Consultant prods CMS leaders to do better on strategies for Black and brown students

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Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is falling behind on its quest to ensure that Black and Hispanic students take college-level classes in high school, according to a report presented to the school board Tuesday. And a consultant told board members they still aren’t getting a clear strategy for improvement from the superintendent.

Part of the district’s strategic plan calls for having 75% of all 2024 graduates earn at least one college-level credit, such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and dual-enrollment classes offered by colleges. White and Asian students have already passed that level, but Black and Hispanic students are below the interim goals set to get them there in two more years.

CMS projects that by the end of this school year, 77% of white and Asian students who are graduating will have earned at least one college credit, compared with 42% of Blacks and 43% of Hispanics. Those numbers would be down slightly from 2021.

Advanced classes can encourage students to aim for college — and if enough credits are earned in high school, can cut the tuition bill.

Challenges include confidence and info

Superintendent Earnest Winston said Black and Hispanic students and their families often lack information about advanced options, as well as confidence that they can
pass. He said he plans additional efforts, such as assemblies and information sent to parents, to push those options.

Board member Lenora Shipp, a former principal, pushed for details about how CMS will support students who take on the challenge.

“What kind of specifics are we doing?” she asked. “Have we got the tutoring in place? Do they have after-school opportunities, before school, where they can really feel confident that they’re going to pass these courses successfully, it’s not dropping their GPAs?”

Winston said CMS has “pockets of success” in providing such support, but needs to make that consistent.

The report says CMS will have teachers work intensely with 59 seniors who are enrolled in college-level classes but have failing grades in hopes of getting them to pass. The district will also monitor attendance for struggling students to improve their chances of success.

Focus is on coming years

Winston says it’s not realistic to expect dramatic change for this year’s seniors.

“The greatest opportunity that we have moving forward to meet the targets are our current sophomores and our current juniors, which is where the majority of our work will be focused,” he said.

The district will look for 10th- and 11th-graders who have good grades but haven’t enrolled in advanced classes and encourage them to do so.

The report says staff shortages and pandemic-related strains on faculty have set CMS back in its quest to ensure that all schools provide opportunities for advanced classes and encourage all students to consider them.

“A few years ago we instituted a practice where all of our comprehensive high schools are expected to offer 10 core AP courses,” Winston said. “One of the challenges is for some of those courses we may not have the interest (from students) at every school.”

Consultant: Where’s the strategy?

The report was part of the school board’s ongoing work to focus on monitoring Winston’s vision and strategies for student success. Consultant A.J. Crabill with the Council of the Great City Schools has been working with the board for months. He followed Tuesday’s discussion remotely and said the board fell short.
“I’m going to read through an uncharitable review of how this conversation went,” he began.

He said board members frequently asked tactical questions and offered their opinions about what Winston and his staff should do, which shouldn’t happen during monitoring reports. Crabill said that meant they failed to get answers focused on strategy.

“During the course of that, what I did not hear was clear insights from the superintendent regarding his long-term vision for how the school system will go about addressing the deficiencies highlighted in the monitoring report,” he said.

Crabill said board Chair Elyse Dashew didn’t refocus members when they veered off track.

“And what’s particularly bad about that is you now, at this very moment in life, you all don’t know what is the superintendent’s vision for this and what changes in resource allocation is he contemplating,” he said. “And so you will leave this board meeting with no greater insights than when you arrived.”

Several board members, including Dashew, acknowledged they haven’t mastered the process.

“Honestly, I’ve been a little touchy lately and I’m afraid, I just don’t want everyone to get mad at me,” Dashew said, laughing.

Crabill suggested the board rotate the responsibility for reining in distractions so Dashew won’t have to police every review.