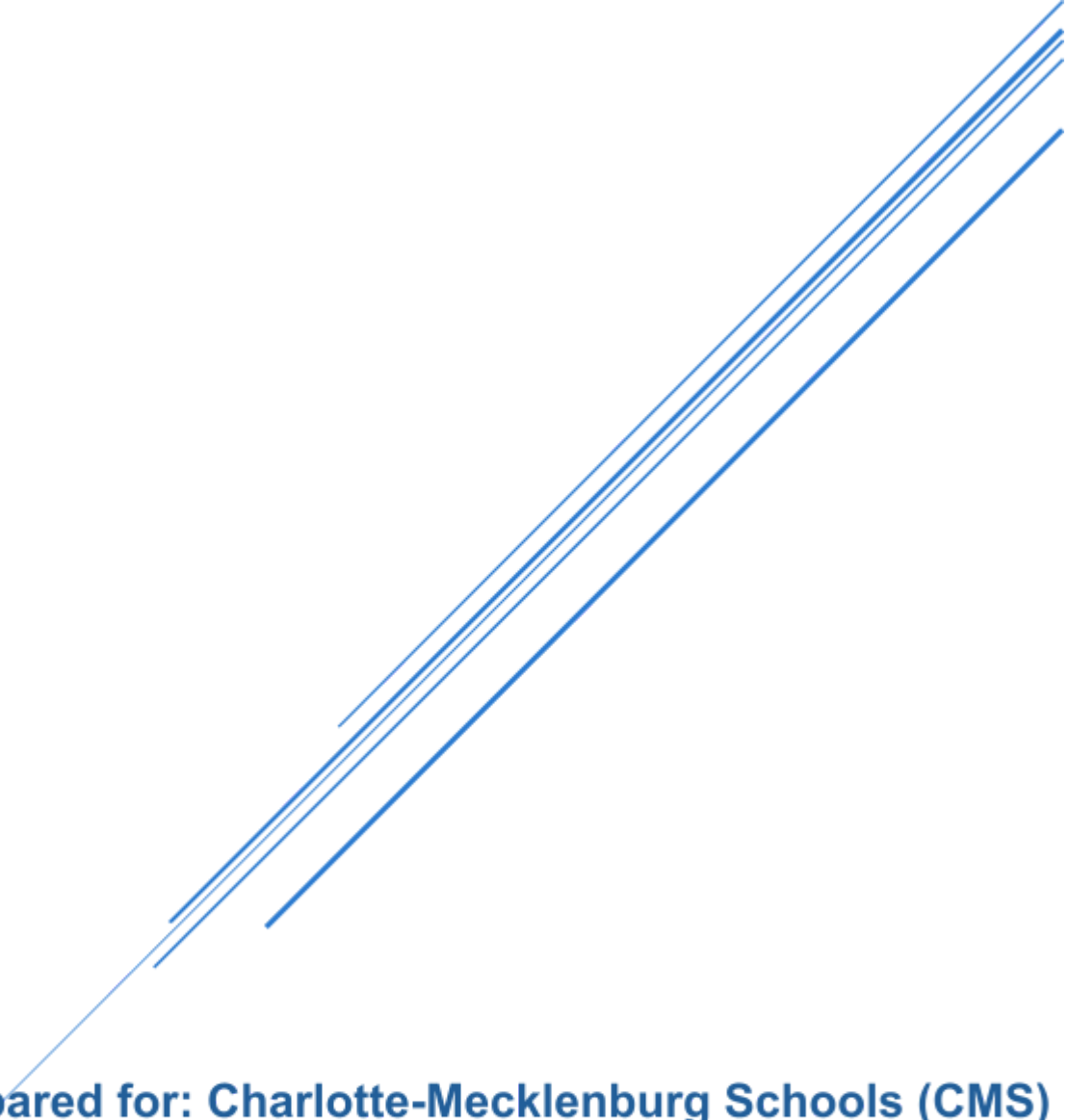


ENHANCING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES
IN MECKLENBURG COUNTY:
**Launching the CMS FlexLearn
Program**



Prepared for: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS)
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March 2026

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Abstract

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) serves a dynamic, diverse student population in a metropolitan region marked by significant socioeconomic gaps. Educational outcomes in the district unmistakably mirror the county's well-documented geographic divide, the Crescent and Wedge. Urgent action is needed: students in west, north, and east Mecklenburg County face higher poverty, lower incomes, and diminished educational access compared to those in the affluent southern wedge.

Approximately 60 percent of CMS schools receive a performance grade of C or lower under the accountability system administered by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. These grades are calculated on a 15-point scale, allowing schools to achieve passing grades at lower thresholds than the 10-point scale used for individual students.

Beyond persistent low performance, CMS confronts deeply entrenched challenges: chronic absenteeism, stubborn achievement gaps, unsustainable teacher turnover among schools serving our most vulnerable populations, and a pronounced shift away from traditional public education. The very structure of CMS risks perpetuating lower wages, increased reliance on public assistance, and generational poverty for BIPOC and low-income white families. The time for decisive change is now.

This proposal champions the CMS FlexLearn Program as a transformative path forward for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. The CMS FlexLearn Program, an innovative hybrid public school option, blends in-person classroom instruction and structured home-based learning. This bold approach immediately offers greater flexibility, empowers family engagement, and delivers truly personalized instruction.

By launching the CMS FlexLearn Program, CMS will break down longstanding educational barriers and forge new pathways for student success, especially among Mecklenburg County's most underserved communities. The time to act is now—our students cannot afford to wait.

Executive Summary for the CMS Board of Education

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) serves a vibrant and diverse student population in a rapidly evolving metropolitan region. Despite numerous district initiatives, deep inequities in academic achievement, school performance, and student engagement persist—and demand bold action from leaders now.

These disparities are closely tied to Mecklenburg County’s well-documented geographic and socioeconomic divide known as the Crescent and Wedge. Communities within the Crescent—primarily on the west, north, and east sides of the county—experience higher poverty rates, lower average incomes, and reduced access to educational resources compared to communities in the southern Wedge. Educational outcomes across CMS reflect these broader inequalities.

Approximately 60 percent of CMS schools receive a school performance grade of C or lower under the accountability system used by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. These grades are calculated using a 15-point grading scale, which allows schools to receive passing grades at lower performance levels than the 10-point grading scale used for classroom assessments. If many of these schools were evaluated using the same grading standards applied to students, a significant portion would fall into the failing range.

CMS also faces challenges related to:

- persistent racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps
- chronic absenteeism affecting more than one in four students
- teacher turnover in high-poverty schools
- increasing enrollment shifts toward charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling

These challenges demonstrate that traditional schooling models are failing to meet the needs of all district families. To break this cycle, we must act decisively: this proposal demands the creation of the CMS FlexLearn Program within Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

To tackle these urgent issues, this proposal urges the swift establishment of the CMS FlexLearn Program. This hybrid education model strategically blends in-person instruction with structured home-based learning. Like the proven iAcademy program in Iredell-Statesville Schools, FlexLearn students will benefit from direct instruction two to three days a week and high-quality, guided coursework at home. Bold solutions are required now.

Key goals of the CMS FlexLearn Program include:

- Increasing student engagement and attendance
- Improving academic outcomes through smaller instructional groups
- Strengthening family involvement in education
- Expanding flexible learning opportunities for students
- Improving teacher retention and job satisfaction

Program outcomes would be evaluated using Groller's Scorecard, which measures student achievement, engagement, family participation, teacher outcomes, and equity impact. A comprehensive Cost–Benefit Analysis would also assess the program's financial efficiency and long-term economic benefits.

CMS once led the nation in educational progress after *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, setting the gold standard for desegregation. Now, CMS must seize the opportunity to lead again—by pioneering a flexible public education model that boldly addresses modern family needs and lifts historically underserved communities. The future of Charlotte's students, especially the most vulnerable, demands leadership through innovation, now.

By adopting the CMS FlexLearn Program, CMS can decisively open a new pathway toward educational equity, robust family engagement, and long-term student success. It is time to embrace innovation that meets the promise of public education for every child.

The CMS FlexLearn Program Brief

Problem

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) educational outcomes mirror the county's well-known socioeconomic divide, known as the Crescent-Wedge divide. Schools located in the Crescent—primarily in west, north, and east Charlotte—serve communities with higher poverty rates, lower household income, and fewer educational resources. Several indicators illustrate the challenges facing the district:

- Approximately 60% of CMS schools receive a school report card grade of C or lower under the accountability system used by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.
 - These grades are calculated using a 15-point grading scale, meaning many schools that are considered “passing” would fall into the failing range under the 10-point grading scale used for students.
- Chronic absenteeism continues to affect a large portion of students.
- Achievement gaps persist across racial and socioeconomic groups.
- Increasing numbers of families are leaving traditional public schools for charter schools, private schools, or homeschooling.
- Teacher shortages due to unfilled vacant positions and high turnover rates

These trends indicate that the traditional five-day classroom model may not fully meet the needs of all families.

