

WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

THE PROBLEMS –

WHAT YOU’VE NEVER BEEN TOLD

BY THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

&

THE SOLUTIONS –

TO BETTER ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document provides a summary of the background, challenges, and potential solutions facing the Wake County School Board as it seeks to replace a policy which used socioeconomic status to determine student placement. During the past year, the school board thoroughly examined the existing assignment process and uncovered a serious and neglected problem -- a policy that placed greater emphasis on grading schools rather than grading students. The forced busing policy discriminated against the economically challenged and minorities who represent a disproportionate percentage of FRL students. The emphasis on grading schools created an assignment method that systematically deprived low-income -- as well as gifted students -- of the same opportunities as their peers in districts like Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

The review process uncovered the following problems:

- Adequate Yearly Progress scores declined
- A culture of low expectations became systemic
- Graduation rates declined
- The achievement gap between the races widened
- End-of-Course scores declined across all groups
- District comparisons showed Wake schools at lower performance
- Opportunities for parental involvement, control, and influence diminished
- Low-income students were denied equal academic opportunities
- An inefficient and expensive busing system was created

The facts show things are not working out well. To quote one of the News & Observer's columnists, "While there is no denying that the diversity policy has been a public relations success, the claim that it has bolstered the academic performance of poor students and is a model for other districts is plain wrong."

Members of the current Board of Education are proposing solutions for the academic challenges, improving the assignment choices, and increasing parental involvement to provide the highest quality educational opportunity for all children. To this end, the WCPSS Board has begun the process of correcting many of the failings of the former forced busing assignment plan. The process must include support for individual students as well as additional opportunities for parents to become involved in all aspects of their children's education. The solutions being considered are:

- Providing additional resources to meet academic expectations
- Giving parents greater control over where their children attend school
- Increasing magnet options for all students
- Implementing ideas from other successful schools
- Adding proven programs including KIPP and Teach for America
- Utilizing SAS software for an individual student tracking system so each student can achieve their full potential
- Developing an economic development initiative using area schools as the base for the plan

BACKGROUND

Class-based busing functions as an alternative to the practice of forced busing based on race. For decades, the courts debated the legality of race-based busing. In 2007 the Supreme Court put the practice to rest. In *Parents Involved v. Seattle School District No.1*, the Supreme Court ruled that using race as a factor in student assignment was unconstitutional. However, this ruling did not disqualify the practice of using federal free and reduced price lunch percentages, a commonly used proxy for family income, to assign students to schools. Richard Kahlenberg, a leading advocate of forced busing, pointed out that class-based busing would “indirectly promote racial integration in a manner that is legally bullet proof.”

According to Kahlenberg, middle class schools are ideal learning environments because they offer an orderly and stable educational environment that is apparently unachievable in low-income neighborhoods. The theory is that peer pressure from middle class students drive low-income classmates to better behavior and higher levels of academic performance. Proponents of race-based busing had made similar arguments for decades. Abigail Thernstrom wondered if this kind of racial stereotyping meant that black children could not learn without the presence of “some white magic.”

The parallels between race-based and class-based busing are particularly relevant in North Carolina. In 1971, the Supreme Court ruled in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* that forced busing was an appropriate remedy to segregated schools. The *Swann* decision led to the widespread use of forced busing throughout school districts in the South. Thirty years later, race-based busing in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools ceased when the Fourth Circuit Court ruled that the district had achieved “unitary status.” In 2002, the district began to assign students to neighborhood schools.

Thus, by the early 2000s Wake County and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, had chosen radically different ways of assigning students. Charlotte-Mecklenburg assigned students based on the proximity of the school to their home. Wake County assigned students based on the ratio of low-income children to middle class children.

Proponents of the former school board’s school assignment plan soon claimed that economic growth and real estate development justified its continued use. Thus, the school board allied with certain governmental entities, business advocates, and community organizers to create a unified power structure intent on perpetuating their educational designs. It was no wonder that parents, who were increasingly shut out of the process, strongly desired change.

Last fall, four new school board members - all of whom campaigned on a platform of replacing the current school assignment policy in favor of neighborhood schools - won electoral victories by large margins. This election was a referendum on busing and the results reflected a deep public disapproval of the current plan. The politicians, businessmen, and activists who had allied with the former school board have met recent changes implemented by the school board with resistance and resentment. These developments should cause us to ask questions that the previous board ignored: Why has the former plan failed to improve academic achievement among those students it was designed to serve? What were the hidden consequences of the busing policy? Was the plan cost effective and efficient? A summary review of ten years of student achievement results shouts a resounding “no.”

