

# Project L.I.F.T

## Leadership and Investment for Transformation



Charlotte Mecklenburg School Investment Study Group  
Project Summary  
January 2011

## **CMS Investment Study Group**

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## Closing the Achievement Gap at CMS

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) is dealing with an alarming student achievement crisis, as are many urban school districts across the country. Graduation rates in our highest poverty schools are dismal, with only **slightly more than 50% of students graduating from these schools last year**<sup>1</sup>. Based upon current trends, nearly a third of CMS students who entered 8<sup>th</sup> grade in 2009—the majority of whom are poor and/or minority students—will also fail to graduate.

Over the last several years, CMS leaders have been developing and implementing a number of groundbreaking strategies to narrow the achievement gap in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Progress is being made on a number of fronts, and CMS continues to gain national recognition as a leader in education reform. However, in the face of significant budget cuts and competing priorities, CMS will be hard-pressed to close the achievement gap fast enough to reverse the trajectory of thousands of students for whom failure and negative social and economic outcomes are imminent.

### Implications for the Community

Although a high school diploma is not a guarantee of a person's success, lacking one in the 21<sup>st</sup> century virtually guarantees failure. Such loss in human potential imposes a remarkably high cost that has been well-documented through higher rates of unemployment, low earnings and reliance on public assistance, early pregnancies, poor health and incarceration.

Closing the achievement gap means more than students graduating from high school. It's also about preparing our students to compete in the global economy and achieve a better return on investment with our public education dollars. As a nation we're falling behind:

- 15-year-olds in the U.S. trail nearly all other wealthy countries in math and science.
- The U.S. ranks 29th in the world in the percentage of students at the advanced level in math.
- The U.S. is among the leaders in college participation, but ranks 16th – in the bottom half – in college completion.
- Close to half of all U.S. students who enter college need remedial courses.<sup>2</sup>

Closing the achievement gap is also about equity—leveling the playing field

### Cohort Graduation Rate 2009-2010

All CMS High Schools	70%
All High Schools in NC	74%
Highest CMS Graduation Rates	
- Mallard Creek High	92%
- Providence High	92%
Lowest Graduation Rates	
- West Mecklenburg High	58%
- E. E. Waddell High	52%
- West Charlotte High	51%

Source: CMS

### The High Costs of Dropping Out

- The average college graduate will earn \$1 million more over his/her lifetime than a high school dropout.\*
- High school dropouts have 3.5 times the unemployment rate of college graduates.\*
- 52% of high school dropouts are not in the labor force and an additional 19% are looking for work.\*
- The mortality rate for those ages 24-65 with less than a high school degree is 32% , higher than for the same age group with more than a high school diploma.\*\*
- 75% of America's state prison inmates are high school dropouts as are 59% of federal prison inmates.\*\*\*

Sources: \*Bureau of Labor Statistics  
\*\* Journal of American Medical Association  
\*\*\*Justice Policy Institute

<sup>1</sup> Graduation rates are based upon the graduation rate for a full cohort of students beginning with entering 9<sup>th</sup> graders four years earlier.

<sup>2</sup> Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD)—all bullets

for success between poor and minority students and their more affluent peers. Nationally and locally, minority and low-income students lag in performance. The End-of-Grade and graduation rates shown below illustrate the clear racial and economic disparities that exist at CMS. These are not statistics of which to be proud.

### Disparities in Student Achievement at CMS

Student Group	End-of-Grade (Reading and Math) Grades 3-8 % of Students At or Above Achievement Level III*		CMS Cohort Graduation Rates
	2009-2010		2009-2010
All Students	66.3%		69.9%
Black	51.6%		61.6%
Asian	75.1%		76.4%
Hispanic	55%		54.6%
Native American	61.3%		63.8
White	88.4%		84.9%
Multi-racial	73.6%		72.0%
Limited English Proficiency (LEP)	37.8%		43.9%
Economically Disadvantaged	51.3%		59.8%

\*Achievement Level III means that students consistently demonstrate mastery of the grade level subject and skills and are well prepared to advance to the next level.