Policy Proposal

Establish the CMS FlexLearn Program within CMS. Students would attend school 2–3 days per week for in-person instruction and complete structured coursework at home during the remaining days. Key features include:

- Small-group instruction during in-person days
- Structured home learning guided by teachers, legal guardians, and community supports
- Community learning hubs for students who need supervised environments

Expected Benefits

The FlexLearn Program will help CMS:

- Reduce chronic absenteeism
- Improve student engagement
- Increase parental involvement in education
- Provide more individualized instruction
- Improve teacher retention by reducing classroom overload
- Close the academic achievement and socioeconomic gap between the county's crescent and wedge communities

Evaluation and Accountability

The CMS FlexLearn Program would be evaluated using:

- Groller's Scorecard to assess academic outcomes, student engagement, family participation, teacher retention, and equity impacts
- A Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) to determine financial sustainability and long-term economic benefits

Recommendation

Launch the CMS FlexLearn Program in selected schools, particularly those serving Crescent communities, then evaluate and expand districtwide.

Charlotte previously became a national education leader following the landmark case *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*. The CMS FlexLearn Program offers CMS the opportunity to lead the nation in education innovation once again.

Overview

Historical Background of the Public School System

Public education in the United States was founded on the principle that all children should have access to free, publicly funded schools. State constitutions, including North Carolina's, require the government to provide a public education system that ensures every child has access to learning opportunities that support informed citizenship, economic productivity, and social cohesion. Public schools are expected to develop students' academic abilities, social awareness, and critical thinking skills while preparing them for post-secondary education, workforce participation, and civic engagement.

The North Carolina Constitution specifically mandates the establishment of a “general and uniform system of free public schools.” This language imposes both legal and moral obligations on the state and local school districts, including Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, to provide equitable access to quality education. By law, public schools in North Carolina must prepare students for postsecondary education opportunities, contribute to the development of a skilled workforce, and cultivate informed and engaged citizens.

Despite these constitutional commitments, the history of public education in the United States reveals significant disparities in educational opportunity, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color (BIPOC), as well as many low-income White communities. For much of the nation's history, public schools were segregated both by law and by practice. The landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. However, desegregation was implemented slowly, widely contested, and often incomplete.

Even after formal segregation ended, many school systems continued to experience disparities in funding, access to resources, and educational outcomes. These inequities have disproportionately affected BIPOC students and economically disadvantaged communities. Structural factors—including residential segregation, school funding models tied to property

values, disciplinary disparities, and unequal access to advanced academic programs—have contributed to persistent opportunity gaps.

Current Educational Landscape in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

CMS is one of the largest public school districts in the southeastern United States, serving more than 140,000 students across Mecklenburg County. Although the district has implemented many reform initiatives to improve academic performance, significant disparities in school achievement, student participation, and access to resources persist.

These disparities reflect broader social and economic inequalities in Mecklenburg County. Over the past few decades, the county has developed a well-known geographic and socioeconomic divide, known as the Crescent-Wedge divide. In this pattern, wealthier and predominantly White communities are concentrated in the southern “Wedge.” In contrast, many lower-income communities with higher populations of Black and Latino residents form a crescent around the west, north, and east sides of the county.

Because school attendance zones are closely linked to neighborhood demographics, this geographic divide also shows up in school outcomes across CMS.

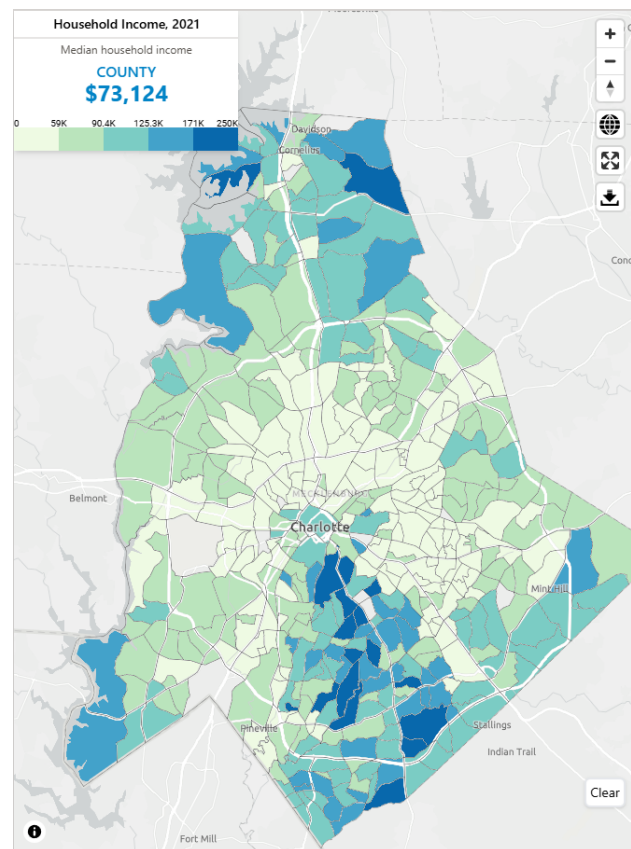
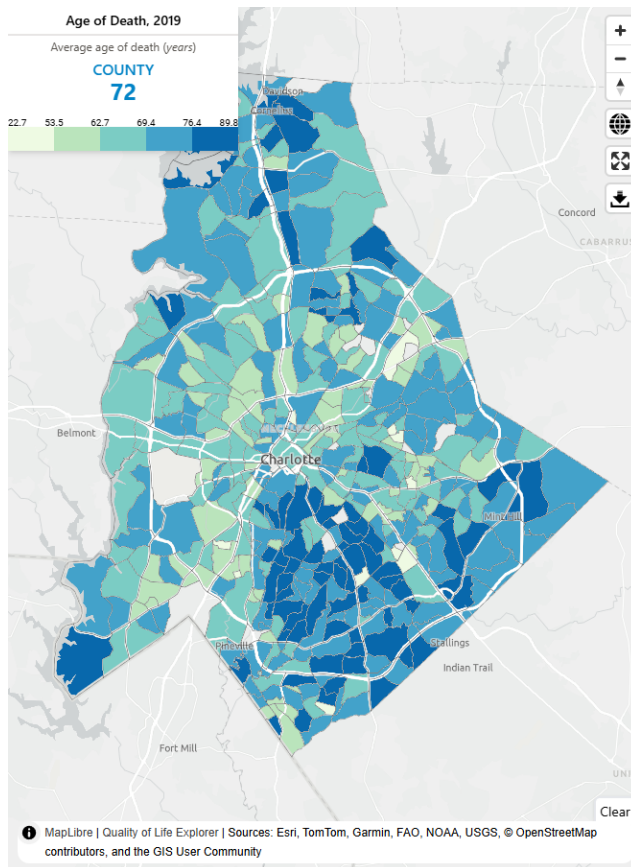
Socioeconomic and Racial Disparities within the Crescent-Wedge

Communities located within the Crescent areas of Mecklenburg County are characterized by several socioeconomic challenges, including:

- Higher proportions of Black and Latino residents
- Greater poverty rates and lower household incomes
- Limited access to educational and economic resources
- Lower levels of educational achievement

These disparities are rooted in historical patterns of segregation, redlining, and uneven investment in housing, infrastructure, and public services. As a result, many Crescent neighborhoods continue to face systemic barriers that affect both educational opportunity and long-term economic mobility.

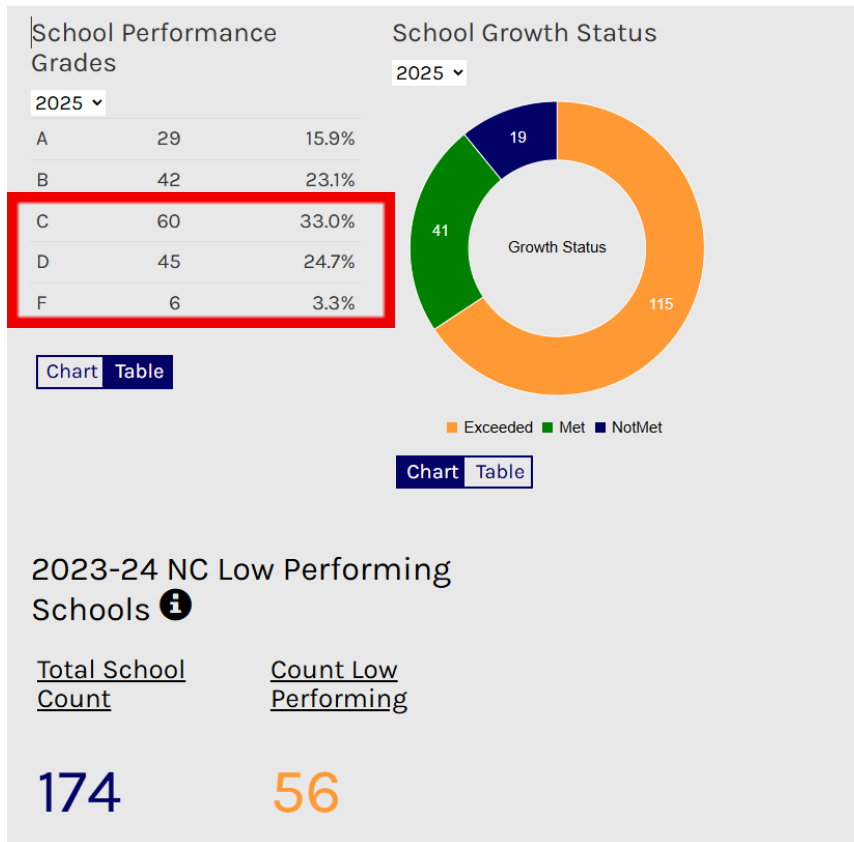
The consequences of these inequalities extend beyond the education system. Public health and economic data show that residents of Crescent communities often have shorter life expectancies, lower average household incomes, and fewer economic opportunities than residents of the southern Wedge.



