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Report warns of dire needs at CMS

District can't improve low-performing schools without money to back efforts, Gorman says.

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Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools must take dramatic measures to improve its lowest-performing schools, Superintendent Peter Gorman and a consultant told the school board Tuesday.

And leaders must figure out how to do that while slashing spending in a recession, Gorman added. The board spent almost 3 1/2 hours Tuesday wading through data, preparing for a Friday session to start planning the 2009-10 budget.

Gorman estimates the district could fall about \$70 million short of what it needs to keep services steady.

“When we're talking about the numbers we're talking about, there's some bad decisions to be made,” he warned.

A consultant's report presented Tuesday seems likely to spark lively discussion about several CMS practices – from using school poverty levels to award extra money to giving principals more leeway on spending.

Jonathan Travers, director of the nonprofit Massachusetts-based Education Resource Strategies, said CMS can't make major districtwide gains without turning around its lowest-performing schools, which house a disproportionate number of impoverished and failing students.

Travers said current efforts, such as creating a special “achievement zone” for struggling schools and letting star principals recruit proven teachers to turn around weak schools, are “good prescriptions to the right diagnosis.” But he said – and Gorman agreed – it will take more to make a big difference.

Gorman said he believes he'll have to replace more principals, offer more pay incentives and eventually reassign teachers against their will to get better results at all the schools that need help.

The board, which includes two new members, offered little reaction Tuesday night. They plan to delve in Friday, when Gorman says he'll roll out some early budget proposals.

The consultants, paid by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, spent four months studying CMS data and visiting schools. Their report doesn't tell the board how to cut the budget or distribute its money. But it does pose some challenges and questions. Among them:

School poverty levels: Some board members have questioned the accuracy of the lunch-subsidy numbers used to tally poverty in schools – and the wisdom of using flawed numbers to parcel out tens of millions of dollars.

Travers said there's a strong correlation between high numbers of students getting lunch aid and low test scores. But for middle and high schools, he said, the number of students failing exams at their previous school could provide an even stronger predictor of the need for extra aid.

Bureaucracy: CMS spends a relatively small part of its budget on central administration compared with other districts Education Resource Strategies has studied, Travers said, making it unlikely the district can protect schools by slashing spending on central offices.

Small classes: CMS may not be getting the best results by hiring extra teachers to shrink class sizes in high-poverty elementary schools, Travers said, suggesting it might be smarter to focus on teacher quality.

CMS mandates: Top-down management may lead to ineffective spending, Travers said. He cited requirements that high schools offer a set number of Advanced Placement or foreign language classes, even when demand is low.

Board members said they're eager to learn more and discuss such questions as whether the “freedom and flexibility” effort Gorman launched this year should be expanded. Last spring Gorman chose 48 experienced principals with a record of strong results and released them from some of the district's rules.