

Ron Margiotta
Speech to the Raleigh Chamber of Commerce
Thursday, August 26, 2010

- Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today.
- The time has come for our community to come together to listen to each other in an effort to focus on and improve education for our children.
- We have always proven that when we gather the county's best minds, we reach solutions to the challenges we face.
- Wake County is a school system that I have great respect and admiration for, or I wouldn't be here today.
- I think we all share that respect and admiration.
- There are many excellent areas in the school system that we all can be proud of.
- It is with this pride in mind that the Board is moving forward with innovative ideas for improving educational opportunities for ALL students.

- I came today to discuss three major topics:
 - First, to present the facts regarding student achievement,
 - Second, request that you consider possible solutions, and
 - Third, to seek your help.

- There was a time in Wake County when challenging the status quo was commended.

- I hope today to challenge everyone to allow that type of dialog to occur again.

- I also hope **EVERYONE** will listen to this presentation with an open mind.

- Today, Wake County Schools faces many difficult challenges such as increasing state and national standards, growth, and funding to address the needs of students.

- The public education system must recognize and address these challenges while also answering the question, “Are students receiving the education that they need and deserve?”

- Let’s review some facts.

- These facts are not opinions and not political.

- These facts are derived from the State Department of Public Instruction.
- First, Wake County excels at graduating white, Asian, multi-racial, and students from middle and high-income families.
- The district graduation rates far exceed state averages in these categories.
- But, traditionally, these populations do not represent our most vulnerable students.
- It is important to examine the performance of Hispanic, African-American, and economically disadvantaged students in our community.
- In these areas, Wake County's graduation rates are disappointing. **THIS MUST CHANGE!**
- Last year, African-American females, Hispanic females, African-American males, and Hispanic males in Wake County graduated at lower rates than the state average.
- Specifically, Hispanic male and female students in Wake County graduate at rates six to eight percentage points lower than the state average.

- Similarly, black female and male students in Wake County graduated at rates two to three percentage points lower than the state average. **THIS MUST CHANGE!**
- The graduation rate for economically disadvantaged students is just as worrisome.
- Wake County graduated a lower percentage of economically disadvantaged students than their counterparts in Guilford, Forsyth, and Cumberland counties.
- Furthermore, Wake graduated nearly the same percentage of economically disadvantaged students than Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, a district with thousands more low-income students. **THIS MUST CHANGE!**
- In general, state test results mirror these findings.
- On state reading and math tests, low-income and African-American students in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools outperform those in Wake.
- The print and broadcast media have discussed these scores in detail over the last few weeks, so I need not belabor the performance gap between students in Wake and Charlotte-Mecklenburg.
- But demographics are not destiny.

- Gaston College Prep, a charter school in Northampton County, significantly outperforms Wake, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and the state as a whole.
- While two-thirds of the school's enrollment is disadvantaged and 81 percent are African-American, Gaston Prep graduated nearly 90 percent of its students last year and their pass rates on state tests were 20 to 30 percent higher than Wake, CMS, and state averages.
- Also, according to the Public Education Research Institute of Queens University of Charlotte – and I quote: “As demonstrated by End-of-Grade test results, there is no indication that the different approaches to student assignment have made a significant difference in student achievement.
- While the overall average Development Scale Scores are slightly higher in Wake County, there is no indication that Wake County outperforms Charlotte Mecklenburg in most individual student subgroups.
- The academic achievement of Charlotte Meck's students has grown as rapidly as Wake County and in fact the growth of Charlotte Meck academically gifted students has been faster than Wake County's.”
- As the facts show, things are not working out that well.

- Quoting one of the News & Observer's columnists from last week, "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 district's is plain wrong."
- The busing policy intended to help the economically disadvantaged, but it has not.
- Most important, our grading system focuses on "schools" rather than "students" so we cover-up the poor performance of individual students. **THIS MUST CHANGE!**
- I could stand here today and list multitudes of frustrated parents having children reassigned each year.
- This assignment plan has created a breakdown in the family structure, community involvement , parental involvement in schools, and many other factors. **THIS MUST CHANGE!**
- In summary, topic number one described some of the important facts.

