.2	69.8	24.6	46.1
Ranson Middle	32.0	37.0	39.0	56.1	21.1	24.9
Reid Park	22.8	24.7	30.8	36.7	2.2	14.0
Sterling Elementary	34.6	48.3	52.4	75.6	19.6	22.7
Westerly Hills Elementary	32.4	33.5	41.7	47.0	12.1	7.5

In the case of reading and math, the average progress in Strategic Staffing schools exceeded the district average, while progress in science fell slightly below the district average.¹⁸ This is particularly impressive given that overall student performance in many of these schools had been declining in the years prior to the launch of Strategic Staffing. Also, several schools had especially extraordinary gains in the percentage of students at or above proficient in certain subjects. For example, there was a 16% jump in science at Briarwood Elementary, a 16% increase in math and a

¹⁶ After retesting, average progress at Strategic Staffing schools was even higher, but 2008 testing data are prior to retesting, so comparing 2009 testing data prior to retesting is the most accurate assessment of growth.

¹⁷ Reading and math data are a composite of grades 3-5, while science data shown are for grade 5 only (there is no science assessment for grades 3-4).

¹⁸ Average increases in percentage of students at/above proficient throughout the district: 2-3% for reading (2% for grade 3, 2% for grade 4, 3% for grade 5), 2-3% for math (3% for grade 3, 3% for grade 4, 2% for grade 5), and 10% for science (grade 5).

22% increase in science at Devonshire Elementary, a 17% jump in math at Ranson Middle School, and a 23% increase in math at Sterling Elementary.

At Cohort II schools, EOG tests were administered only a couple of months after principals began in March 2009, so it is too early to draw any conclusions regarding student performance.

Going Forward

CMS continues to plan for the future of Strategic Staffing. The district is currently (as of March 2010) launching Cohort III, and these six principals will be joined by their full teams in fall 2010. Including Cohort III, there are 20 schools participating in the Strategic Staffing Initiative.

However, there are certain limitations on the district's ability to continue the Strategic Staffing Initiative indefinitely: a dwindling number of schools for which Strategic Staffing could be effective and a decreasing pool of proven school leaders to run these schools. CMS is beginning to address the latter issue with variations on the typical Strategic Staffing model, as explained in the "Refining the Strategic Staffing Model" section of this case study. And in regards to the number of schools remaining for Strategic Staffing, Clark articulates her vision as follows: "We have 58 Title I schools right now, and in my mind, we have to continue Strategic Staffing—in whatever hybrid format works—until we have all of our Title I schools on a very positive student achievement trajectory, or having arrived at and are maintaining a high number of students at grade level or above." As CMS moves forward with this initiative, the district leadership will face many new decisions, such as how extensively to use Strategic Staffing (i.e., at how many schools) and how to transition schools out of Strategic Staffing after the three-year period is finished.

Implementing Strategic Staffing in a subset of district schools has also added impetus to CMS leadership's efforts to create a more systemic approach for improving teacher and leader effectiveness. The district's *Strategic Plan 2014: Teaching Our Way to the Top* includes several key strategies targeted at teacher and leader effectiveness, such as:

- Clearly define and measure teacher effectiveness
- Base teacher recruitment and selection on effectiveness, not on qualifications
- Recruit and retain top talent for school-level positions
- Revise compensation structure to reflect a focus on performance

Strategic Staffing is further reinforcing the importance of strong and aligned teachers and school leaders, and this has had a catalytic effect on CMS' decision to think more expansively about these reforms.

Conclusions

The knowledge that Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has gained in its development of turnaround strategies, particularly the Strategic Staffing Initiative, can be beneficial for other districts struggling with the challenge of persistently low-performing schools. While there are certainly particular factors in CMS that support success of Strategic Staffing, there are many variations of this strategy—with the critical components being a proven school leader and a core collaborative team—that could be tailored to other schools and districts.

The components of an effective turnaround strategy include¹⁹:

- **A transformational leader** who can build a culture of high expectations and ownership of student outcomes.
- **High-capacity teams of teachers** with know-how and expert support to collaborate to adjust instruction using assessment data on student progress.
- School designs that **prioritize core academics and provide time and individualized interventions** for students to catch up.
- **Resources and central support** to implement their turnaround vision.

As the CMS experience demonstrates, it is also important to remember that a turnaround strategy does not exist separately from a district-wide school support and accountability framework. Such a framework is essential for initiatives such as Strategic Staffing to succeed. Before developing differentiated supports and interventions such as Strategic Staffing, a district must have in place the ability to measure student growth and school performance, and to identify what is and is not working. Furthermore, as districts develop turnaround strategies, they must be thoughtful about where they use their strategies; the particular problems at a school must dictate particular interventions.

The Strategic Staffing Initiative is demonstrating that turnaround strategies with certain components tailored to a particular school can be highly effective in altering school cultures and improving student performance. Gorman commented, “There’s not a single silver bullet to fix troubled schools, but I think the parts of Strategic Staffing that helped it succeed in CMS could be successfully applied elsewhere.”

Ultimately, at the core of the Strategic Staffing Initiative is the belief held by CMS leadership that all students deserve a great principal and excellent teachers. As Principal Steve Hall of Bruns Avenue Elementary School said, “It’s the moral thing to do. This is the single most ethical educational initiative I’ve ever been involved with as an educator.”

¹⁹ Education Resource Strategies framework.

About Education Resource Strategies

Education Resource Strategies (ERS) is a non-profit organization dedicated to changing the way people, time, and money are used in urban education so that all students receive the support they need to succeed.

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Education Resource Strategies
1 Brook Street
Watertown, Massachusetts 02472
Tel: 617.607.8000 | Fax: 617.607.8957
www.educationresourcestrategies.org



The Aspen Institute
One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036-1133
Tel: 202.736.5800 | Fax: 202.467.0790
www.aspeninstitute.org/education