

Can Controlled Choice Solve Wake County's School Assignment Problems?

March 2011

Introduction

Across Wake County, people are eager for the community discord surrounding our public schools to be resolved. In February, the Wake Education Partnership and the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce presented the Wake School Choice plan as a first step toward ending the serious disagreements that have divided our community over the issue of student assignment.

Developed by educational consultant Michael Alves, the Wake School Choice plan¹ deserves careful review by all community stakeholders. We, the organizations involved in developing this paper, conducted such a review with the whole Wake County community in mind.

Between 2003 and today, student enrollment in our public schools has grown by 36 percent, reaching 143,289 this year and making the Wake County Public School System the largest school system in North Carolina. The Wake School Choice plan proposes to use a student assignment methodology called "controlled choice" to accommodate continued population growth in our county while also satisfying the school preferences of individual families and honoring our community's values. Based on our reading of the Wake School Choice plan and our research into other school districts where a similar plan had been implemented, we raise the following questions that we believe any new student assignment plan must address:

- Would a controlled choice plan in Wake County provide a balance between individual family needs and the needs of the community as a whole, while also remaining academically sound and cost effective?
- We already have a modified controlled choice program with magnet and calendar choice options. How is this plan different, and would we be better off by implementing it?
- Would the plan truly provide stability, choice, and proximity while improving student achievement?

¹ <http://wakeschoolchoice.com>

- Is it realistic to expect the plan to accomplish all of its goals while also accommodating the future growth predicted for Wake County?
- Will this plan increase the overall costs of educating students in Wake County by creating more high poverty, racially identifiable, low performing schools?

To this final point, the Wake Education Partnership raised a similar concern several years ago in an earlier paper about choice plans. The report asked: “As schools re-segregate and as additional funds are required for schools with disproportionate levels of poverty, how long will taxpayers be willing to make the additional investment in these schools?”²

We hope the information and analysis provided is illuminating and helps our community become better informed about the implications of the Wake School Choice plan.

1. a. What is Controlled Choice?

Controlled choice was first developed in the early 1980s as a means for school districts to achieve voluntary racial integration. Ideally, a successful controlled choice policy provides parental choice and integration, creating a student assignment plan that is politically palatable and educationally sound.

Approximately 30 school districts in the United States have adopted or attempted a controlled choice methodology in their student assignment.³ Generalizations from such a small sample are difficult. However, it is notable that most districts using controlled choice have a small student population relative to Wake County. Also, the primary mission of controlled choice plans has historically been to achieve racial integration, not to address rapid population growth in a district or improve student achievement.

² See the Wake Education Partnership’s detailed and carefully researched 2003 report, “Making Choices: Diversity, Student Assignment and Quality in Wake’s Public Schools,” April 2003. http://www.wakeedpartnership.org/publications/d/Making_Choices_report.pdf, accessed March 16, 2011.

³ Some examples include: Boston, Cambridge, Maiden, Lowell, Salem, Somerville, and Springfield (all Massachusetts); Miami-Dade, Monroe County, St. Lucie, St. Petersburg, and Sarasota (all Florida); Champaign and Rockford, Illinois; Berkeley, California.

The goal of controlled choice is to enable parental choice within a system of reasonable constraints. From a pre-determined list of schools, parents select the schools they would like their child to attend in order of preference. Students are subsequently assigned to a school based upon a number of factors with varying priority. These factors may include but are not limited to sibling school attendance, proximity to school preferences, school capacity, student achievement, and avoiding racial and socio-economic isolation.

Assessing the success of controlled choice plans in the United States presents challenges because there are many ways that “success” can be defined and subsequently measured. Racial and socio-economic integration, parental satisfaction, improvement in student achievement, reducing the number of students who leave the public school system – all of these factors and more could be included in an assessment of the “success” of controlled choice. Below is a brief discussion of how controlled choice has fared in other places.

1. b. National Experiences with Controlled Choice Models for Student Assignment

Over the past 30 years, several school districts have adopted some version of controlled choice, including Cambridge, Mass.; Seattle, Wash.; Louisville, Ky.; Lee County, Fla.; and St. Lucie County, Fla. Although none of these districts exemplifies unqualified success with controlled choice, some smaller districts have had an easier time administering such a system. Controlled choice plans require significant outreach to the community in order to ensure parents have enough information about their options to make truly informed choices. Smaller districts can do this more easily, having fewer families to contact and educate.