School Performance and Report Card Grades

One of the clearest indicators of systemic challenges within CMS is the distribution of school performance grades assigned by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Under North Carolina's accountability system, approximately 60 percent of CMS schools receive a report card grade of C or below. The state evaluates schools on a 15-point grading scale, unlike the traditional student grading scale.



Under this system:

- A “C” grade starts at 60 points out of 100.
- Schools can still earn a passing grade despite showing relatively low performance.

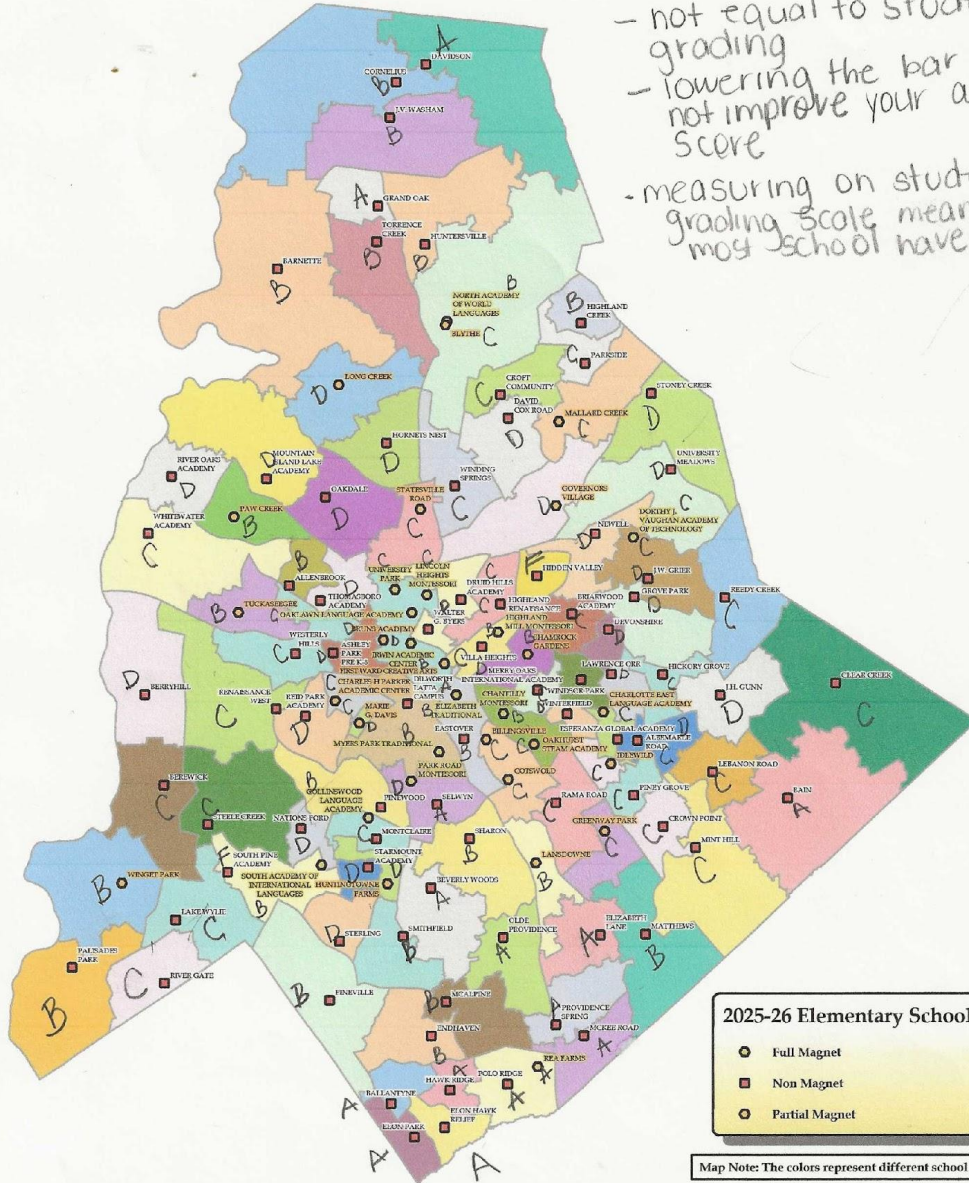
However, if these same schools were evaluated using the same 10-point grading scale that is used for students, many would be considered failing. This indicates that while the accountability system considers many schools as “passing,” their actual academic performance reveals significant challenges in student achievement.

As shown in the following three images, schools with lower report card grades are disproportionately located in Crescent communities, where they face higher poverty levels, more staffing challenges, and fewer resources.

CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG SCHOOLS 2025-2026 ELEMENTARY SCHOOL BOUNDARIES



15 pt grading system
- not equal to student
grading
- lowering the bar does
not improve your actual
score
- measuring on students
grading score means
most school have a diff



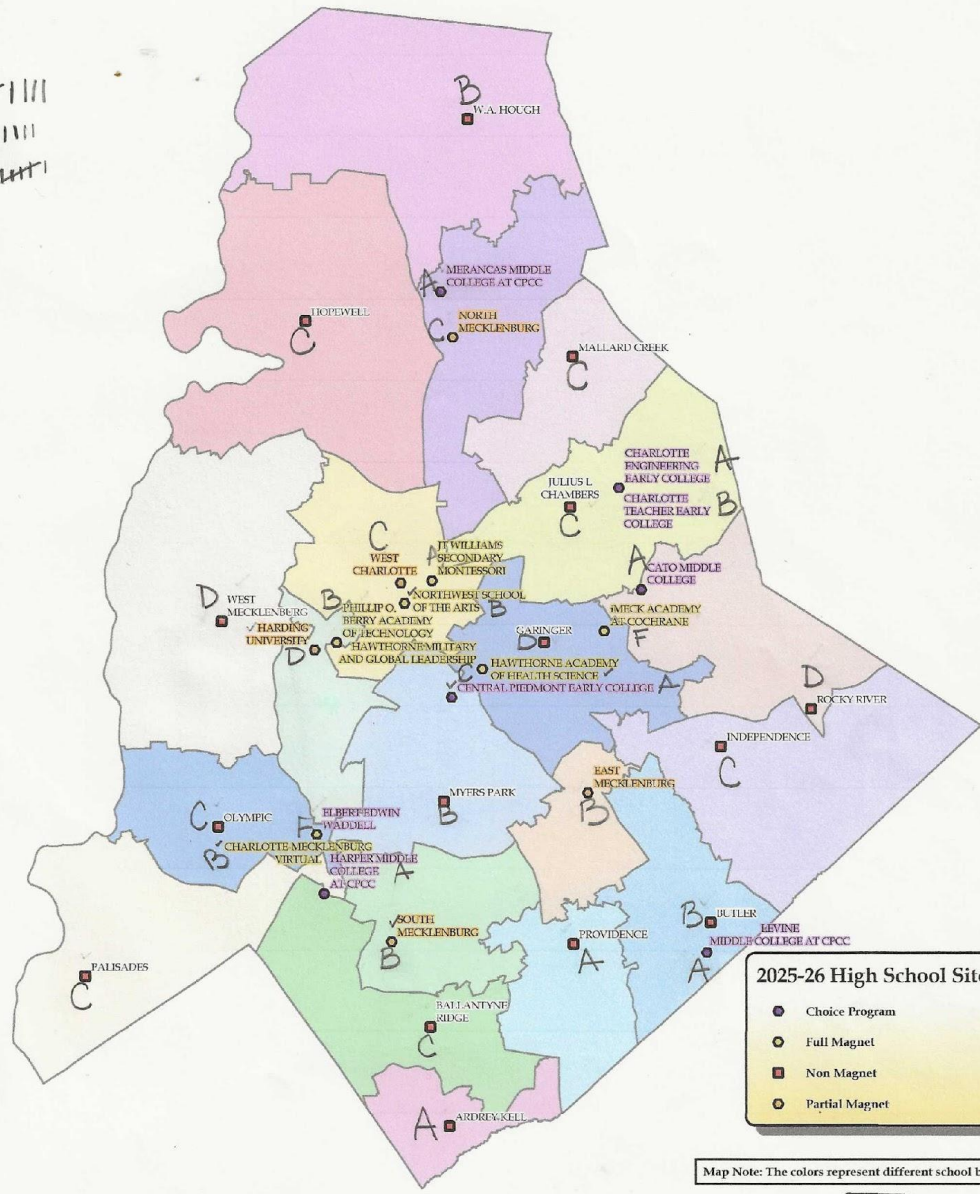
Cropper

Data sources: Mecklenburg County NC, ESRI, CMS.
Map created: 10, May 2025.

CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG SCHOOLS 2025-2026 HIGH SCHOOL BOUNDARIES



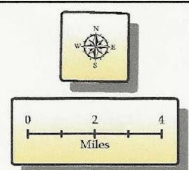
A ~~||||~~ ||||
 B ~~||||~~ ||||
 C ~~||||~~ ||||
 D ||||
 F ||



2025-26 High School Sites

- Choice Program
- Full Magnet
- Non Magnet
- Partial Magnet

Map Note: The colors represent different school boundaries.

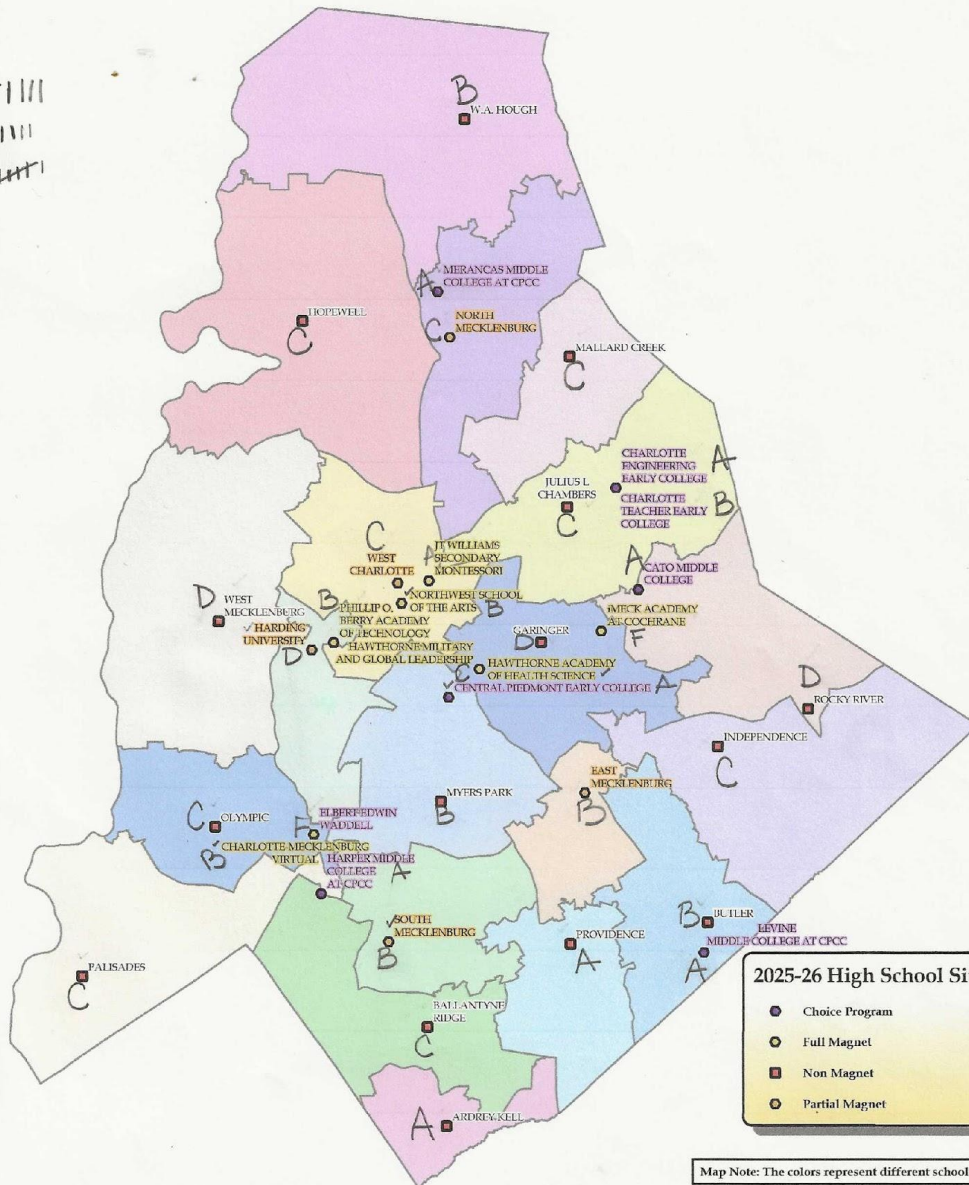


Cropper25 Data sources: Mecklenburg County NC, ES&L, CMS Map created: 10 May 2025

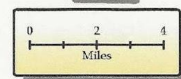
CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG SCHOOLS 2025-2026 HIGH SCHOOL BOUNDARIES



A ~~||||~~ ||||
B ~~||||~~ ||||
C ~~||||~~ ||||
D ||||
E ||



Map Note: The colors represent different school boundaries.



Cropper25

Data sources: Mecklenburg County NC, ES&E, CMS
Map created: 10 May 2025

Academic Achievement Gap

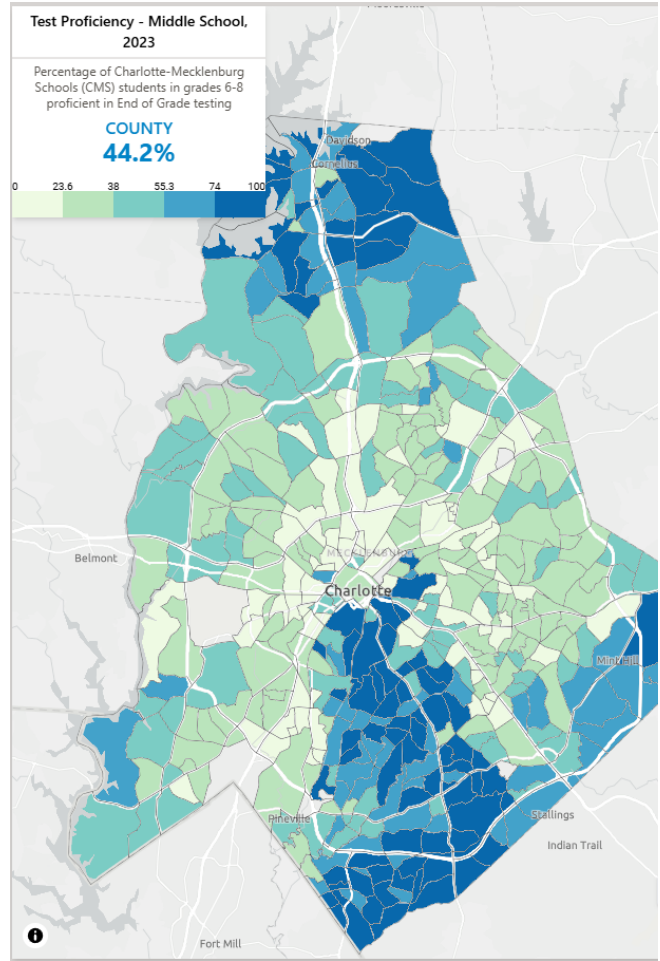
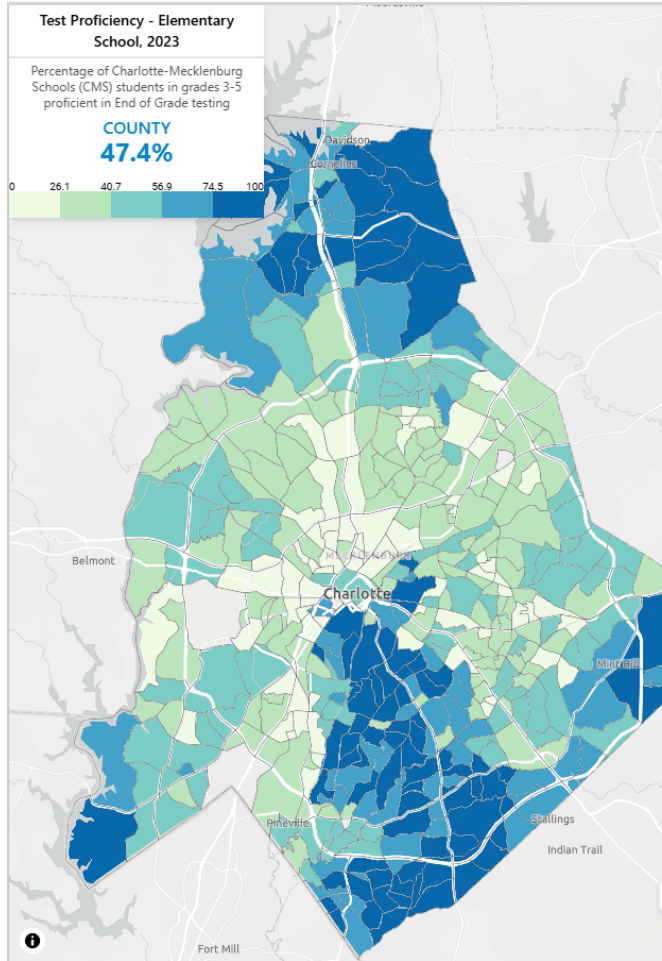
CMS continues to face a persistent academic achievement gap between students of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Current data (exhibited in the four images below) show significant disparities in grade-level proficiency:

