

WFAE 90.7

# With blunt talk and discipline, Texas consultant tries to focus CMS school board on kids

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Published December 23, 2021 at 1:56 PM EST

A.J. Crabill has called the current state of Black and brown children in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools deplorable. He has scolded local elected officials for “choosing ego over results.” And he’s getting paid to do it.

For the past eight months, Crabill has been leading the CMS board in a quest to change their own behavior in hopes of overcoming racial disparities and pandemic setbacks for students. He’s a former Kansas City school board president and Texas deputy education commissioner who works with the [Council of the Great City Schools](#).

As the year comes to an end, the first phase of his work with CMS is ending. The school board has laid out goals under Crabill’s direction, promised to hold Superintendent Earnest Winston accountable for meeting them and restructured meetings to focus on monitoring academic data.

“This year was the training and the planning,” board Chair Elyse Dashew said recently. “Next year’s when we actually do it.”

As Crabill prepares for that phase, he spoke with WFAE about what he sees CMS leaders doing well and where they’re falling short.

For instance, there’s the way the school board oversees Winston.

“The decisions about staff should not be a personality contest, and conversations to date have sounded more like middle school engagement in selecting class president rather than professional leadership around ‘How do we hold senior executives accountable?’ It should not matter whether you like the superintendent or not,” Crabill said.

Instead, he says, the board must relentlessly focus on how students fare on measures of reading, math and college-career preparedness. And the district must be willing to change tactics — and even leaders — if results don’t materialize.

So how did the CMS board end up working with someone who pushes them to confront embarrassing data and make tough choices?

### **Crabill has faced challenges**

Crabill has been in the hot seat himself. He says he was involved in tech startups, then education and neighborhood activism, before being elected to the school board in his hometown of Kansas City, Missouri, in 2008. He spent eight years on the board, much of it as president. It was a stretch that saw him blamed for a superintendent's abrupt departure, although that superintendent later [told The Kansas City Star](#) that was incorrect. The newspaper [also reported](#) that "the board, which had developed a reputation for dissonance, operated in relative harmony during his time on the governing body."

At the time Crabill was known as Airick Leonard West. He changed his name in 2016 as he moved to a new job as deputy education commissioner in Texas, taking the name of a family that fostered him as a child. [Crabill's biography](#) says he moved in and out of foster care throughout his childhood, attending 11 schools.

### **Results in Dallas**

In Texas, Crabill worked with the Dallas Independent School District on strategies to focus on their most urgent academic needs. The district created an "[Accelerating Campus Excellence](#)" program to provide tutoring, extra class time and strong teachers and principals in the lowest-performing schools. [According to news reports](#), it was costly but brought dramatic gains.

Crabill's work became part of a statewide [Lone Star Governance](#) program. He currently lives in Houston and is the [state-appointed conservator](#) to help the DeSoto (Texas) Independent School District reorganize its staff and budget.

Dashew says she and CMS board Vice Chair Thelma Byers-Bailey learned about his work through training offered by the Council of the Great City Schools in January. The CMS board signed Crabill on to work with them, starting with a board retreat in late spring.

"I really think based on the districts that have done this, particularly in Texas, it really works. So I hope we see that," she said.

The contract calls for CMS to pay \$10,000 plus Crabill's travel expenses — but that's only if they meet the timetable they agreed on. If they fall short, they'll pay up to \$75,000, based on his hourly work.

That's not a huge sum for a district with a \$2 billion operating budget, but Dashew says it has provided motivation. "There's a history of boards that take on a project and then kind of get distracted and let it drop when it gets hard," she said.

## A rocky start in Charlotte

Crabill says CMS “started a step ahead of the game” because they had created a strategic plan with their former superintendent, Clayton Wilcox. But that didn’t mean they were successfully executing it.

“Everybody has ideas, but few people will have the discipline necessary to execute those ideas,” he said.