Cambridge, Mass., may be the most successful example of controlled choice; it serves fewer than 10,000 students, or less than seven percent of Wake County’s current student population. Both Cambridge and Lee County, Fla. (with a student population of 80,000), have intensive parental outreach efforts. Cambridge, for example, requires the families of all rising kindergartners to visit family resource centers to become educated about their school choices before making their selections. However, even these districts report a strong tendency for affluent, educated families to be more pro-active in the selection process while less affluent

families, non-native English speakers, and recent immigrants to the community are often the last ones to make their choices.⁴

Many school districts that have adopted controlled choice plans have done so in direct response to court orders to desegregate. Consequently, these districts have put racial integration as one of their highest goals. Again, Cambridge has demonstrated notable success in this area, with student sub-group populations in most of its schools reflecting the district-wide averages of those subgroups, within a margin of 10 percent.⁵ Despite progress toward integration, there are still chronically under-chosen schools in Cambridge, and these tend to have the highest proportion of poor and minority students. Under-chosen schools naturally have the most openings, so they are more likely to receive immigrants and low income students who join the system mid-year, compounding the racial imbalance among schools.

Measures of student achievement have also been good in Cambridge, with high graduation rates, but there is still a racial achievement gap in Massachusetts state achievement tests, SAT scores, and Advanced Placement course enrollment.

Unfortunately, not all districts employing controlled choice have found success. In Seattle, decades of lawsuits led to a decision to implement a voluntary desegregation program, and in 1988, continuing problems led the School Board to turn to a controlled choice plan. Choice was expanded to encompass all Seattle public schools, yet complicated formulas allowed schools with up to 85 percent non-white students to be considered integrated. Other "loopholes" in the controlled choice plan allowed parents to circumvent the system, while other families left the

⁴ Edward Fiske, "Controlled Choice in Cambridge, Massachusetts" in *Divided We Fail: Coming Together Through Public School Choice: The Report of the Century Foundation Task Force on the Common School*, Century Foundation Press, October 2002, p. 179-182.

⁵ This goal was loosened from an original target goal of 5 percent within district-wide averages when that goal proved too difficult to meet. Fiske, "Controlled Choice," p. 184.

Seattle public schools in great numbers.⁶ Many parents expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of a base assignment.

Louisville's experiment with controlled choice resulted in a legal challenge, in part because of poorly defined policies, including ambiguity and a lack of transparency with regard to how race was being used as a factor in Louisville's voluntary integration plan.⁷ These shortcomings ultimately led to its choice plan being declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court.⁸

Certain recurring difficulties are notable among less successful controlled choice districts. For one, parental dissatisfaction and an unwillingness to accept system constraints can lead affluent families to exit the public schools or demand "schools within schools" to serve their children's needs. Parental preferences can also contribute to the creation of chronically under-chosen, higher poverty schools. Controlled choice plans also meet resistance where there are an insufficient number of high quality schools available throughout the district. Schools of dramatically differing quality undermine the perception that the system is fair. Finally, controlled choice plans can significantly increase transportation costs.

St. Lucie County, Fla., like Wake County, faces the challenge of rapid population growth, though it currently serves only 40,000 students. The district, which implemented controlled choice in 1990, is successful by many performance indicators, having increased student achievement in recent years and attained a high graduation rate of 81 percent, which is above the Florida state average. While proximity choices led to the creation of some high poverty schools, the open enrollment process was transparent and more resources were given to those schools. However,

⁶ Cassandra Tate, "Busing in Seattle: A Well Intentioned Failure," HistoryLink.org Essay, September 7, 2002, On the Internet at http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=3939; accessed March 14, 2011.

⁷ See Dakari Evans, "Jefferson Co. Schools Sued Over Student-Assignment Plan," On the Internet at: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/District_Dossier/2010/06/jefferson_co_schools_sued_over.html; accessed on March 22, 2011.

⁸ Louisville and Seattle are addressed in: Angelo Ancheta, "A Constitutional Analysis of Parents Involved In Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1 and Voluntary School Integration Policies," Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice, Harvard Law School, December 2007. On the Internet at: <http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/assets/documents/publications/Ancheta%20-%20Constitution%20Analysis%20of%20PICS.pdf>, accessed March 19, 2011.

stability has been challenged by increasing costs: in 2006, 18,000 students—almost half of the district’s students—were reassigned and choices were reduced to control transportation costs.⁹

1. c. Outcomes of a Family Choice Plan in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools

The Family Choice Plan adopted in 2000 by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools provides an illuminating comparison with the Wake School Choice plan now being considered.