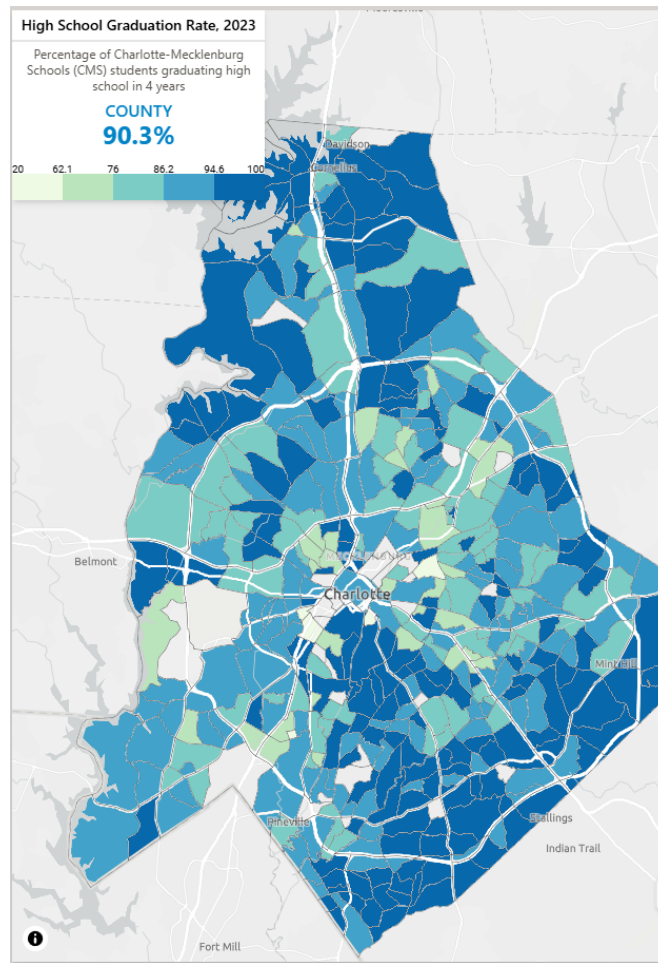
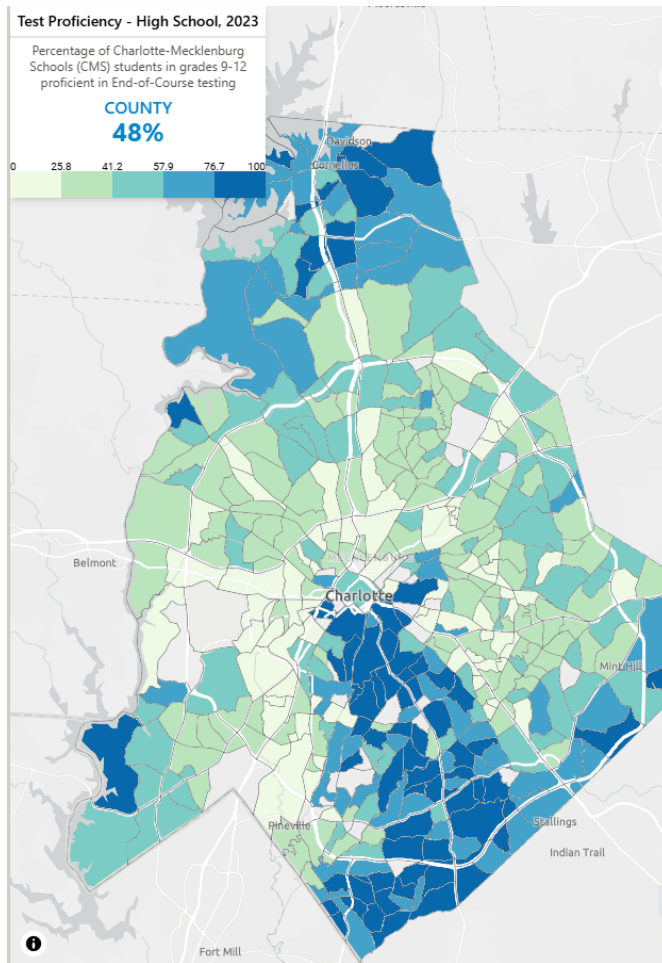
- Approximately **81% of White students** are performing at or above grade level.
- Only **41% of Black students** and **38% of Hispanic students** are meeting grade-level expectations.

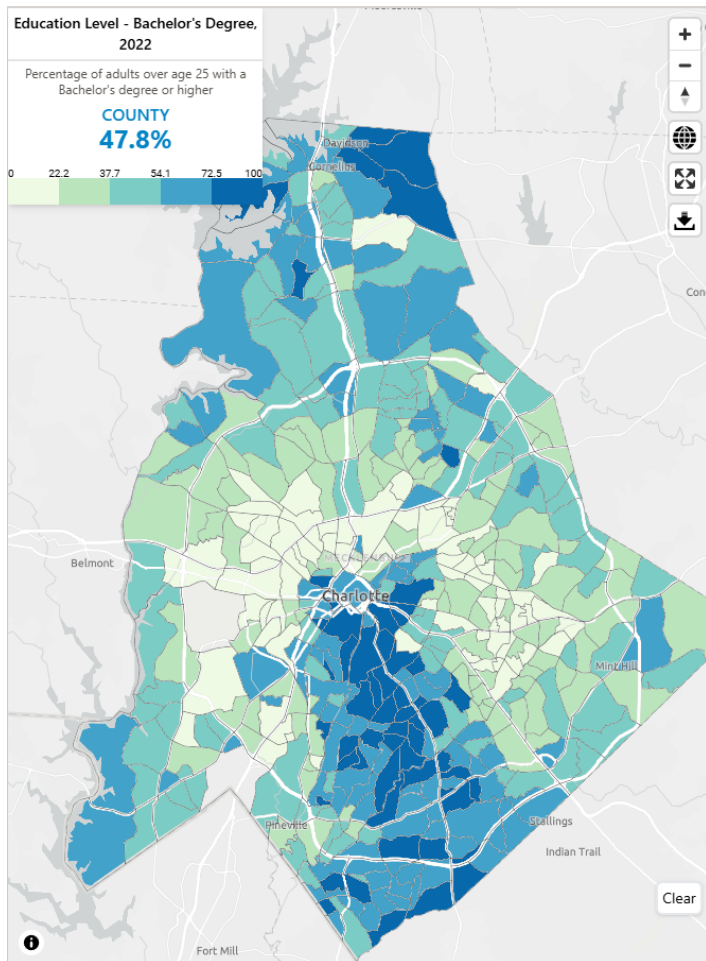
Graduation rates also reflect disparities across student groups:

- White student graduation rate: **approximately 93%**
- Black student graduation rate: **approximately 83%**
- Hispanic student graduation rate: **approximately 75%**

These gaps are strongly correlated with poverty, neighborhood segregation, and unequal access to experienced educators and academic supports.







Chronic Absenteeism and Student Engagement

Student attendance has become an increasing concern across CMS. Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing at least 10 percent of school days, has risen significantly in recent years. Current estimates show that more than one in four CMS students is chronically absent. Chronic absenteeism leads to:

- Lower literacy and math achievement
- Higher rates of course failure
- Increased risk of dropping out
- Fewer long-term economic opportunities
- Backlog in truancy court cases and school social workers spending limited resources and time on addressing truancy without tackling the root causes

Absenteeism rates tend to be highest in schools serving high-poverty communities, reflecting broader challenges such as transportation barriers, housing instability, and work schedules that make consistent attendance difficult for many families.

Parent Disengagement and Structural Barriers

Many families living in Crescent communities encounter structural barriers that limit their ability to participate in traditional school engagement activities. These barriers include non-traditional work schedules, multiple jobs, limited transportation access, childcare responsibilities, and language accessibility challenges.

As a result, some parents may appear disengaged from school activities even though they remain highly invested in their children's education. Traditional school models often provide limited flexibility for families facing these circumstances.

Enrollment Shifts Away from Traditional Public Schools

CMS has also experienced changes in enrollment patterns as more families explore alternative education options. Increasing numbers of families are choosing charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling.

These decisions are frequently driven by concerns related to school quality, safety, class size, and the desire for more personalized educational experiences. As enrollment shifts away from traditional district schools, CMS faces additional challenges related to funding stability and long-term planning.

