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Superintendent turbulence has community saying 'not again'

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The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Board of Education's recent suspension and investigation of Superintendent Crystal Hill has left her job in flux. Hill is the seventh superintendent in 15 years at CMS, and the lack of updates is leaving parents and teachers with a sense of déjà vu.

In 2014, Superintendent Heath Morrison resigned, and the CMS board said it could not answer questions. In 2019, Clayton Wilcox resigned, with the board declining to explain why. In 2022, the board fired Earnest Winston, later releasing documents citing concerns about his performance.

When the current board placed Hill on paid leave pending an investigation without providing details, CMS parent Jessica Hensen said her reaction was immediate.

"Initially, maybe it was a: 'Oh, not again,'" Hensen said, laughing. "Not again."

WFAE spoke with parents, teachers, former board members and other community members who expressed similar concerns. No CMS superintendent has served more than three years since Peter Gorman, who led the district from 2006 to 2011.

With personnel matters often kept confidential under state law, many are left wondering: Why can't CMS seem to keep a superintendent?

"I think that's what I've heard from a lot of the parent community is, 'Why does this keep happening? I am concerned that this keeps happening,'" Hensen said. "How are we making decisions on these leaders?"

'Anybody's guess'

Coulwood Middle School teacher Katie Price said some longtime educators have become desensitized to the turnover, and that the school board has lost some credibility because of how often this seems to happen.

“I think it's almost a running joke among teachers: ‘Who will be the superintendent this fall?’” Price said. “It's always anybody's guess.”

Price said she does not have strong opinions about Hill as superintendent. She said she doesn’t agree with everything Hill has done, but otherwise found her to be “measured and intelligent,” particularly in the midst of the recent tensions with the board over the budget.

But Price believes frequent leadership changes create instability for students and staff. She said the frequent turnover doesn’t give superintendents the runway to truly understand the needs of teachers.

“I was just disappointed to see that we almost were going to be distracted from issues related to kids by another seemingly kind of bureaucratic issue,” she said.

Price and others said that without more information about the investigation, it is difficult to weigh its necessity against the disruption it may cause.

Kyle Queen, of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg chapter of the group Public School Strong, said stable leadership is important, but that she also understands the responsibility of elected officials to represent the public interest.

“Because we don't have inside information, we can't even begin to provide a cost-benefit analysis of instability versus the need for the board to have taken what seems a drastic action,” she said.

In a statement to WFAE, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Association of Educators said it respects the process underway and is focused on students – but also called for clear communication.

“Periods of uncertainty and leadership transitions are critical moments for our schools,” said CMAE President Amanda Thompson. “Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Association of Educators calls on the Board of Education and district leadership to provide transparency and communicate clearly with educators, families and the community.”

Some appreciate the deep dive

Others appreciated the board’s robust questioning. One parent and former teacher told WFAE in an email that reports from former colleagues about a more “controlling and micromanaging” leadership style had left her concerned.

“I am encouraged to see a board that is questioning district officials more,” that parent said.

A recent Charlotte Observer article captured similar viewpoints.

Former board member Melissa Easley wrote on Facebook that she would not miss Hill if she left, and accused her of creating a culture of fear that sidelined teacher voices. Easley declined an interview but, in a text, told WFAE that the situation has damaged trust between the board, Hill and the public, and she called for more transparency.

Another former board member, Lisa Cline, questioned whether constant change has become the norm. She noted the board's general counsel left earlier this year under undisclosed circumstances, and that Hill herself had made a lot of changes over the last three years.

"So is change the constant?" Cline said. "And that's not good for anyone. It's not good for the employees, it's not good for the families, and it's not good for the overall reputation of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools."

Cline, an occasional critic of Hill, said she wonders whether larger factors — such as the district's size and diverse needs — contribute to the frequent leadership changes.

National trend

In an interview with WFAE, Board Chair Stephanie Sneed said superintendent turnover reflects broader challenges in public education, not just at CMS. She pointed to a recent report from the Council of Great City Schools that found superintendents in large urban districts serve an average of about 2.7 years, a figure that has declined since the pandemic.

"That does prompt for broader questions about, you know, the state of education," Sneed said. "But Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is not unique in that. Not that it's an excuse — but it's not unique."

Sneed emphasized that there is "no predetermination that any particular action will take place" regarding Hill's employment.

"CMS remains focused on supporting its students and employees and making sure that our students have every opportunity to be successful," Sneed said. "That's going to happen, first and foremost, no matter what."

Sneed said whether the findings of the investigation will be made public will depend on the outcome and legal guidance provided to the board.

The community got a glimpse of how CMS operates without Hill during the first board meeting following her suspension.

Deputy Superintendent Melissa Balknight delivered the superintendent's report, congratulating the Class of 2026 and previewing "historic" test results expected this fall.

Board members did not address the ongoing investigation or Hill's absence during the meeting.