Charlotte’s Family Choice Plan is arguably not an example of true controlled choice. Indeed, inadequate controls on choice in Charlotte led quickly to a system of schools segregated by race and socio-economic status.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Charlotte’s choice plan shares some common features with the Wake School Choice plan. Because of these similarities, and because Charlotte’s school system is of a similar size and complexity to Wake County’s, it is important to examine Charlotte’s policies.

In 1972, under court order to integrate schools, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public School System designed a race-based student assignment plan that bused students outside of their neighborhoods.¹¹ Another court order in 1999 to stop using race-based student assignment led to the adoption of the Family Choice Plan in 2000.¹² Implemented in the 2002-03 school year, the Family Choice Plan was a neighborhood school-based student assignment plan that also

⁹ See Sandra Hong, “St. Lucie to Review School Choice Setup,” *Palm Beach Post*, March 28, 2005. On the Internet at http://findarticles.com/p/news-articles/palm-beach-post/mi_8163/is_20050328/st-lucie-review-school-choice/ai_n51872220; accessed on March 12, 2011.

Also see Sandra Hong, “St. Lucie to Revise School Choice,” *Palm Beach Post*, June 14, 2005. On the Internet at http://findarticles.com/p/news-articles/palm-beach-post/mi_8163/is_20050614/st-lucie-revise-school-choice/ai_n51876777; accessed on March 12, 2011.

¹⁰ Thomas Goldsmith, Ann Doss Helms, T. Keung Hui, “School Systems Struggle with Diversity,” *The Charlotte Observer*, August 8, 2010. On the Internet at <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2010/08/08/1608894/school-systems-struggle-with-diversity.html#ixzz1FrQZKe7Q>; accessed on March 24, 2011.

¹¹ For the related court decision, see *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools*, 402 U.S. 1, 95 S.Ct. 1267, 28 L.Ed.2d 554 (1971).

¹² For the related court decision, see *Cappachione et al. v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools*, 535 U.S. 986, 122 S. Ct. 1538, 152 L.Ed.2d 465 (2002).

allowed a race-neutral choice option among nearby magnet schools. The CMS choice plan had the following key features:

- 1) a guaranteed seat in a neighborhood base school
- 2) a focus on maximum stability of assignment over a student's educational career
- 3) the option to choose enrollment in high-performing schools for poor-performing or low-income students who attend schools with concentrations of poor-performing or low-income students
- 4) magnet school choices with a variety of themes
- 5) a focus on maximum utilization of all school seat capacities.¹³

Resegregation by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status rapidly accelerated under the Family Choice Plan, leading also to overutilization of suburban school facilities and underutilization of central city school facilities.¹⁴ Almost one-third of the district's 133 schools were under-chosen in the 2nd "choice" assignment lottery, leaving them with empty seats. The 2003-04 assignments for one high school showed 51 percent of the students had not selected that school as any of their choices, but were assigned there nonetheless.¹⁵

Despite a focus on stability under the CMS Family Choice Plan, instability continued, as reassignments were necessary due to severe overcrowding in more affluent areas and shrinking populations in many high poverty schools. Furthermore, many of these reassignments led to personal and divisive battles pitting neighborhoods against each other.

Extra funding was provided to high poverty, low performing schools for smaller class sizes, premium teacher pay and tuition assistance for advanced degrees. However, student achievement was still adversely affected for students who attended schools with concentrated

¹³ R. Mickelson & S. Southworth, *When Opting Out is not a Choice: Implications for NCLB's Transfer Option from Charlotte, North Carolina in Equity and Excellence in Education*, 2005, volume 38, p.1-15.

¹⁴ R. Mickelson, "The Academic Consequences of Desegregation and Segregation: Evidence From the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools." *81 NC Law Review* 120, 2003.

¹⁵ Ann Doss Helms, "Twenty-seven Schools, Few Takers, More Empty Seats," *The Charlotte Observer*, May 18, 2003.

poverty, and choices to transfer to other schools were limited due to overcrowding at most higher performing schools.

