

A letter from the superintendent

Unleashing educational excellence: The time is now

To the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education:

At Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, our commitment is to provide a personalized environment of academic excellence that prepares every child, every day, for a better tomorrow. The 2014-2015 budget proposal is our collective opportunity to advance this goal in the coming school year. Over the past several years, we have made significant strides. CMS students outperformed their peers in other urban districts on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in math and reading. Average SAT scores and the number of students taking Advanced Placement courses are on the rise. We have expanded academic choices and programs for our students. Our dropout rates are declining and our graduation rates have risen to a record high of 81% last year. We are proud of these accomplishments. We also acknowledge that there is more we must do to build on these positive trends and prepare all children for college and career success.

Building on these trends will be challenging but together we will rise to the occasion. The educational landscape has changed over the past five years. Student enrollment has grown over six percent since 2008-2009, outpacing our operating budget which has grown four percent. Increases in day-to-day operating costs have exceeded our operating budget growth, resulting in tough staffing and program cuts. For example, the CMS operating budget has increased \$48 million since 2009 while health and retirement costs alone have increased nearly \$61 million. Average per pupil spending in the state has dropped to 48th nationally. Salaries for CMS employees have been stagnant while those for other city and county employees have increased. As is the case across North Carolina, average salaries for our teachers rank 46th in the nation – making it harder to attract and retain top talent for our students. Meanwhile, the bar for academic achievement has been raised with the adoption of Common Core State Standards and the implementation of Read to Achieve legislation. To continue to prepare every child for a brighter tomorrow, we must accelerate our level of investment in our students.

This budget recommendation represents the voices of our employees, students, parents and community as shared through our annual budget survey, community engagement forums and numerous superintendent coffees and work sessions. It seeks to better serve students by focusing on four key areas: making our employee compensation more competitive, increasing academic choice and personalization for students, broadening the social and emotional support services we offer our students and schools, and expanding our literacy initiatives in the early grades so that every child is prepared to become a life-long learner.

A high priority in the 2014-2015 budget proposal is making our employee compensation more competitive. We are losing too many of our outstanding employees to other states which pay more than we do. Our employees have had one small raise in five years. If the average full-time employee was a single parent with two children, seventy-seven percent of them would make below the threshold for a Mecklenburg County living wage. If part of a two-parent household with two children, fifty-nine percent would make less than a living wage. The economic disparity for our teachers has been well documented in national rankings. We're in the bottom five states for average teacher pay (salaries for teachers in the middle of their careers). Our teachers earn \$10,000 less than the national average and as much as \$7,000 less than those in neighboring states. If we're going to compete successfully with other states and districts, as well as other industries offering stronger compensation packages, we must address this. Every CMS employee plays a part in helping our students succeed. Now is the time for all of us to support the district's employees with a meaningful increase - one that makes clear how much the citizens of Mecklenburg County value our employees' important contribution to educating the community's children. Our proposed budget directs \$26.7 million in county funds to provide at least a three percent raise for all employees and allow for an even greater increase if the state provides additional salary support. We will continue to advocate with the state to make employee salaries more competitive with the national average. We need the support of our Mecklenburg County community to help make salaries for CMS employees - 83% of whom are Mecklenburg County residents - more competitive locally no matter what the state chooses to do.

Another priority is increasing academic choice and personalization. CMS is committed to providing programs to meet the individual academic needs of our students. Our families and our students have been clear in their support for increased academic choice. This budget proposal includes \$3.8 million, \$1.9 million from county funding, to expand the choices we offer students. These include:

- iMeck Academy
- Hawthorne Academy of Health Sciences
- Advanced Manufacturing Entrepreneurship High School
- Middle College program expansion with Central Piedmont Community College
- Early College program on a UNCC campus
- Long Creek Pre-K-6 Montessori
- and numerous science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) schools and programs

It also includes \$1.6 million to provide a digital platform that can be used to further personalize instruction and learning for every student.

For many of our students, we must also remove barriers to learning. We know that every student can learn at high levels. But some of our students come to school with

challenges that may get in the way – domestic violence, mental illness, fear, poverty or homelessness. Many children, regardless of their socio-economic circumstance, have social or emotional needs that can impede academic success. To help us better meet the needs of our students, we are seeking \$3.7 million in county funding to begin a four-year plan to provide more counselors, psychologists and social workers for our schools, as well as additional supports for targeted schools.

A student's ability to read by the end of third grade has long been recognized as a predictor of future academic performance. CMS is making a pledge to have all students reading on grade level by the end of third grade. Accomplishing this means we must plant the seeds of literacy well before third grade. To help our youngest learners build the foundation for later success, we are seeking \$1.2 million in county funds to provide intensive training to literacy teachers in grades one through three. This will complement our plans to expand our Pre-K program, offer summer reading camps for rising first through third grade students and add more literacy materials in our classrooms.

These four areas represent our commitment to moving our district forward in the 2014-2015 school year. We also remind you that CMS continues to grow, and so do many of our operating costs including preventive maintenance and repair, utilities, health insurance costs and retirement costs. These plus the money we will need for new student growth, charter pass-through costs and maintaining additional space all combine to push our sustaining costs higher next year. We have budgeted these increases, including the raise for all employees, at \$41.8 million.

In all, we are seeking nearly \$403 million in county money -- \$46.2 million more than we received last year -- to provide the educational supports our students, staff and community deserve. It's an appropriate request because everyone in Mecklenburg County benefits from strong public education. Preparing our community's children for a bright, prosperous future is one of the most important investments we can make. This budget proposal reflects our dedication and commitment to the goal of educating every child, every day, for a better tomorrow. It's called the superintendent's recommended budget but it is truly the community's budget because it represents proactive outreach and intensive listening to our stakeholders. I hope you will join me in fully supporting and advocating for this funding request. The time is now!

Warm regards,

Dr. Heath E. Morrison