DID MINORITY STUDENTS ACHIEVE ACADEMIC SUCCESS IN WCPSS?

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). From 2002-03 to 2009-10, the percentage of WCPSS schools making Adequate Yearly Progress under the federal No Child Left Behind law, declined from 43 percent to 38 percent.

Culture of Low Expectations. Under the former policy low-income children were classified as at-risk students. The designation perpetuated the *At Risk Model of Education*, which identifies at-risk sub groups, which trains teachers to treat populations differently and selects courses and curriculum paths that are in line with these expectations. A recent Educational Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) analysis found that over 80 percent of high achieving WCPSS minority students were being turned away from higher-level gateway classes like Algebra I and being tracked into remedial classes. State-supported training programs like Ruby Payne's Framework for Understanding Poverty also advances stereotypes by claiming that the only way for children of poverty to succeed is to separate them from their own culture and values.

This culture of low expectations likely helped to widen the achievement gap. The lack of intellectual challenge could also have contributed to higher drop out and suspension rates.

Graduation Rates. Over the past five years, graduation rates of economically disadvantaged students remained flat at 56%, three percentage points lower than the state average. Since 2005, the overall WCPSS graduation rate declined consecutively from 82.6 to 78.4. Graduation rates for Whites, Black, Hispanic, Multi-Racial and Limited English Proficiency students have also all declined. Hispanic male and female students in Wake County graduate at rates six to eight percent lower than the state average. Similarly over the same period, black male and black female students in Wake County graduated at rates two to three percent lower than the state average.

Achievement Gap. The differences between White, and Black, Hispanic, Multi-Racial, Economically Disadvantaged and Limited English Proficiency test scores have not improved, but have gotten worse.¹ (See Attachment 1 for 2006-2010 Rates)

End-of-Course (EOC) Scores. From the 2001-02 to the 2008-09 school year, the percentage of White, Black, Hispanic, Multi-Racial, Economically Disadvantaged and Limited English Proficiency students who passed both reading and math tests, declined across all groups.

District Comparisons. UCLA professor and busing proponent Gary Orfield recently told the *New York Times* that people in Wake County should drive to Charlotte and "see what's happened." Much to Orfield's surprise, they would find a school system that thrives without the use of forced busing. When the two districts go head to head, Charlotte-Mecklenburg outperforms Wake County on state assessments of student achievement. What makes this impressive is the fact that Charlotte-Mecklenburg has over 26,000 more economically disadvantaged students than Wake.

According to an independent study conducted by Queens University of Charlotte, Wake County's busing policy did not provide their students an academic advantage compared to students who attended the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools enroll a higher number of Black,

Hispanic, Economically Disadvantaged, and Limited English Proficiency students. Nevertheless, all CMS minority subgroups, except but Multi-Racial, bested their WCPSS counterparts on EOC and EOG tests. On state reading and math tests, low-income and black students in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools outperform those in Wake.

Gifted & Talented not as high as Charlotte. The number of academically gifted students in CMS has grown faster than the equivalent population in Wake County schools.

Evaluation Results. For years, school officials rejected calls for a rigorous evaluation of the student performance of bused children. When district researchers attempted an in-house evaluation of busing in 2004, the experimental group included 52 students or 0.05 percent of the over 100,000 students enrolled at the time. This forced school district officials to admit that their sample size was too small to reach valid conclusions.

Earlier this year, the Student Assignment Committee requested reading proficiency and graduation rates in Southeast Raleigh and East Wake. Southeast Raleigh represents a low-income area that has many students bused to more affluent parts of the county. East Wake represents another low-income area, but the district does not assign many of these students to other schools. A comparison of the two areas can provide insight into the impacts of the school assignment plan across the district. The results are worth noting. Scores revealed Southeast Raleigh had a 46.7 percent reading proficiency (53.3 percent of students were not able to read at grade level) compared to East Wake's 66 percent proficiency (34 percent who were not reading at grade level). Unfortunately, the reading proficiency rate at Southeast Raleigh remained constant throughout elementary and middle schools. The graduation rate for Southeast Raleigh students was 52 percent. East Wake had a 62 percent graduation rate. The comparison reveals that students who stayed in their home communities had higher reading proficiency percentages (20 points higher) and a graduation rate (10 points higher) than those students who were forcibly bused to other schools.

SCHOOL ASSIGNMENT POLICY: THE HIDDEN CONSEQUENCES

Loss of Parental Involvement and Influence. The board's use of over 1,300 geo-nodes to control the movement of students has fractured families, neighborhoods, and fueled parental angst. Frequent reassignments became the norm for many families.