Rather than creating choice and voluntary racial and economic balance, the Family Choice Plan led to the following:

- 1) resegregation of many CMS schools
- 2) concentrations of low-income, low-performing students in specific schools
- 3) inefficient use of facilities due to overcapacity in suburban schools and under-capacity in center city schools, ultimately resulting in the closing of ten schools this year
- 4) unbalanced distribution of highly qualified teachers in the schools
- 5) increased spending in high poverty schools in an effort to provide equity
- 6) inability to provide equity to all children¹⁶

1. d. What is the Context for Considering a Controlled Choice Plan in Wake County?

A key distinction between Wake County and most other districts that have opted to use controlled choice is our starting place: Wake County is not currently, nor has it been in the past, under court order to desegregate. In fact, the merger of the Wake County and Raleigh City schools in 1976 was a huge step towards desegregation. Since the merger, Wake County has been successfully integrating its schools through the magnet program, established in 1982, and the former Board Policy 6200, which adopted socioeconomic status and student achievement as factors in student assignment in 1999. Also, unlike Charlotte, Wake County was not under court order to alter its “diversity policy.”¹⁷ The decision to abandon socioeconomic status as a factor in student assignment was accomplished by a 5-4 vote of the newly elected Board of Education in March 2010.

¹⁶R. Mickelson & S. Southworth, *When Opting Out is not a Choice*, p. 1-15.

¹⁷ For a more comprehensive comparison of Wake and Charlotte’s school systems, see Great Schools in Wake, “Calculating the Costs & Consequences: What’s at Stake for Wake?” Great Schools Fall Forum, NC State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, October 16, 2010. On the Internet at http://wakeupwakecounty.com/cms/sites/default/files/image/Oct16_ForumReport_abridged_v3_FINAL.pdf.

The Wake Education Partnership, in a significant reversal of its earlier views on controlled choice and “free market” approaches to student assignment,¹⁸ now offers the Wake School Choice proposal, in partnership with the Raleigh Chamber of Commerce, in a context of protracted community discord, unabated population growth, and severely strained resources. In recent informational sessions around the county, Tim Simmons, Vice President for communications of the Wake Education Partnership, has presented the Wake School Choice plan as a framework for providing stability in student assignments – answering a key complaint of constituents who elected the current school board majority – while also coping with ongoing population growth and preserving diversity as a community value.

2. The Wake School Choice Plan

While labeled a “plan,” the Wake School Choice plan is, in actuality, a series of general guidelines and assumptions that illustrate how a controlled choice model *could* work in our school district. The costs to put this plan into operation are, therefore, not defined, nor are specific policies that would guide its implementation provided.

The plan describes these key features:

- **Choice Schools:** All schools within the local school district are considered schools of choice, and no students are assigned a base school according to their place of residence.
- **Availability of Seats:** The availability of seats at each school is based upon the number of vacant seats that the school in question has at each applicant’s grade level.
- **Magnets and Calendar Options:** Every family has a choice of magnet and year-round schools at each school level.
- **Stability of Student Assignment:** Students are allowed to continue attending the school in which they are enrolled until they complete that school’s highest grade. However, students can utilize the controlled choice assignment process at any grade level if they want to apply to a new school.

¹⁸ See the Wake Education Partnership’s 2003 report, “Making Choices: Diversity, Student Assignment and Quality in Wake’s Public Schools.”

- **Controlled Choice Attendance Areas:** Attendance areas are positioned so that the demographic composition of each area generally parallels that of the school district as a whole. Additionally, the areas are mapped with an eye toward giving students equal access to educational options (such as magnet and year-round schools) and resources.
- **Assignment Priorities:** When demand for a school exceeds available seats, a weighted lottery will determine how students will be assigned. Priority is generally given to sibling relationships and proximity to students' first choice school.

The plan describes these four pillars: stability, choice, proximity and student achievement.