- Now on to Topic Number 2 – It is not enough to point out what’s wrong, we must have ideas on how to fix the problems.
- We have considered many ideas on how to improve all students’ academic performance.
- We’re actually off to a good start.
- Let me review some of the recent accomplishments in our school system.
- Implemented an initiative to improve student performance at Knightdale High School which has been an underperforming school.
- The initiatives include an Academy of Environmental Studies, a Freshman Leadership Academy, and a joint effort with Green Hope High School where Knightdale and Green Hope will jointly offer electronic AP classes.
- Many of these classes are not currently available at Knightdale.
- An alternative suspension program was implemented at Knightdale High School to keep students in school for small infractions with the intention of improving the graduation rate.

- Adopted a revised system wide Student Code of Conduct to reduce suspension rate and have a positive impact on instructional time for students without compromising a safe environment.
- Adopted revisions to our plan for Academically Gifted Students positively impacting the entire Wake County system.
- The Wake County school system completed and opened four new facilities and three major renovation projects.
- All of these projects utilized prototype facilities resulting in the saving of tax dollars and positively impacting the needs of instructional space.
- We are challenging the status quo, and the challenge is being met with both support and resistance.
- I am asking all of you to please listen with an open mind.
- There are options that can help everyone.
- The goal we have as a Board is to improve the academic performance of all students.
- In this process, we intend to help support families with stability and choices.

- Some of the ideas being discussed are:
 - Giving parents the control over where their children attend school.
 - Keeping Magnet Schools with a lottery selection process.
 - Providing economically challenged families additional options.
 - Providing siblings priority selection so families can stay together.
 - Programs for at risk children at the elementary school level.
 - An additional focus on academically gifted students.
 - Not being afraid to seek ideas from successful private and public charter schools.
 - Not being afraid to seek ideas from groups that are successful at improving education results for economically challenged students such as Teach for America.
 - Implementing techniques that more adequately deal with discipline problems.

- Please understand that these are ideas, not decisions.

- I have covered the first topic with the facts that show things are not working that well.

- I have covered the second topic listing some ideas on how to improve.

- Now the third and final topic is to ask for your help.
- As a business person, sometimes you, as leaders, must make decisions that employees and perhaps your customers don't like or understand.
- During these times, I bet you asked them to give your idea a chance to work.
- That is what I am asking of you today.
- Give us the opportunity to prove that we can make it work.
- The Board, staff, and all stakeholders hopefully will be a positive influence on the process to provide the best educational opportunities for all children.
- As everyone knows, the Board has adopted a new assignment policy.
- While there has been much public debate regarding the new assignment policy, the Board has made the decision to stop the forced busing policy that used economic diversity or free and reduced lunch as the guiding principle for student assignment.
- The Board is formulating a new assignment policy based on proximity, stability and choice.

- The Board believes that all students will benefit from the new policy.
- In the best interest of students, families, the community, and businesses, the Board and Chamber must cooperate in this effort.
- I am asking for your help to accomplish the tasks that are before us.
- Our new plan must include methods of improving the weak schools -- which will be a challenging task and require a change in the status quo.
- The business community, led by the Chamber, can assist the Board in numerous ways such as finding the resources necessary to recruit and compensate the best principals to lead these schools back to acceptable strength.
- This is just one idea of how we can work together.
- There are too many ideas to mention here today where the expertise, knowledge and selfless contribution of time and resources from you, the business community, can benefit our school system.

- From the pizza shop on Main Street to the largest employers in our county – everyone can contribute in different ways.
- I know this might be a corny phrase, but I do believe that together we can, and we will.
- We can make things better for all students and provide them the best educational opportunity possible.
- You have been kind enough to listen to the facts, some ideas the Board is considering, and my personal request to work with us in building the best school district in the nation.
- Thank you for your time.