

# LET'S FIND a BETTER WAY

## **Let's Find a Better Way: Restoring Well Being to the Wake County Public School System**

*“Let’s get our priorities straight: The quality of our children’s education should be more important than the proximity of the school. I would rather my child attend a high-performing school farther away than a failing school in close proximity. The Wake County school my child, a rising sixth-grader, is assigned to is one of the poorest-performing middle schools in the county, and all of my choices during the magnet and proximity selection processes have been denied.*

*The school system needs to spend the time, effort and money on the quality of education our children receive versus pacifying the parents with an assignment program that gives the illusory appearance of giving parents a choice. What choice do you have if each choice is denied? Now, my choice is to have my child attend a failing school or remove my child from the WCPSS. I choose to remove my child.”<sup>1</sup>*

---

### **We Are All Stakeholders**

Wake County citizens, whether they have school-age children or not, have an important stake in the success of our public schools. A healthy, vibrant, and sustainable school system contributes to the overall well being of our community by attracting new investment in our area and, more importantly, by educating young people so they are able to contribute to society as adults.

The catalyst behind the adoption of a new student assignment plan was the exponential growth of our county, and the need to reassign students to fill new schools and to better utilize existing facilities. Initial results are now in on this new assignment model, and they are decidedly mixed. The plan, originally touted as a “community-based choice model” is in reality dividing neighborhoods by having families compete for limited seating at proximate schools. Some schools remain overcrowded, while brand new schools are under chosen. Further, there is a deep, well-founded concern among members of our community that the plan will produce additional negative consequences over the long term.

---

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Graham, News and Observer, Letter to the Editor, March 20, 2012, <http://www.newsobserver.com/2012/03/20/1944546/elizabeth-graham-poor-school-choices.html>

While the financial costs of the plan have yet to be calculated, it is easy to begin to quantify the toll it is taking on our community. Great Schools in Wake believes that it is time to pause, reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of the new plan and its predecessor, and develop an alternative that combines the best of all assignment methodologies while considering what our community values in public education.

## **Shortcomings of the Choice Student Assignment Plan**

### **The choice plan fails to provide choice.**

- Feeder patterns, “the progression a student will follow from elementary to middle to high school,” were implemented as a means of creating assignment stability. In their practical application, feeder patterns are locking students into schools they don’t necessarily want and locking others out. Out of fear of the unknown, some families are staying with their assigned feeder pattern, even if they do not like that pattern, lest they run the risk of not being seated in any of their top choices. For other families wanting to make a new selection, their choices are greatly limited by low odds of being seated in a school largely occupied by students in automatic feeder patterns. The choice plan effectively encourages families *not* to exercise choice.
- Families in several neighborhoods participated in the choice process for their children, but received *no placement*, despite selecting multiple options. More than 200 students are in this predicament; families are concerned that limited options available in the next selection round will result in assignments to distant schools.
- One of the plan’s design objectives for managing growth is *voluntarily* filling new schools. Three new schools set to open in 2012-13<sup>2</sup> were significantly under chosen. With a shortage of seats at all three school levels—elementary, middle and high school—looming in the next few years, relying on choice to optimize the use of facilities does not appear to be a successful strategy.

### **The choice plan fails to solve old problems.**

- Overcrowding schools is a long-standing and serious issue that affects the quality of instruction and places strains on facilities and services, including when and where a child receives lunch and instruction. Today, trailers account for 17 percent of our school capacity.<sup>3</sup> At the end of choice round one, it appears that many students were given their first choice at schools that will now be overcrowded, while other facilities remain underutilized.

---

<sup>2</sup> Abbotts Creek ES, Richland Creek ES and Rolesville MS were under chosen. Rolesville MS has 170 available seats after accounting for feeder students, but only 54 selected Rolesville MS as their first choice. Only one student chose Abbotts Creek ES, and only two students requested Richland Creek ES as their first choice.

<sup>3</sup> WCPSS, <http://www.wcpss.net/demographics/reports/book10/VF-facilities.pdf>, p. 148, (accessed 22 March 2012).

- Nothing in the choice assignment model prevents the creation of high poverty schools. The educational, financial and societal benefits of healthy, balanced schools are well documented, while the costs of racial isolation are substantial.<sup>4</sup>

**The choice plan fails to promote student success.**

- While the policy that drives student assignment cites “achieving academic success for ALL children” as its first goal, there is nothing in the choice plan that directly targets student success. In fact, student assignments reflect a trend towards greater stratification (schools becoming more high poverty from West to East across the county), and a correlation between higher poverty and lower test scores.<sup>5</sup>
- Thirty-five elementary schools were designated “high performing” regional choice schools. Children living in low performing nodes have a “high performing” school on their list of options. However, it is unclear that there will be sufficient capacity to satisfy the number of students who reside in low performing nodes and are eligible to attend a regional choice school.<sup>6</sup>

**What Wake County Values in a Student Assignment Plan**

**Student success**

The greatest measure of a school district’s success is the academic success of its students. From 1982 until 1999, schools of choice (magnets) were the mechanism used to help desegregate Wake County’s public schools and encourage systemwide health and diversity. In 1999, in response to a growing population and a desire to maintain this balance, WCPSS added socio-economic diversity to its assignment policy. The benefits of diverse schools (greater educational and occupational achievement, more effective teachers, preparation of all students for citizenship and employment in a multiethnic, democratic society) were widely acknowledged and embraced by the community, and a relatively small percentage of students (less than five percent) were actually bused for this purpose. Only when exponential growth forced student reassignment did some members of the community question the value of socio-economic diversity as a criterion for student assignment. We feel that healthy, diverse schools are good for our community, and believe that the majority of Wake County’s citizens share this important value.