- **Stability** is established by the process of grandfathering students into schools they currently attend, unless they voluntarily choose to utilize the choice policy. Additionally, feeder patterns are established, with each elementary school feeding into a designated middle and high school.¹⁹ Thus, when enrolling their child in an elementary school, parents will also be determining the middle and high schools their children will attend. Parents do have an option to leave the feeder pattern and enter back into the controlled choice assignment process.
- **Choice** is established as parents will be encouraged to list schools they would like their student to attend in order of preference. Additionally, the plan establishes three student assignment zones/areas, each having similar student demographics and an equal number of magnet and year-round schools. Although the attendance zones play a significant role in student assignments, every school in Wake County will be considered a school of choice; the concept of a “base assignment” no longer exists with a controlled choice plan.
- **Proximity and Achievement** take effect after parents submit their list of choice schools. Students will be assigned to schools based on six factors identified below in order of priority:
 - 1) Siblings at first choice school
 - 2) Students living within 1.5 miles of the school

¹⁹ A feeder pattern is a pathway of schools for student assignment—students from one elementary school will advance as a group of rising 6th graders to a specific middle school, and then those students will as a cohort feed into a specified high school as rising 9th graders. In a controlled choice plan, students do retain the option of re-entering the assignment process and choosing alternate schools upon advancement.

- 3) Students whose nearest school is their first choice
- 4) Students whose nearest school is overcrowded and choose the next closest school that is not overcrowded as their first choice
- 5) Students whose nearest school is a magnet, but who do not choose a magnet as their first choice
- 6) Students who do not meet any priority above whose attendance would promote achievement-level diversity as their first choice.

Strengths of Wake School Choice Plan

Some aspects of the plan show promise:

- The use of a comprehensive plan may provide for more stability than the current node-based method of assigning students.
- The plan has a built-in mechanism for dealing with growth by assigning students based on which schools have available seats; this flexibility may help to reduce overcrowding in some schools and counteract underenrollment in others.
- Although it is unclear how the plan will prevent large concentrations of low performing students in some schools, the inclusion of this goal is laudable. To be specific, the plan sets as a goal that 70 percent or more of the students at each Wake County public school will be proficient in reading and math.

Any of the strengths listed above could easily become weaknesses depending on how the plan is implemented. Right now parameters of the Wake School Choice plan are too vague on many details to assess the true strengths of the plan. Before a real assessment can be made, there must be full disclosure of the data used to come up with the plan, the statistical models that were run, and the fine details of how the plan would operate in the real world, along with costs to implement and maintain over time. It will be imperative that the Board of Education makes a commitment to balanced schools (even if only by using levels of student achievement) and this commitment should be reflected in Board of Education policies. Further, these policies cannot be waived, relaxed or ignored, or the “control” part of a controlled choice plan will become meaningless.

Weaknesses of Wake School Choice Plan

- Proximity is the major factor in assignment and trumps all other factors.
 - This will likely lead to increased levels of socioeconomic and racial segregation as reflected in housing patterns, many of which are the legacy of discriminatory policies of that have long since been overturned by courts.
 - Controlled choice plans in districts that are over 30 percent minority generally produce less interracial exposure than do voluntary desegregation plans with magnets.²⁰ Wake County's public school population is more than 50 percent minority.
 - The plan assumes that parents choose schools based largely on proximity. In reality, parents are motivated by many other factors such as specific programs offered at different schools, social preferences, proximity to a parent's workplace, and familiarity.
- Parents may be uncomfortable with the uncertainty and confusion created by a controlled choice system.
 - Not all families will get their first or second choice schools. It remains to be seen how students will be assigned to their third, fourth, or fifth choices and how those assignments will impact parent satisfaction and their commitment to the public schools.
 - When moving to a new area, there is a large degree of uncertainty about what school one's children will attend—especially if the closest school is filled. This could make the area less attractive to families who are relocated to Wake County.
 - Consultant Michael Alves and Tim Simmons, Vice President, Wake Education Partnership both acknowledge that outreach is a key part of successful controlled choice. The level of outreach required in a county the size of Wake has never been attempted.
- While student achievement is our schools' top priority, it is a challenge to measure student achievement accurately.
 - Student achievement levels are dynamic and hopefully always improving. Shifting student achievement, however, could undermine stability. Unless Wake County school leaders are willing to disrupt prescribed feeder patterns, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to maintain a standard of high performance at every school.

²⁰ Christine H. Rossell, "Controlled-Choice Desegregation Plans: Not Enough Choice, Too Much Control?" *Urban Affairs Review*, 1995 31:43. On the Internet at <http://uar.sagepub.com/content/31/1/43>; accessed March 15, 2011.

