



[Commentary](#)

Where's the outrage?

How many Black students need to fail before we pay attention?



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By Arthur Griffin Jr.
September 8, 2021

Arthur Griffin Jr. is a former Chair of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education.

The last Facebook post of Heather Heyer, the young white woman killed in Charlottesville, Virginia, during the 2017 counter-protest against white supremacy, read: "If you are not outraged, you're not paying attention."

Likewise, if the 2021 annual African American student-performance report card isn't outrageous, then you are not paying attention to our local school system.

We can stop the crocodile tears. We can stop the convulsion of promises to do better. Rather, recognize that we have slipped into a decades-long downward achievement spiral for African American students – and it needs an immediate reversal.

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There's an adage in the African American community: "When white folks catch a cold, Black people get the flu." The most recent student achievement data released by Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools mimics this saying exactly.

Academic performance for African American students within CMS declined two to three times that of white CMS students.

The decline didn't just start.

The downward spiral started in 2010, when former Superintendent Peter Gorman closed several schools located in Black communities. The community was outraged with the merging of several predominately Black K-5 elementary schools with 6-8 middle schools, done without consideration of the negative impact of having middle schoolers learning in a facility built for primary students.

The resulting outrage was short-lived. Soon after this decision, Project Lift was announced, with one of its strategic goals being to have 90% of seniors graduate college- or career-ready. Also, there was a promise of \$55 million targeted to nine predominately Black schools.

Shortly after the launch of Project Lift, the Chetty Study ranked Charlotte last among the 50 largest U.S. cities and Mecklenburg 99 out of 100 counties in upward mobility for poor children, mostly Black and Brown. The Chetty Study outraged our local leaders, and **Leading On Opportunity** was born out of this revelation. One of its strategic goals was to increase the college and career readiness of African American students. Simultaneously, former CMS Superintendent Heath Morrison launched the Beacon Schools Initiative, focused on 14 Center City schools; focused on improving the academic performance of African American and Hispanic students.

Just a year later, in 2015, former Superintendent Ann Clark launched the North Star Reading Initiative, focused on improving the reading skills of African Americans students. By 2018, Dr. Clayton Wilcox unveiled Breaking the Link Report and CMS 2024 Strategic Plan, "What Matters Most."

Presently, CMS Board Chair Elyse Dashew and Superintendent Earnest Winston are rewriting the 2024 Strategic Plan with Student Outcomes Focused Governance.

Each of the earlier initiatives promised, but failed to deliver, a transformed culture, sustainable results, key professional development, improved leadership, additional instructional resources, increased family-community engagement, differentiated support, accountability, and talent management.

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Project Lift failed to achieve its academic goals, with seven of nine targeted schools still low performing; The Beacon Initiative failed to achieve its academic goals, with nine of 14 schools still low performing; North Star Reading Initiative failed to achieve its goals, with a whopping increase of 10 times the number of schools with 50% or more of its 3rd grade students reading at level 1, the lowest reading level.

Classroom teachers didn't fail. They did exactly what they were told to do. School leadership failed our students and teachers.

In fact, CMS third grade College and Career Readiness reading scores declined across the board, and the number of low-performing schools increased from 37 to 42 prior to COVID19.

CMS Schools by Percentage of Third Graders at College and Career Ready on EOG (2014-2019)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
At 80% or more	4	8	9	6	4	1
At 70% or more	22	22	19	18	13	16
At 60% or more	34	28	37	28	28	27
From 40% to 59%	20	27	29	31	33	33
Below 40%	48	48	41	48	49	49
Total Schools	102	103	107	107	110	109

Major slide to middle over past 6 years. Number of lowest performing pretty stable.

CMS Schools by Percentage of Third Graders at Level 1 on EOG (2014-2019)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Below 20%	52	45	51	50	50	46
At 20% to 29%	22	25	21	20	19	18
At 30% or more	28	33	35	37	41	45
At 50% or more	1	6	4	2	5	11
Total Schools	102	103	107	107	110	109

Decline from 51% to 42% of total schools

Major increase in number at 30% and 50%+ Level 1.

Source: Read Charlotte

The current rewriting of the 2024 Strategic Plan, coupled with Student Outcomes Focused Governance, offers little hope so far.

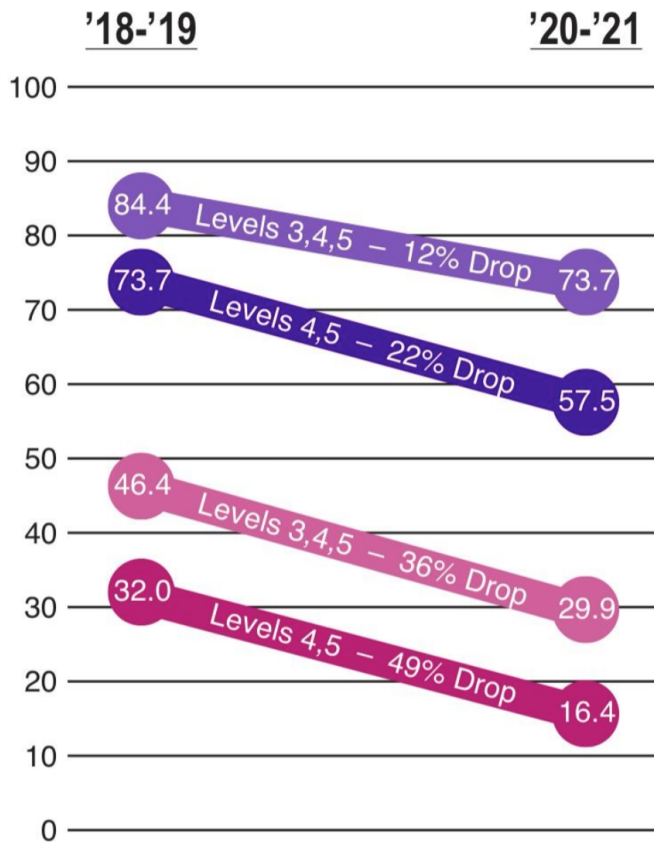
At a CMS Board of Education workshop on April 30, 2021, the Board was asked by its consultant, "What was the total percent of Board time spent on student outcomes (achievement) from January 1, 2021, to April 30, 2021?" Individual Board members and the superintendent's answer ranged from 0% to 5%.

Basically, the school board and superintendent admitted spending little to no time focused on student achievement, at the same time telling the public the exact opposite. (There's a plan, and we are working our plan.)

Here's the result of the School Board working a non-existent plan.

CMS Performance on All Subjects (combined) by proficiency standard (Level 3 & above, Level 4 & above)

White Students African American Students



– Source: <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/2020-21-school-assessment-and-other-indicator-data>

Where is the outrage?

How many Black students need to fail before we pay attention; before we get involved; before we attend school board meetings; before we engage at individual schools; before you join the PTA; before you join the School Improvement Team; and before you volunteer at your child's school or closest school?

Are you paying attention now?

2 Comments

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