Nodes are geographic zoning tools that cluster 50-100 families together and break up neighborhoods, subdivisions, and communities. The complexity of the current plan made the assignment policy nearly impossible for the average parent to understand.

Nodes were designated as either high poverty or low poverty nodes. They were mixed and matched for balance in a quasi-quota system. While there are several ways to consider income in assignment models, the measure the district chose to gauge income was the free and reduced lunch (FRL) data. A fixed percentage of these children would be set as a determinate of an undesirable school. The high suspension and expulsion rates especially for minorities may have significant connection to the inability of parents to participate in school functions because of busing and the distance parents must travel to their child's school. For example, students living in Node 593, near Bugg Elementary in downtown Raleigh, are bused to Hilburn Elementary in North West Raleigh, then bused to Lufkin Middle School in downtown Apex, then bused to Apex High School.

Discrimination Against Poor Students. Many low-income gifted and talented children live near magnet schools. The use of socio-economic status as determined by free and reduced priced lunch eligibility in Wake's assignment plan usually meant academically gifted, low-income students would be denied a choice to attend their local magnet schools. In a model that weighs socio-economic status, income becomes a weighted priority factor in the selection process as well. So, in a magnet school if you do not want any more of "those kids" you rank the children applying from a low-income node as a priority 12. By the time the computer runs through ranks 1-5, all the seats are full.

Regrettably, low-income families routinely bear the burden of the busing policy. FRL eligible students living in a "node" next door to an excellent magnet school were denied the opportunity to apply to their neighborhood magnet school if school administration decided that the students living in their node needed to be bused to create alleged economic diversity in some distant suburban school. Minority neighborhoods are those most often broken up for busing and minority students are often selected for the furthest trips to free up space in the magnet school for higher income children. The main outcome of this model of integration is to give affluent children choice while low-income children are clustered in nodes for forced bus rides. The forced busing policy has a disproportionate impact on capable black children who did not have an equal chance to be admitted to a magnet school in their neighborhood as compared to white students living elsewhere in the county.

WAS THE FORCED BUSING PLAN EFFECTIVE & EFFICIENT?

Costly and Unpopular Transportation. The complexity of student assignment plan requires WCPSS to stagger start times and maintain over 900 buses in 15 different zones. Such conditions required 25 percent of buses to travel outside their zone, have reduced the average bus ridership to only 23 (WCPSS buses have an average capacity of 52 high school students and 70 elementary students) and made bus rides for many students unacceptably long. Up to 20,000 students are still traveling over an hour to/from school.

More Free and Reduced Lunch Schools. Since 2003, the number of schools out of compliance with the de facto quota system 40 percent free and reduced lunch benchmark has not decreased but increased dramatically. In 2000 less than 10 percent of schools were out of compliance. By last year the schools out of compliance climbed to over 30 percent; many of these schools had student populations comprised of 60 to 70 percent rates of FRL.

Public Perception. In 2000, approximately 9 percent of families with school-aged children had opted out of public schools. In 2010, the percent of Wake County children enrolled in private schools had nearly doubled to 17.5 percent. One contributing factor to this exodus of students has been the continuing uncertainty surrounding school assignment and school calendar.

LOOKING FORWARD

It is not enough to point out what's wrong with the current system. Leadership requires ideas and the ability to address current challenges. Ideas on how to improve all students' academic performance build on some of the recent accomplishments in Wake County Public Schools. They include:

- Implement an initiative to improve student performance at Knightdale High School that includes an Academy of Environmental Studies, a Freshman Leadership Academy, and a joint effort with Green Hope where Knightdale and Green Hope will offer joint AP classes.
- Set up an alternative suspension program to keep students in school for small infractions.
- Adopt a revised Student Code of Conduct that considers suspensions and its impact on instructional time for students.
- Adopt a plan for Academically Gifted Students that reflects current revisions.
- Complete four new educational facilities, three major renovation projects. Projects should use prototype facilities to save tax dollars and align the needs of instructional space.
- Strengthen support systems for special education children by digitizing the IEP countywide for these children, families and teachers.
- Establish an Economically Disadvantaged Child Task Force that is working with community leaders and families to address broader community and schools system efforts to collaborate and support these children.
- Open engagement and partnership process with community partners such as various civic groups, church groups, and non-profits like the Boy Scouts.
- Remove the discriminatory SES-weighted priorities from magnet and calendar applications. This summer we experienced a 60% reduction in transfer appeals.
- Prevent cuts of teacher and classroom dollars by trimming only administration costs.