- The plan does not spell out how student achievement will be measured for all students. Rising kindergartners have no academic record, and yet this is the key moment in the assignment process because it puts students into a feeder pattern leading to specific middle and high schools. Without comprehensive, well-defined measures of achievement at all levels—particularly as students transition to middle school and high school—the student achievement pillar carries little weight.
- The costs of implementation may be too high, particularly in the face of a substantial budget shortfall.
 - The Wake School Choice plan will require an extensive and comprehensive annual review to ensure the plan’s four pillars are being honored. Expanded administrative staff may be needed to implement, monitor, and evaluate this complex plan.
 - Capacity levels must be constantly assessed to maximize usage of existing capacity and to maintain waiting lists and provide full choice to parents and students.
 - A large, on-going community outreach effort will be needed to inform the public of how the plan works, and what choices are available to students.
 - Bus routes may become even more complex, more costly, and more difficult to administer, yet transportation is essential to offering true choice.
 - Schools will need to be built in strategic areas in order to maintain program proximity, possibly leading to higher land and construction costs.
- The plan promises to bring stability for individual students but not to the district as a whole if growth continues.
 - Popular schools will need to be capped for enrollment when applications outstrip capacity. Capping is likely to happen more often under a choice plan.
 - Enrollment caps have proven costly to the school system – as well as very unpopular with parents. Capped schools lead to high parent dissatisfaction and many choose to leave the public school system.
 - High growth areas with capped schools may develop costly assignment and transportation patterns that sacrifice proximity. For example, if a school has reached its capacity, a newcomer may not be assigned to his/her closest school, even though students currently attending that school may not live as close as the newcomer.
 - It is unclear how the construction of new schools to accommodate growth fits into the plan. Current WCPSS projections estimate that 33 new schools will be needed to

accommodate expected growth over the next ten years. Enrollment growth and the continued opening of new schools have undermined stability in the system for 20 years. These trends may continue to undermine stability unless parents choose to go to the new schools.

3. Policies and Guidelines Needed for Wake School Choice Plan to Be Fair and Sustainable

Specific policies and guidelines must be in place to ensure fairness and sustainability for the Wake School Choice plan. As stated earlier, the Wake Schools Choice plan is really a series of general guidelines and assumptions that illustrate how a controlled choice model *could* work in our school district.

Without fact-driven policies that are clearly defined, easy to understand, and consistently implemented, this plan could easily degrade the academic quality of our schools, cause greater instability in assignment, limit school choice and substantially increase costs—all of the things that it was precisely *not* intended to accomplish.

Dangers to be Avoided in the Wake School Choice Plan:

- As the Wake Education Partnership noted in its own April 2003 report, *Making Choices: Diversity, Student Assignment and Quality in Wake's Public Schools*: "In case after case, both at home and abroad, choice models for student assignment result in either the stratification of communities across racial and/or economic lines or the infusion of millions of extra dollars to support lower performing schools that occur as a direct result of the choices made by parents."²¹ Given past experiences in other districts, how will the Wake School Choice plan avoid the twin dangers of racial/economic stratification and expensive, low performing schools? In a time of declining budgets for public education, how will parents react to schools in affluent areas being denied funding to fund low performing schools of the county's own creation?

²¹ Wake Education Partnership, *Making Choices: Diversity, Student Assignment and Quality in Wake's Public Schools*, p. 16. See also Robert Bifulco, et al., "Public School Choice and Integration Evidence from Durham, North Carolina," *Urban Institute*, Working Paper 14, February 2008. On the Internet at <http://www.urban.org/publications/1001151.html>; accessed March 22, 2011.

- Choice is only meaningful if parents are informed about their options. How will the Wake County Public School System conduct effective outreach to all the families of Wake County with school-aged children so that they know about the school choices available to them?
- Choice is only meaningful if there are real options. Predetermined feeder patterns for middle school and high school will restrict available choices for rising 6th and 9th graders and may discourage families from taking the risk of giving up their guaranteed track. In addition, as popular schools become oversubscribed, their enrollments may need to be capped. Given the realities of ongoing growth, the need for stability, and naturally more popular/less popular schools, what choices will be available to families and students in practice? What happens if capacity does not keep up with growth in set feeder patterns? Will over-enrollment occur in middle or high schools or will students be reassigned?
- Community trust in the system’s fairness and transparency is the most basic requirement for any successful student assignment plan. How will the Wake School Choice plan guarantee transparency and avoid “loopholes,” special treatment, and “gaming the system,” so that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, the education level of their parents, or their race, receive a fair shot at attending a high quality school?
- Community “buy-in” is also essential for a successful student assignment plan. How will the Wake School Choice plan guarantee schools of sufficient quality across the county so that even families who receive their third, fourth, or fifth choice schools will still respect the system enough to allow their children to attend their assigned public schools?