### Collective Action for Collective Impact: Project L.I.F.T.

What can be done to address the achievement gap in Charlotte-Mecklenburg? The CMS Investment Study Group, composed of leaders from nine of the largest community and family foundations in Charlotte, Mayor Anthony Foxx and several other community thought leaders, has been meeting since September 2010 to wrestle with this question. We have spent countless hours attempting to:

- Understand the issues and factors related to student achievement and explore education reform strategies that are working or not working locally and elsewhere; and
- Identify how foundations and other sectors might work together to help CMS close the achievement gap.

Through this discovery process and our many discussions and debates, the Study Group reached agreement around the following:

- The gap that separates thousands of our minority and low-income students from their peers at CMS is **unacceptable** and has far-reaching economic and social implications for our community.
- As leaders in the community, we must **galvanize** and collectively help lift up and accelerate CMS's efforts to improve academic outcomes for all students. The need is urgent and clear.
- The return on investment and **collective impact** of coordinating and leveraging our philanthropic investments on a common agenda and approach to closing the achievement gap will be much greater than that of any isolated intervention or investment.
- To attain dramatic results in student achievement, **bold action** must be taken and it must be taken now.

Acting on these beliefs and the knowledge we've gained from meeting with nationally recognized education reform leaders; investigating student achievement models and initiatives being implemented elsewhere; and obtaining input from over 650 parents, teachers, students and other community stakeholders, we've created the foundational elements of an exciting, cutting-edge initiative we believe will help CMS close the achievement gap. As part of our planning work, the Study Group has:

#### Key Models/initiatives Explored

- Harlem Children Zone Project
- Teach for America
- Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP)
- New Leaders for New Schools
- School of One
- Rocketship Education
- Good Shepherd Services
- Generation Schools Model

1. Selected the West Charlotte Corridor student feeder zone as the focus of our investments;
2. Identified four key areas of intervention where we will target our investments: Talent, Time, Technology and Community Support; and
3. Established an unprecedented goal of collectively raising \$55 million for a five-year pilot to help implement the initiative.

More about each of these decisions follows.

1. **Selection of the West Charlotte Corridor student feeder zone as the focus of our investments.** Focusing resources in one school feeder zone versus the entire school district will enable CMS to concentrate and test evidenced-based strategies and methods that could be replicated in other school zones. It also acknowledges and supports the progression of students from Pre-K through high school.

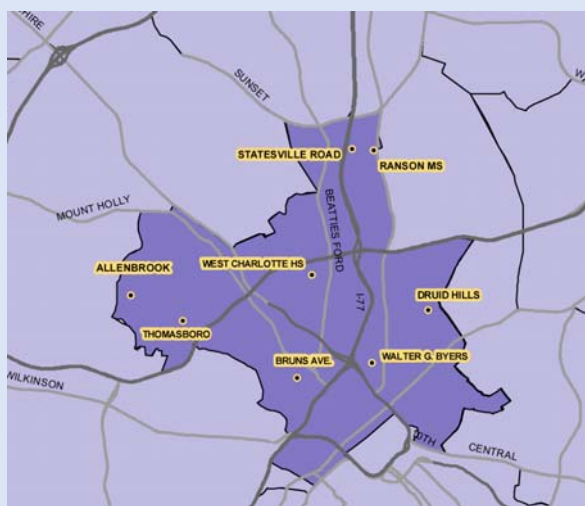
The West Charlotte corridor includes West Charlotte High, as well as the elementary, middle and pre-kindergarten programs that will feed into the high school in 2011-2012. We chose to invest in this corridor because the graduation rate and other indicators of student achievement are the lowest in the county. It's also an area where community support is strong, and opportunities to leverage community resources are significant. If we can achieve success in this most challenged area of the community, we can learn from and replicate those successes elsewhere.

