

Remarks about CHS by Dr. Royal A. Gurley, Jr., Superintendent Charlottesville City Schools Board Meeting | December 7, 2023

Good evening, Charlottesville community.

Baked into our small city are many things that divide people. Some of them are very painful and run very deep. But Black Knight pride runs deep, too. Over the years Charlottesville High School has often been a beacon of shared light. It is a place where opportunities for excellence and education span these divides.

Recently, though, I bet almost everything you've heard about Black Knight Nation has been shared with a frown, a head scratch, a sigh.

CHS belongs to all of us in Charlottesville, and as your superintendent I wanted to speak to not only the School Board but the broader community about how we got to this juncture, and where we are going.

I made the decision to cancel classes at CHS on Friday, November 17, because we didn't have enough teachers and substitutes to safely staff the school. On top of normal staff absences, plus six staff vacancies, that day about 10 additional teachers called in sick after a number of recent student fights. These teachers wanted classes canceled to make time for teachers and administrators to "reset the culture" at the school.

Let me tell you more about the culture that needed to be reset. At CHS this year there have been six fights that became large and unruly enough that we needed to call in CPD. There have been sixteen additional fights that involved two or three teens and were resolved quickly. In total these 22 fights involved 46 of our students.

How did this happen? Perhaps more to the point, how did your school leaders allow this to happen?

This fall, to address these challenges, my colleagues and I in Central Office were working on long-term solutions for CHS students who needed another path for learning, including Lugo-McGinness, our new alternative learning program, Knight School, and plans for work-based learning.

We also spent time in the halls of CHS this fall to offer support. But the bottom line is that in retrospect it is clear that I should have done a lot more for CHS a lot sooner.

The number of fights truly turns my stomach. I know that's how our teachers felt, too. That's why they called in sick that Friday.

Before I go on, I want to say a few important things about these fights and the students involved. We are talking about our youth, *not criminals*. There have been no weapons involved in any of these fights. All of them stem from familiar teen conflicts: insults, relationship troubles, social media posts. We've seen boys fight one another and girls fight one another. We're talking about mostly fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds with a lot to learn about how to resolve their differences.

Fighting in school is unacceptable—period. And it is up to us, the adults, to make that clear. These are our children, and they need our guidance, our boundaries, and our unconditional care. Only with this support from us can they find a new path and reach their fullest potential.

Students who need another educational path have been a focus of my superintendency since I arrived in Charlottesville 2 years ago. Our schools are only as strong as our weakest points. In closing the school, we faced, together, what those are.

I will provide a summary here of the main underlying issues our staff identified. There is also a [comprehensive FAQ on our website](#), including discipline data and a new dashboard tracking student behaviors.

This is what we have to own and fix for our school community.

- Staff vacancies meant teachers were overburdened with extra subbing duties. This left less time for these trusted adults to support students outside of class.
- Some students routinely wandered the halls instead of going to class. They behaved disrespectfully. Despite receiving out of school suspensions, the students returned with the same behaviors.
- As I have already mentioned, 22 fights – 6 of which were very disruptive – occurred just this fall.
- There was turnover in leadership: the principal announced his resignation midyear. And an assistant principal vacancy was only recently filled in October.
- The way the school and the division communicated about CHS – both the conflicts and the daily happenings – was inconsistent and often confusing. Parents and students have come to feel they cannot trust what they hear from us.

The Board and I closed CHS for an additional two days before Thanksgiving so that staff could work together on a plan to address these issues. Since returning from break, we

are seeing some early signs that we are turning a corner. I will provide some examples of what I mean here, and direct you to our [website for a full FAQ](#).

One example of early success is that we had an infusion of support from division staff and community volunteers acting as extra hall monitors. Now, most “wandering” students are either back in their classroom, or in discussions about alternative learning options.

Here are other changes that I am prioritizing based on the staff reset and feedback from the community:

- We will address staff vacancies at CHS. Already, we have hired 2 licensed science teachers to begin after winter break and have added an extra employee to help manage people arriving at CHS. We have plans to bring on more employees who will manage hallways, monitor doors, and improve visitor protocols.
- We will better support substitute teachers through training and in-school resources.
- We will stabilize the school’s leadership.
 - In the short term, this means hiring experienced interim principal Kenny Leatherwood. Additionally, Dr. Denise Johnson has agreed to serve as Strategic Advisor at the school. She will be in charge of shoring up systems and processes, and building greater connection between our central office and CHS.
 - Long-term, this means hiring and supporting a new CHS principal. This person will most likely join us in July 2024.
- We will make our communications clearer and more transparent. That starts tonight, with this presentation, and the detailed information on our website.
- We will make greater efforts to build positive school culture: In short this means building relationships, having fun, and celebrating the great things our students are doing. One of our CHS staff committees is working on a plan for this.

I don’t have to tell you that Charlottesville is a tale of two cities, but we meet at Charlottesville High School. Even in times like these, our students love this school. Here, students excel in their studies while balancing jobs and clubs, sports and friendships, family responsibilities and future planning, and the ups and downs of adolescence. Here, students achieve excellence as they define it for themselves and make us all proud in the process.

CHS got off track this fall, but it’s a special place, and it’s ours to nurture back to its full potential.

Thank you for your time. I would be glad to accept any questions from the Board.