Strong relationships among parents, students and teachers are a key to education success. To the extent possible, the guiding principles of the assignment system -- proximity, choice, and stability -- should support work to foster these relationships.

Ideas under discussion include:

- Pledge by the WCPSS Board to place additional resources (including new school facilities, teachers, principals, tutors, targeted assistants and special programs) to allow students to meet higher academic expectations.
- Give parents the control over where their children attend school.
 - Neighborhood schools (one idea has been presented and will be changed and adjusted to accommodate the needs of parents and communities)
 - Offer parents three educational choices within their district.
 - Streamline appeal process for parents selecting a school outside of their district, (i.e., choosing a school near their employment location to facilitate parental involvement).
- Maintain lottery selection process for magnet schools and allow more participation by local / neighborhood students.
- Provide economically challenged families and poor performing students' additional options, such as system-wide choice for school assignment.
- To minimize disruptions to families by providing siblings priority selection in assignment process.
- Select the best teachers and principals to help turnaround underperforming schools.
 - Increase principal and teacher pay for low performing schools.
 - Solicit support from the business community to recruit and compensate the best principals to lead these schools back to acceptable strength.
- Plan for at risk children at the elementary school level.
 - Troubled students will be assigned to a "Special Team" to improve discipline and educational performance.
- Establish an Algebra I readiness initiative to have ALL children proficient by the end of 8th grade.
- Establish an Early Warning Dropout Prevention Initiative.
- Pilot unique themed academies, such as a 21st Century Technological Learning Academy in

partnership with corporate partners, and a Language Emersion Center where kids can participate in dual language learning in K-5.

- Initiate accountability and reform to establish high expectations for all students and set high standards for all schools.
- Provide additional focus and opportunities for academically gifted students.
 - Incorporate Enrichment Magnet Programs throughout the County.
- Seek ideas from successful private and public charter schools.
 - Add Contract schools under the same criteria as charter schools.
 - Offer KIPP Contract / Charters in low performing areas.
- Seek ideas from groups that are successful at improving education results for economically challenged students.
 - Increase Teach for America's presence in low performing schools.
 - Add Direct Instruction program selection in specific K-5 schools.
- Implement techniques that successfully address discipline problems.
- To ensure maximum student performance, utilize non-discriminating nationally recognized data systems provided by SAS to support each individual student and measure teacher effectiveness.
- For students not performing at grade level, provide parental discussions, tutoring opportunities, and additional assignment choices.
- Along with the Raleigh Chamber of Commerce, implement a special economic development initiative to provide a targeted plan for areas with high concentration of economically challenged households using schools in these areas as the basis for the initiative.

Please understand these are ideas, not decisions. A formal process will be established for parents, the business community, and the community at large to provide feedback and input on all proposed solutions.

CONCLUSION

For the past decade the Wake County Public School System has used socio-economic status as a means to achieve racial/socio-economic balance. The district has been guided by a student assignment policy and a “healthy schools” model that has done little more than scatter and hide underperforming students. For too long the answer to poor academic performance was to reassign low-performing students to another school. This process is akin to treating the symptom and not the disease. Because we want to see every child in Wake County succeed, we will no longer use reassignment as the means to address academic failures.

A review of the data suggests WCPSS’s student assignment plan repeatedly failed the students it was purported to serve.

Last year an independent study of the WCPSS assignment model concluded the changing conditions of the community, combined with the model’s preexisting conditions, left the plan lacking in public support and doomed to fail.² The results of last fall’s elections confirmed those assertions. The new board majority has started the process of creating an assignment process that will create the environment for academic success for all students.

The time has come for our community to have an honest conversation about the real facts and construct ideas and solutions for our children. We welcome the opportunity to work with the citizens of Wake County to improve the educational opportunities for all children.

¹ Judgment represents comparison of White, Black, Hispanic, Multi-Racial, Economically Disadvantaged and Limited English Proficiency scores on ABC End-of-Grade and ABC End-of-Course Tests 2001-02 to 2008-09. Earliest score for Economically Disadvantaged, 2003-04. Earliest score for Limited English Proficiency, 2002-03.

² “To Turn Back Would Be A Huge Mistake: Race, Class and Student Assignment in Wake County Public Schools” Eric. A. Houck, University of Georgia, Sheneka M. Williams, University of Georgia. Paper prepared for Presentation at American Education Research Association, Annual Conference. 2010.