Resource Constraints and Staffing Challenges

Schools serving high-poverty communities often need extra academic and social support for students. However, these schools usually face the biggest staffing and resource challenges. Common problems include higher teacher turnover, more early-career teachers, staffing shortages, and fewer specialized programs and enrichment opportunities.

Research consistently shows that teacher experience and stability are strongly linked to improved student outcomes. When schools experience ongoing staff turnover, students lose

access to consistent instructional support, which can negatively affect long-term academic success.

Educational Outcomes and the Crescent

Educational outcomes across CMS closely reflect Mecklenburg County's Crescent-Wedge divide. Schools in Crescent communities tend to have:

- lower performance grades
- higher absenteeism rates
- lower standardized test scores
- more teacher turnover
- lower graduation rates

These patterns demonstrate that education policy in Mecklenburg County must be considered within the broader social and economic context surrounding schools and neighborhoods.

Implications for Education Policy

The county's current educational landscape indicates that traditional schooling models alone have struggled to address long-standing structural inequities. Innovative approaches that offer greater flexibility, personalized learning experiences, and enhanced family involvement will provide new opportunities to improve student outcomes in historically underserved communities.

Policies that broaden educational options, such as the CMS FlexLearn Program, create a pathway to better align educational structures with the needs of students and families in Crescent communities.

Misalignment Between the Traditional School Model and Crescent Communities

The traditional public school model in the United States was largely developed during the industrial era. Its structure emphasizes standardized schedules, centralized instruction, and large classroom environments designed to efficiently educate large numbers of students. While

this model can function effectively in communities with stable economic conditions and strong institutional support systems, it often fails to meet the needs of students and families living in economically disadvantaged areas.

In Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, this misalignment is particularly visible through the region's well-documented Crescent and Wedge divide. Communities within the Crescent frequently face systemic challenges, including lower household incomes, housing instability, limited transportation access, and reduced access to healthcare and social services. These structural barriers make it difficult for the traditional school model to address the realities facing many families in these neighborhoods fully.

The conventional school structure assumes that families can adhere to rigid daily schedules, attend daytime meetings and school events, and regularly support homework and academic activities at home. However, many parents in Crescent communities work multiple jobs, maintain irregular work hours, or lack the schedule flexibility necessary to participate in traditional school engagement activities. As a result, families who are deeply invested in their children's success may appear disengaged when the educational system's structure does not accommodate their circumstances.

Large classroom sizes further compound these challenges. In many CMS classrooms, teachers are responsible for more than 20 students at a time. This limits their ability to provide individualized attention, targeted interventions, and differentiated instruction for students who require additional academic support. These structural mismatches contribute to several persistent challenges within the district, including:

- Chronic absenteeism affects more than 24% of students
- Persistent racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps
- Higher teacher turnover rates in high-poverty schools
- Lower school performance grades in Crescent communities
- A growing backlog of cases in truancy court

According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, approximately 60 percent of CMS schools receive a school performance grade of C or lower. These grades are calculated on a 15-point scale, unlike the 10-point scale used for individual student assessments. Under the state's accountability system, schools can receive a passing grade even when their overall performance would be considered failing under the traditional grading scale applied to students.

This discrepancy highlights a broader issue: current accountability metrics mask deeper systemic challenges within schools. When a large proportion of schools struggle academically, the issue extends beyond individual students, teachers, or families. Instead, it suggests that the educational system's structure does not align with the realities faced by many communities.

In Crescent neighborhoods, where economic and social barriers are more prevalent, the traditional school model often lacks flexibility, personalized learning opportunities, and supportive infrastructure needed to address longstanding educational disparities.

The CMS FlexLearn Program as an Equity Strategy

The proposed CMS FlexLearn Program presents an opportunity to rethink how public education is delivered in Mecklenburg County. By combining traditional classroom instruction with structured home-based learning, the program introduces greater flexibility while preserving the core strengths of the public school system.

Under this model, students would attend school for part of the week and complete structured learning activities at home during the remaining days. These home learning periods could be supported by parents, tutors, or community-based learning hubs. This approach allows students to retain the benefits of public education—including teachers, standardized curriculum, and access to school resources—while introducing flexibility that can improve engagement and strengthen family involvement.

For Crescent communities, hybrid education models such as the CMS FlexLearn Program will help address several systemic barriers that currently affect student outcomes. Key benefits include:

Smaller Instructional Groups

Hybrid scheduling reduces the number of students physically present in classrooms at any given time. This allows teachers to provide more individualized instruction, targeted interventions, and stronger student-teacher relationships.

Increased Family Engagement

When students learn at home for part of the week, parents and caregivers become more actively involved in the learning process. This engagement can strengthen accountability, reinforce academic habits, and build stronger partnerships between families and schools.

Reduction in Chronic Absenteeism

A flexible schedule can help students who face transportation challenges, health issues, or family responsibilities remain engaged in their education.

Expanded Learning Opportunities

Home learning days can be used for internships, community programs, enrichment opportunities, project-based learning, or career exploration experiences.

Improved Teacher Retention and Job Satisfaction

Smaller instructional groups and flexible instructional structures can reduce teacher burnout and allow educators to focus more fully on teaching rather than classroom management.

Closing Opportunity Gaps

By providing additional flexibility and individualized instruction, hybrid models help address disparities associated with the Crescent-Wedge divide.

Most importantly, the CMS FlexLearn Program does not replace traditional schools. Instead, it expands the range of educational pathways available to families within the public school system.

In a county characterized by significant geographic and socioeconomic disparities, educational innovation is not simply a matter of convenience; it is a matter of equity. Providing families with flexible, high-quality learning options can strengthen family engagement, improve academic outcomes, and expand opportunities for historically underserved communities.

Legality and Judicial Support for the CMS FlexLearn Program

Current policy frameworks in North Carolina support flexible educational approaches, such as the CMS FlexLearn Program.

As of September 2025, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction implemented a policy stating that students cannot be failed solely due to attendance issues if they are successfully passing their courses academically. This policy recognizes that academic mastery and attendance are not always perfectly aligned and encourages districts to focus on learning outcomes.

Additionally, during a public interview with WFAE, Spencer Merriweather, the Mecklenburg County District Attorney, emphasized the importance of distinguishing between truancy cases caused by parental neglect and those resulting from legitimate family needs or structural barriers.

Programs like CMS FlexLearn can help address these concerns by offering families a structured, legitimate pathway to maintain educational engagement even when traditional attendance models pose challenges. Other districts in North Carolina have already implemented similar approaches. For example, Iredell-Statesville Schools operates iAcademy, a hybrid learning program that allows students to divide their time between classroom instruction and home-based learning.

These precedents demonstrate that hybrid models are compatible with existing state educational policy frameworks.

Rationale for Implementing the CMS FlexLearn Program

The CMS FlexLearn Program provides a new educational pathway that allows families to partner directly with the district while maintaining a more active role in their children's education. In this model, students would attend school on designated days for core academic instruction, tutoring and intervention support, enrichment activities, and extracurricular programs, or specialized services while completing additional coursework at home.

This approach expands educational access and flexibility while maintaining the district's constitutional responsibility to provide a sound public education. By keeping students formally enrolled in the district, the hybrid model preserves access to instructional resources, professional educators, and school services while also empowering families to support learning at home.

A hybrid program is valuable for students in communities that have historically experienced uneven educational outcomes. By creating a structured partnership between families and schools, the model allows for more individualized learning plans, culturally responsive instruction, and stronger family engagement. Research consistently shows that when families are actively involved in their children's education, students are more likely to succeed academically and socially.

For Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, implementing the CMS FlexLearn Program represents an innovative step toward addressing long-standing inequities while expanding educational choice. It allows the district to retain students, strengthen relationships with families, and create a more flexible and inclusive public education system that responds to the diverse needs of the community.

The CMS FlexLearn Program Design

To address the educational disparities impacting many students in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, the district should introduce a hybrid learning program that blends the strengths of traditional classroom instruction with the flexibility of home-based learning.

In this model, students would divide their instructional time between classroom learning and structured home study. A typical hybrid schedule might include:

In-Person Learning (2–3 Days Per Week)

Students attend school for core instruction led by teachers. During these days, educators focus on:

- Direct instruction in core subjects such as mathematics, reading, science, and social studies
- Small-group tutoring and academic intervention
- Hands-on laboratory and collaborative learning activities
- Social development and peer interaction

Home-Based Learning (2–3 Days Per Week)

Students complete structured coursework at home under the guidance of teachers, legal guardians, and community support. This work may include:

- Online lessons aligned with the district curriculum
- Reading assignments and writing projects
- Project-based learning activities
- Independent or guided practice exercises
- Career exploration

Teachers would provide lesson plans, learning objectives, and assessment tools to ensure that academic standards are maintained. Additionally, the district could establish community learning hubs—like those utilized for long-term student suspensions—located in libraries, recreation centers, or partner organizations. These hubs would support families in need of a

structured learning environment during home learning days by providing internet access, tutoring, supervised study spaces, and enrichment programming.