---

<sup>4</sup> Walnut Creek ES opened this year as a high poverty school. Initial operating costs were \$1 million more than for schools that were more socio-economically balanced. Since the opening of Walnut Creek, assignments have over crowded the school, requiring additional staffing and modular classrooms to accommodate students and staff.

<sup>5</sup> Will Huntsberry, “Mapping Poverty Level and Test Grades in Wake Schools,” *Raleigh Public Record*, 15 March 2012, <http://www.raleighpublicrecord.org/news/2012/03/15/correlation-between-wake-county-schools-poverty-level-and-test-grades> (accessed 22 March 2012).

<sup>6</sup> As of 3/12/12, ten of the 35 high performing regional choice elementary schools had fewer than five seats available.

### **Choice**

Parents value the ability to make *real* choices for their children. For the last 30 years, parents in Wake County have had opportunities to make choices—first with the development of the magnet program and then, in 1991, when year-round programs were offered as another option. We believe that the right way to offer greater choice is to develop more attractive programmatic options and expand the number of magnet schools strategically designed to ensure the health of all Wake County schools. For many families, the quality of an academic program trumps the distance traveled to attend that program.

### **Proximity**

Having the assurance of assignment to a nearby school attended by many children in a neighborhood is greatly valued by families in our community. For many years, Wake County public school students enjoyed base school assignments and the assurance that they could always choose to return to their proximate base school from a magnet assignment. As the new choice assignment plan unfolds, it has become clear that families now see the uncertainty of a proximate assignment as a significant liability.

### **Stability**

Stability was the trigger that drove the implementation of a new student assignment plan. The great majority of Wake County families opted to remain with their current assignments, effectively *choosing not to choose* in the interest of keeping a stable, guaranteed assignment for their children. Yet the K-12 stability provided by feeder patterns runs counter to the idea that choice is more pedagogically important at middle and high school entry, when students have a better idea of their interests and preferences. Under the choice plan, rigid feeder patterns discourage choosing to change schools at 6th or 9th grade. A choice to leave one's feeder pattern is a choice to re-enter the uncertainty of a lottery.

### **Efficiency**

It is critical to ensure the efficient use of facilities and other resources, including transportation, in a system as large as WCPSS and especially in the face of challenging economic times. Unfortunately, the new assignment plan fails to effectively utilize facilities. At the end of the first choice round, 30 schools were under chosen by 33 – 50 percent, and another 31 schools were under chosen by more than 50 percent. On the other end of the spectrum, we have at least eight schools that have been overcrowded as a result of the choice model. Further, a minimum of 25 additional buses will be required next year to implement the choice plan. Other costs of the plan remain to be calculated and presented to the public.

## **Let's Find a Better Way**

What most citizens want and expect is to have a guaranteed school assignment, fair and reasonable magnet choices, and assignments that allow students to finish at any school they start at. At the same time, Wake County citizens want to continue their commitment to providing quality educational opportunities for all students. Wake

County has an outstanding national reputation in part due to the quality of its school system and commitment to all students in all neighborhoods. Other communities in North Carolina and around the country are watching to see how we manage this issue. They are looking to Wake County as a beacon of hope for the protection of high quality public education in the face of mounting momentum towards privatization.

Everyone wants the very best student assignment solution possible. To realize this goal, it is important that WCPSS not simply defend the current assignment plan, but to acknowledge its strengths and weaknesses as we work together to find a better alternative.

With this focus in mind, Great Schools in Wake believes there is a better way to assign students, one that incorporates the values embraced by Wake County residents and reestablishes our region as a premier place to go for an education at all levels.

Among our recommendations for that better way:

- **Create a plan with clear rules that can be easily understood by the public.** The complex and often vague nature of the current school choice assignment plan has created tremendous anxiety and uncertainty among families. Rules and processes must be fair, clear and simple so parents can make the best possible decisions for their children.
- **Eliminate feeder patterns.** Feeder patterns constrain choice, rather than encourage it. Allow families to participate in choice at any grade level.
- **Provide stability for grade spans.** Once children start at a school, they stay at that school, unless a family opts to apply for another assignment.
- **Put seats where they are needed.** A choice model does not accommodate growth any better than mandatory assignments if schools are not built where they are needed.
- **Expand the magnet program.** In a review of six studies, Genevieve Siegel-Hawley of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA and Erica Frankenberg of Penn State University concluded, “Across multiple dimensions, then—achievement, of course, but also social/emotional indicators and graduation rates—we see that magnet schools are linked to very desirable outcomes for students.”<sup>7</sup> Strategically expanding our nationally recognized magnet program will offer families greater choice, creates a more socio-economically diverse student body, and allows Wake County to once again qualify for Federal magnet school grants to fund program expansion.

---

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Carr, “Magnet-school resurgence? A Q&A with Richard Kahlenberg,” *The Hechinger Report*, 7 March 2012, [http://hechingerreport.org/content/magnet-school-resurgence-a-qa-with-richard-kahlenberg\\_8057/](http://hechingerreport.org/content/magnet-school-resurgence-a-qa-with-richard-kahlenberg_8057/) (accessed 22 March 2012).

- **Redefine nodes.** It is critical to recognize that the composition of many nodes has changed over time as neighborhoods were built out, resulting in illogical feeder patterns. The management of student assignment would be easier and more logical if smaller nodes based on 2010 U.S. Census data were created.
- **Reestablish address-based assignments.** Offer families the assurance of a guaranteed school assignment with an option for choice at all grade levels.

To define a better way in greater detail, we call on the Board of Education to return to the practice of holding open public hearings—not surveys—around the County. We believe that reinvigorating community engagement in a real and meaningful way will allow for the development of a better way of assigning students and create the healthy, vibrant, and sustainable school system that our community deserves.