#### West Charlotte Corridor at a Glance In 2009-2010

- Nearly 7,500 students were enrolled in West Charlotte High School, its feeder schools and pre-Kindergarten programs.
- 84% of all Corridor students received free/reduced lunch.
- Students reading at or above grade level in elementary and middle schools in the Corridor range from a low of 44% to a high of 66%.
- Students at or above grade level in math at elementary and middle schools in the Corridor range from a low of 24% to a high of 46%.
- 70% of West Charlotte High School students are at or above grade level in math proficiency and 63% in reading proficiency.
- 51% of all students within their cohort graduated from high school.

Source: CMS

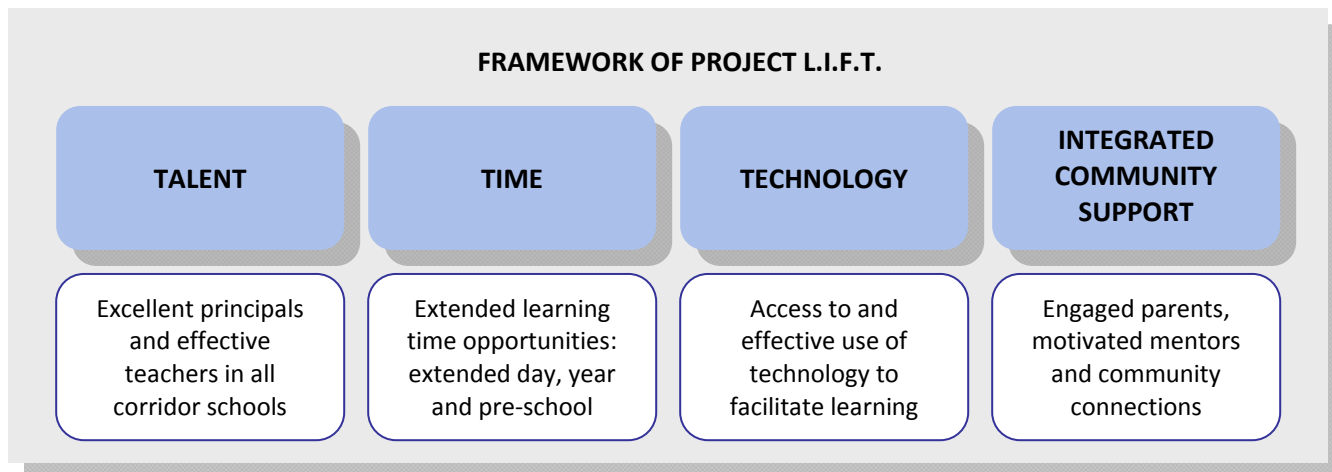
#### West Charlotte Corridor Schools 2011-2012



#### West Charlotte Corridor Schools 2011-2012

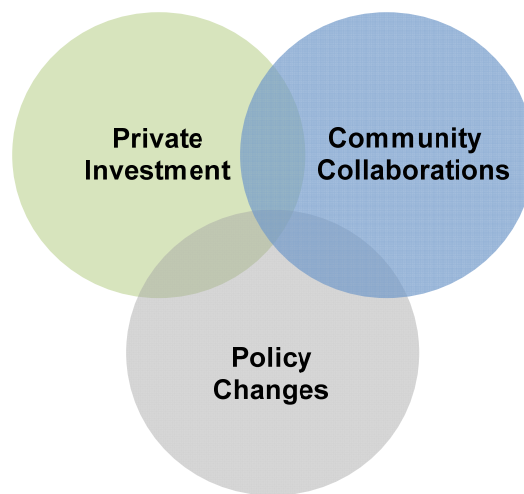
- Allenbrook Elementary
- Bruns Elementary
- Druid Hills Elementary
- Statesville Road Elementary
- Thomasboro Elementary
- Walter G. Byers Elementary
- Ranson Middle School
- West Charlotte High School

2. **Identification of four key areas of intervention where we will target our investments: Talent, Time, Technology and Integrated Community Support.** The evidence is conclusive among researchers and educators that focusing on these four areas can yield the greatest return on investment for improved student achievement, with talent—excellent principals and effective teachers—as the most critical school-based factor. We heard resounding endorsement for this focus from parents, teachers and others through our community engagement efforts.