This model allows CMS to maintain educational quality while expanding flexibility for students and families.

Cost and Funding Considerations

Implementing the CMS FlexLearn Program is financially feasible for CMS because hybrid models can reduce certain operational costs while improving educational outcomes. Potential areas of cost efficiency include:

Reduced Facility Usage

With students attending school fewer days per week, school facilities will experience lower daily occupancy. This can reduce operational costs associated with transportation, utilities, food, and maintenance.

Smaller Class Sizes Without New Construction

Hybrid scheduling allows schools to serve the same number of students while rotating in-person attendance. This effectively reduces classroom density without requiring additional school buildings.

Technology Investments

Initial investments for enhancing digital learning in schools would likely include student laptops or tablets, learning management systems, digital curriculum platforms, and teacher training for hybrid instruction. However, it's important to note that many of these technologies are already widely used across school districts, a trend that accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic when digital learning became essential.

Potential Funding Sources

Funding for the CMS FlexLearn Program could come from multiple sources, including North Carolina state innovation grants, federal education innovation funding, local philanthropic partnerships, public-private partnerships with Charlotte-based corporations, and

education-focused foundations. In addition, Mecklenburg County is home to numerous major employers and philanthropic organizations that have historically supported education initiatives, and these partnerships could help offset program startup costs.

Why CMS Should Lead in Hybrid Public Education

Mecklenburg County is uniquely positioned to become a national leader in innovative public education. As one of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the United States, the county faces both tremendous opportunity and significant inequality. The widely recognized Crescent and Wedge divide illustrates how economic and educational opportunities remain unevenly distributed across the region.

At the same time, Mecklenburg County has a long history of educational leadership. During the era of school desegregation following the landmark Supreme Court case *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools became a national model for integration and educational reform.

Today, the district has an opportunity to once again lead the nation by pioneering a new approach to public education that responds to the realities of the modern economy and the diverse needs of families. Hybrid schooling represents a forward-looking strategy that combines the strengths of traditional education with the flexibility made possible by modern technology and community partnerships. If implemented effectively, CMS FlexLearn will:

- Reduce chronic absenteeism
- Enhance family involvement in education
- Improve academic outcomes for underserved students
- Increase teacher retention and job satisfaction
- Expand access to personalized learning

Most importantly, hybrid schooling provides a pathway to close longstanding educational gaps affecting students in Crescent communities. Educational opportunities play a central role in determining long-term economic mobility, health outcomes, and quality of life. Rather than relying solely on reforms within the existing structure, hybrid schooling offers the opportunity to

redesign educational delivery in ways that better reflect the realities of how families live and work today.

Improving educational outcomes in Crescent neighborhoods is not only an educational policy goal but also a strategy for advancing economic mobility, workforce development, and community health across the region.

By launching the CMS FlexLearn Program, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools would demonstrate how public education systems across the country can evolve to serve every stakeholder.

Equity and Civil Rights Considerations

Educational opportunity has long been recognized as a fundamental civil rights issue in the United States. The Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* affirmed that education must be accessible to all students on equal terms.

In a county as economically segregated as Mecklenburg, North Carolina, addressing educational inequality is central to advancing economic mobility and social equity. Research by Raj Chetty at Harvard University found that children growing up in Charlotte face some of the lowest rates of upward mobility in the United States.

Hybrid public schooling will help address these structural challenges by offering:

- more personalized instruction
- stronger family engagement
- expanded workforce preparation opportunities

High school students could use flexible schedules to participate in internships, apprenticeships, or early college coursework, improving career readiness and long-term economic mobility. Over time, improved educational outcomes can contribute to greater financial stability, higher lifetime earnings, and increased homeownership—factors closely associated with the development of generational wealth.

By implementing the CMS FlexLearn Program, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools can modernize public education while expanding opportunity for families across Mecklenburg County.

Evaluation Framework: Groller's Scorecard

One potential tool for assessing the effectiveness of the CMS FlexLearn Program is Groller's Scorecard, a policy assessment framework that measures how well competing policy options meet defined goals. The scorecard allows policymakers to compare alternatives across multiple performance dimensions.

For CMS, the scorecard evaluates program outcomes in the following areas:

School Performance and Report Card Grades

- Student proficiency in reading and mathematics
- Grade-level growth and academic progress
- High school course completion and graduation rates

Student Engagement

- Attendance and chronic absenteeism rates
- Student participation in learning activities
- Student satisfaction surveys

Family Engagement

- Parent participation in learning activities
- Parent-teacher communication levels
- Parent satisfaction with the hybrid model

Teacher Outcomes

- Teacher retention rates
- Teacher satisfaction and workload balance
- Instructional quality indicators

Equity Impact

- Participation rates across demographic groups
- Academic and economic progress among historically underserved students
- Access to technology and learning resources

Below is a Groller Scorecard comparing three education policy options for CMS:

Option 1: CMS FlexLearn Program

A hybrid model allows students to split time between home-based learning and part-time instruction at public learning centers or schools.

Option 2: Magnet School Reform Proposal

Potential restructuring of magnet programs, including changes to lottery systems, program design, or access.

Option 3: Maintain Current System (Do Nothing)

Continue the existing CMS structure without major reforms.

Scores use a **1–5 scale**.

1 = Very Poor

3 = Moderate

5 = Excellent

Groller Scorecard: Education Policy Options for CMS

Evaluation Criteria	CMS FlexLearn Program	Magnet School Changes	Do Nothing
Equity Impact and Civil Rights	5	3	1
Access for Crescent Communities	5	3	1
Cost Efficiency	5	2	1
Educational Flexibility for Families	5	2	1
Student Engagement & Increased Attendance Rates	5	3	1

Personalized Learning	5	3	1
Transportation Barriers	4	2	1
School Performance and School Report Card Grades	5	2	1
Enrollment Shift Toward CMS	5	2	1
Long-Term Cost Efficiency	5	3	1
Ability to Eliminate SES and Racial Disparities	5	3	1
Political and Community Acceptance	5	3	1
Ability to Close Academic Achievement Gaps	5	3	1
Staff and Resource Stability	5	3	1
Policy Option Total Scores	69	37	14

Groller Scorecard Interpretation

The CMS FlexLearn Program

This approach achieves the highest overall score because it expands access regardless of ZIP code, reduces facility overcrowding, enables personalized learning, and supports families facing transportation and scheduling barriers. These benefits are particularly significant for students in Crescent communities, where traditional school structures often limit participation and engagement.

Magnet School Changes

The moderate score for magnet programs is attributed to their ability to offer specialized learning opportunities and support integration goals. However, their effectiveness is hampered by several barriers, including reliance on lotteries, limited transportation access, and complex

application processes. These factors can significantly limit participation for many low-income families, ultimately affecting the programs' inclusivity and reach.

Do Nothing

The current system receives the lowest score due to several critical issues. Firstly, it preserves existing inequalities, which can hinder social mobility and perpetuate disadvantages for certain groups. Additionally, it continues to strain existing infrastructure, making it difficult to meet the needs of a growing population. Moreover, the system fails to address engagement challenges, leaving many individuals feeling disconnected from the processes that affect their lives. While this approach has the lowest immediate cost and highest short-term stability, it ultimately leads to high long-term social and economic costs.

Policy Conclusion using the Groller Scorecard

The hybrid homeschool model outperforms other options because it expands opportunity rather than redistributing limited seats in specialized schools. Unlike magnet reforms, which still rely on lotteries and transportation systems that can disadvantage lower-income families, hybrid schooling allows students to access district-supported learning without being restricted by neighborhood boundaries or rigid schedules.

For a district like Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools—where historic inequities between Crescent and Wedge neighborhoods continue to shape educational outcomes—hybrid schooling offers a scalable strategy to expand access, personalize instruction, and reduce structural barriers that disproportionately affect low-income and BIPOC communities.

Based on the Groller Scorecard, the CMS FlexLearn Program provides the strongest overall policy performance for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools by improving equity, flexibility, and long-term educational outcomes.

Evaluation Framework: Cost–Benefit Analysis (CBA)

In addition to the scorecard, a Cost–Benefit Analysis (CBA) can evaluate the financial feasibility and long-term value of the CMS FlexLearn Program. This analysis considers both implementation costs and potential long-term economic benefits.

Cost–Benefit Analysis: Education Policy Options for CMS

Option 1: The CMS FlexLearn Program

Program Costs

Potential expenses related to the program include:

- Devices for students (laptops or tablets)
- Licenses for learning management systems
- Teacher training and professional development for blended learning
- Curriculum development for hybrid instruction
- Staff for community learning hubs
- Program management and assessment

Cost Savings

Hybrid models can lead to operational savings through:

- Decreased facility use on hybrid learning days
- Lower transportation expenses
- Reduced need for classroom space and future school building
- Better staff retention, lowering recruitment and training costs
- Increased student enrollment in CMS

Long-Term Economic Benefits

Investments in education often result in meaningful long-term economic gains. Possible benefits of the hybrid program include:

- Higher graduation rates
- Better workforce readiness
- Increased lifetime earnings for students
- Decreased social service costs

- Reduced involvement in the criminal justice system

Net Impact

High benefit / moderate cost

Long-term cost savings through reduced facility pressure and improved graduation outcomes.