Soon after the spring retreat, the traditional budget-season sparring between the school board and Mecklenburg County commissioners escalated. The majority of commissioners voiced dissatisfaction with the school board’s plans for improving low-performing schools and addressing racial disparities in test scores. They voted to [withhold \\$56 million](#) until they got a satisfactory plan, and commissioners’ Chair George Dunlap publicly [questioned Winston’s qualifications](#) for the task.

The [CMS board prevailed](#) in legally-mandated mediation, walking away with an extra \$11 million. And they [continued working with Crabill](#) on changing the way they govern — work that struck some members of the public as tedious and unfocused. The board moved the governance work sessions to the start of meetings, earning jeers from some audience members who had to wait longer for public comment sessions.

## Acknowledging the worst

When the board finally unveiled goals, they highlighted [shockingly low test scores](#) for students who were struggling before the pandemic and fell further behind during a year spent largely in remote classes.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board and Mecklenburg County commissioners met Dec. 6 to talk about overcoming differences.

Crabill had insisted that they narrow their focus to a few of the most dire needs, such as the students taking Math I in high school. Only 19% of them passed the state exam in 2021. But the CMS goal focused on an even lower number: Only 4.5% cleared the higher bar that’s considered to put them on track for college and careers.

Dashew and Crabill explained that strategy to county commissioners in a joint meeting Dec. 6, which Crabill led.

“We saw some glaring, glaring challenges, and that’s why we decided to lean into this goal,” Dashew said. “We took the one with the worst news we could find and made a goal of it.”

“And that’s what effective leadership looks like,” Crabill said. “You don’t try to craft goals that make you look good. You craft goals that tell the truth about where we are and what’s not working. And that’s exactly what this is.”

## **What it means for the superintendent**

Crabill has also pushed the board to make sure there are data points they can check throughout the year. He has repeatedly told the board that if Winston and his staff don't show significant progress, they need to talk about whether Winston continues in the job.

In an interview, Crabill declined to talk about Winston's performance.

"Fortunately, it's not my responsibility to evaluate employees," he said. "So while I can't opine on the superintendent or staff's capability, I can opine on the process which school boards should use to make that assertion themselves. And that involves being very clear about what are the outcomes for our students."

"To the extent that we don't see those, even if we absolutely love the superintendent and feel wonderful and fuzzy about them, that's not evidence that we should retain them," Crabill said.

## **Guns and COVID-19 compete for time**

Crabill's work with CMS has come at a time when the district continues to struggle with strategies for educating students during a pandemic, and as a surge of guns and violence at schools creates calls for [new safety measures](#).

Those items aren't part of the academic goals, but Crabill says safety is an essential part of the work.

"As a parent, I'd tell you that the first thing you need to do to make sure that my student is actually in a position to learn is to make sure that they're in a position to be safe," Crabill said. "And so to the extent that there are safety issues, whether they be of the pandemic nature or the violence nature, school systems have to take appropriate steps to calibrate for that."

Crabill frequently talks about moving the focus from adult issues to children's needs, but he says parents demanding changes aren't out of line.

"Parents should not be expected to be entirely patient with safety and security issues," he said. "They should expect that those are addressed in a very rapid and very effective manner."

## **Up next for 2022**

At the Dec. 6 joint meeting, Crabill tried to get county commissioners and school board members to lay groundwork for a more student-focused partnership. He [voiced dismay](#) when they couldn't agree on such things as avoiding social media attacks or refraining from impugning individuals.

“The collective insistence you have on having conversations about the adults does not inspire performance,” he told the two bodies. “So obviously you have the right to do it. You’re elected officials. But to the extent that’s what you choose, you are choosing ego over results.”

Crabill says he’s continuing to meet with members of both boards and will return in January with suggestions for talks that focus on student data.

“If both sides honor that, it would be a step in the right direction for students in Charlotte-Mecklenburg,” he said.

And the ultimate test will be whether CMS strategies bring change.

“When you see improvement in student outcomes as emphatic as they have been in Dallas, that is almost impossible to come about without adults being willing to make hard choices,” he said. “We’ve seen that in Dallas, and children in Dallas have been blessed by that. As we see that happen in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, the children here will be blessed by that as well.”