The Study Group realizes that private investment alone will not produce the change we aspire to with Project L.I.F.T. In concert with CMS leaders, and with strong support from the community, we have identified two other necessary components for the initiative to succeed:

- **Collaborative partnerships** within the community to provide the much needed wrap-around services for students such as nutrition and healthcare support, mental health services and family support. Parents, educators and others in the community have underscored that without such support, many corridor students will not succeed in school.
- **Policy changes** at the state level to enable CMS to boldly move forward with strategies that support innovation, flexible instruction and talent development and retention. For example, legislative and other regulatory changes are needed around extended learning, licensing and tenure of teachers, alternative compensation packages and advanced degree requirements and longevity pay. CMS is already working with the State to change some of these policies. However, strong advocacy support from community leaders will be needed to help CMS obtain the necessary policy relief. These changes are critical to the success of Project L.I.F.T.



3. **Establishing an unprecedented goal of collectively raising \$55 million over the next five years to help implement the initiative.** At no time in our community’s history have philanthropists come together to collectively address and invest in public education in such a way. We do so because we believe education reform is essential to Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s future and that the achievement gap can and must be closed.



The Study Group was clear from the onset that philanthropic dollars will not be used to bridge the current CMS budget gap. Our investments will only be used to support the four components outlined in our planning framework. We want our investments to support lasting, systemic change within CMS that builds on and accelerates the momentum of recent change in student achievement, particularly in high poverty schools.

### **Next Steps for Project L.I.F.T.**

With the decisions the Study Group has made over the last several months, we have created the underlying framework for Project L.I.F.T. In late winter/early spring 2011, a more inclusive “Investor Board” will be established to provide ongoing oversight, planning and accountability for the initiative. Specific goals, strategies, investment allocations and metrics for success will be developed with the intent of starting the initiative in the 2011-2012 school year and full rollout in 2012-2013. Accountability for results will be critical for our continued involvement over the five-year period. The Investor Board, working with CMS, will put the necessary project infrastructure in place to move the initiative forward. A project manager and other critical staff will be hired to focus exclusively on the day-to-day management and operation of Project L.I.F.T. Foundation For The Carolinas has agreed to manage the investment funds.

### **Our Aspirations for Collective Impact**

The CMS Investment Study Group envisions that, over time, significant transformation will take place in the West Charlotte Corridor as a result of the strategic investments made and community collaborations forged over the next five years. Ultimately, because of this collective action, we aspire for:

- West Charlotte High School to match the highest graduation rates in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and for all corridor students to advance to college and/or other post-secondary education;
- Excellent principals and effective teachers clamoring to work in the corridor because of the innovation and culture of achievement that Project L.I.F.T has created;
- A robust network of community partnerships and collaborations helping corridor students succeed in school;
- Successes in the West Charlotte Corridor being replicated in other CMS schools and feeder zones; and
- Educators across the state and nation visiting the West Charlotte corridor to learn from and inform their own education reform efforts.

Although we don’t expect such dramatic results in the next five years, we do expect substantial gains in student achievement in the West Charlotte Corridor. System change takes time and perseverance.

In many respects, Project L.I.F.T. will be an experiment—an experiment in discovering what works best to shift school culture, student performance and community engagement in high poverty schools. We realize the task ahead will not be easy, particularly as CMS continues to face budget challenges. Success is not guaranteed, even though our planning framework is based upon sound, evidence-based practice. If we want to succeed, we have to be willing to fail. As investors and community leaders, we’re willing to take that risk. The possibility of closing the achievement gap is worth the investment of our time, talent and resources. As we prepare to launch Project L.I.F.T., we invite and encourage others to join us.