Option 2: Magnet School Reform Proposal

CMS is considering changes to magnet programs that will involve lottery adjustments, program restructuring, or access changes.

Program Costs

Potential costs include:

- The administrative reorganization involves redrawing magnet access rules, updating lottery systems, and restructuring programs.
- Transportation costs are influenced by the need for extensive bus routes throughout the district to accommodate magnets.
- Changes to popular magnets often create parent resistance, political conflict, and enrollment instability.

Estimated cost: **Moderate**

Long-Term Economic Benefits

Magnet programs can provide:

- Racial and SES integration throughout the system.
- Programs such as STEM, language immersion, and arts schools can support specific interests by providing specialized learning environments.
- Strong magnet programs can boost district reputation and enhance academic opportunities.

Limitations

Magnet systems often unintentionally favor families who have greater transportation flexibility, more time for application processes, and access to more educational resources.

As a result, access gaps remain for Crescent communities and low-income families.

Net Impact

Moderate benefit / moderate cost

Magnets improve options but do not fundamentally solve systemic inequities in school access.

Option 3: Maintain Current System (Do Nothing)

Continue the existing CMS structure without major reforms.

Program Costs

Maintaining the status quo allows several existing challenges to continue, including:

- Students in high-poverty areas are concentrated in underfunded schools and lower-performing academic environments, highlighting ongoing inequality.
- The increasing enrollment in schools has led to overcrowded facilities, higher capital construction costs, greater turnover rates, and unfilled vacant positions.
- High levels of truancy and student disengagement often result from rigid school models that push some students out of the education system.
- Lower graduation rates contribute to reduced workforce participation and higher public assistance needs, leading to long-term economic costs.

Estimated cost: **High long-term social and economic costs**

Benefits

- The short-term stability measures include no new administrative restructuring, no immediate financial investment, and the maintenance of familiar systems.

Net Impact

Low short-term cost / high long-term cost

This option preserves the status quo but fails to address structural barriers.

CBA Comparative Summary

Option	Cost Level	Benefit Level	Equity Impact
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Hybrid Homeschool Program	Moderate	High	High
Magnet Reform	Moderate	Moderate	Medium
Do Nothing	Low short-term	Low	Very Low

CBA Interpretation

Hybrid schooling broadens educational access without forcing families to relocate, enter lotteries, or depend on transportation systems that often disadvantage Crescent communities. It effectively tackles structural barriers in ways that magnet reforms alone cannot. Among the options available, the CMS FlexLearn Program provides the highest return on investment, especially helping low-income families, BIPOC students, and those underserved by traditional schools. The program will boost access to Crescent communities, lower per-student infrastructure costs, personalize learning, decrease truancy rates, and promote equity among students from all SES backgrounds.

Five-Year Implementation Timeline

To ensure successful implementation, the CMS FlexLearn Program should be introduced through a phased rollout over five years.

Year 1 – Planning and Design

- Conduct community engagement and stakeholder input sessions
- Identify pilot schools and participating students
- Develop hybrid curriculum and instructional models
- Train participating teachers and administrators

Year 2 – Pilot Launch

- Launch the hybrid program at selected schools
- Begin initial data collection and program monitoring
- Provide ongoing teacher training and support

Year 3 – Program Evaluation

- Conduct a comprehensive program evaluation using Groller’s Scorecard or a CBA
- Adjust program design based on feedback and data

Year 4 – Expansion

- Expand the program to additional schools
- Increase partnerships with community organizations and learning hubs

Year 5 – Full Program Review and System-Wide Implementation

- Conduct full cost–benefit analysis
- Evaluate long-term outcomes and policy impact
- Convert the hybrid model into a permanent district option

Risk and Opposition Analysis

Any policy innovation within a public school system will bring questions and concerns from stakeholders. Below are a few expected concerns policymakers can use to assess both the benefits and potential challenges of implementing the CMS FlexLearn Program in Mecklenburg County.

Concern: Reduced Instructional Time

One common concern about hybrid learning models is that students may receive less direct instruction when attending school fewer days per week.

However, hybrid models are designed to shift—not to reduce learning time. Classroom instruction centers on direct teaching and guided practice, while home learning days highlight independent study, project-based learning, and reinforcement of key concepts. When implemented effectively, this model can boost student ownership of learning and allow teachers to concentrate more on small-group instruction during in-person days.

Concern: Equity and Access

Another concern is that hybrid schooling might create inequities if some families lack access to technology, internet connectivity, or a suitable home learning environment. To address this, CMS could implement several support measures, including:

- District-provided laptops or tablets
- Internet hotspot access for families without reliable connectivity
- Community learning centers located in libraries, recreation centers, and nonprofit facilities
- Tutoring and supervised study spaces for students who need extra support

Ensuring that all students have access to essential resources would be a key part of the program's design.

Concern: Impact on Teachers

Educators may also have concerns about changes to instructional expectations or additional workload related to hybrid teaching. To support teachers, CMS would offer:

- Professional development in hybrid instructional methods
- Collaborative planning time for teachers involved in the program
- Clear curriculum structures and instructional guidance
- Technology tools that make assignment distribution and grading easier

Research from hybrid learning environments indicates that smaller in-person instructional groups can enhance classroom management and enable teachers to focus more directly on individualized instruction.

Concern: Program Effectiveness

Stakeholders might question whether hybrid schooling leads to measurable improvements in academic outcomes.

To address this, the program would include ongoing evaluation using tools such as Groller's Scorecard and a formal Cost–Benefit Analysis. These evaluation tools would track academic

performance, attendance, family engagement, teacher satisfaction, and overall program effectiveness.

Regular assessments would enable CMS to refine the program over time and maintain accountability to students, families, and taxpayers.

Policy Argument: Why the CMS FlexLearn Program Is the Most Feasible Solution

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools operate within a county marked by significant geographic and socioeconomic inequality. The well-documented Crescent-Wedge divide reflects how economic opportunity, health outcomes, and educational achievement vary dramatically across neighborhoods.

Communities within the Crescent—primarily located in the west, north, and east areas of the county—have higher concentrations of poverty and are home to many of the county’s Black and Latino families. These neighborhoods often face structural challenges, including lower household incomes, limited transportation options, housing instability, and fewer local resources. These barriers affect students’ ability to fully engage in traditional school structures.

Educational outcomes across Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools reflect these broader inequalities. Approximately 60 percent of CMS schools receive a school performance grade of C or lower under the accountability system administered by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. These grades are calculated on a 15-point scale, allowing schools to achieve passing grades at lower performance thresholds than the 10-point scale used for students. If many of these schools were evaluated using the same grading standards applied to students, a large share would fall into the failing range.

At the same time, CMS continues to face persistent challenges, including:

- chronic absenteeism affecting a significant portion of students
- racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps
- teacher turnover in high-poverty schools

- increasing enrollment shifts toward charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling

These trends suggest that the traditional one-size-fits-all school model is not adequately meeting the needs of all families.

Hybrid schooling offers a practical, scalable approach to addressing these challenges. A hybrid learning model combines in-person classroom instruction with structured home-based learning. Students attend school part of the week for direct instruction from certified teachers and complete guided coursework at home on other days. This approach allows schools to maintain academic standards while introducing flexibility that can increase student engagement and family involvement.

For Crescent communities in particular, hybrid schooling options such as the CMS FlexLearn Program offer several advantages.

- First, hybrid models allow for smaller instructional groups during in-person learning, enabling teachers to provide more individualized attention to students who need additional academic support.
- Second, hybrid schooling strengthens parental engagement. When families are more directly involved in home learning days, they gain a clearer understanding of their child's academic progress and can reinforce learning in meaningful ways.
- Third, flexible learning schedules can help reduce chronic absenteeism, particularly for students facing transportation barriers, health challenges, or family responsibilities.
- Fourth, hybrid programs can expand educational opportunities beyond the classroom, allowing students to participate in internships, enrichment activities, community programs, and project-based learning experiences.
- Fifth, hybrid programs significantly eliminate or greatly decrease racial disparities, opportunity gaps, and generational poverty.

Rather than replacing traditional schools, hybrid schooling expands the range of educational options available within the public school system. Families who prefer the traditional five-day model could continue to choose that pathway, while those seeking greater flexibility could opt into a hybrid program. In a county shaped by the Crescent-Wedge divide, educational

innovation must be grounded in equity. Expanding access to flexible public education models can strengthen family engagement, improve student outcomes, and create new pathways to success for students in communities that have historically faced systemic barriers.

By implementing the CMS FlexLearn Program, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools will develop a forward-looking education strategy that responds to the needs of modern families while advancing the district's commitment to educational opportunity for all students.

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