Required POLICIES for the Success of a Controlled Choice System in Wake County:

- I: The new student assignment policy must avoid the proliferation of low performing schools.**

The Wake School Choice plan sets as a goal that, at each Wake County public school, 70 percent or more of the students will be proficient in reading and math. However, the plan does not explain how that laudable goal will be reached, or how it will be measured and monitored.

The goal is undermined by the fact that the Wake School Choice plan gives low priority to achievement in its assignment priorities. Pre-determined feeder patterns from elementary to

middle to high school may discourage parents from exercising school choice, which would diminish the opportunity for achievement to be a factor in student assignments. For those parents who do exercise choice for their rising 6th and 9th graders, balancing achievement levels comes into play as the very last of six assignment priorities. In order to avoid the proliferation of low performing schools, achievement for all students *must* become a much higher priority in student assignment.

The plan seems to assume that all parents will be given choices that include a number of high performing schools, regardless of whether there are enough such schools in close proximity. To implement a plan that creates high performing schools, the kindergarten readiness of each incoming student could be assessed. Alternatively, the system could collect personal information that is highly correlated with kindergarten readiness, as suggested in the Wake School Choice plan description. Finally, the system could rely on the historical achievement levels of students from the neighborhood where the student lives, in much the same way that it now relies on free and reduced lunch data.

While all of these methods raise issues, one thing is clear—to succeed the plan must make every effort not to assign to any one school an overwhelming number of children who are not adequately prepared for school or who lack proficiency in their grade level. While some schools will handle this better than others, the ones that do tend to be expensive to operate.

Recent events in Charlotte and elsewhere make clear that high poverty, racially isolated "neighborhood schools" require extra funding.²² Each of the four Renaissance schools recently

²² Wake Education Partnership, *Making Choices*, p. 17-21. Extensive research has shown that high poverty schools attract and retain the least experienced teachers, cost more to educate students, and achievement results are typically not as strong as balanced schools. Low poverty schools wind up "subsidizing" the cost to fund high poverty schools, while balanced schools offer a financially sustainable model benefitting all students.

For information on *teaching quality* as related to a school's poverty level, see also: U.S. Department of Education, *The Condition of Education 2008* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2008), p. 51; Richard M. Ingersoll, cited in "Parsing the Achievement Gap," Educational Testing Service, 2003, p. 11; Linda Darling-Hammond, "Doing What Matters Most: Investing in Quality Teaching," National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1997, pp. 25–27.

identified by Wake County will cost about \$250,000 extra every year. Currently, that money is coming from temporary federal funds. What will happen when that money is phased out? Will the County Commissioners convince the electorate to provide and maintain the extra money and other resources that they require to prosper? We believe all Wake County students deserve high performing and attractive schools. The school assignment system must serve this goal, not subvert it.

In sum, proximity *cannot* be the primary variable in student assignment if it negatively affects achievement levels at the school being requested. In addition, because student assignments are dynamic, there must be careful oversight of the plan to make sure schools do not drift toward oversubscribed/low poverty schools on the one hand and under subscribed/high poverty schools on the other. A thorough and transparent annual review that allows for adjustments to avoid high poverty, low achieving schools, and underutilized schools is required.

II: To the extent it can be done consistently with Guideline I, the policy should promote stability in student assignment.

The Wake School Choice plan emphasizes stability. It guarantees every student the right to attend a school currently being attended by an older sibling, promises that every student assigned to a school can remain there until the highest grade, and provides every student a feeder pattern that extends from elementary school through high school.

We believe that stability of assignment is an important contributor to parent satisfaction. While it remains to be seen whether any assignment plan can deliver on promises of stability in a time of high growth, any new assignment plan should ensure that entering students could attend a school already being attended by one of their older siblings. The plan should also allow students to remain at their existing schools as long as they can be accommodated without increasing the number of low performing schools. Stability of assignment feeder patterns throughout a

For additional information on *achievement results* as related to a school's poverty level, see also: Douglas N. Harris, "Ending the Blame Game on Educational Inequity: A study of 'High Flying' Schools and NCLB," Educational Policy Studies Laboratory, Arizona State University, March 2006, p. 20.

student's entire career in the system is a luxury that should only be accommodated if it does not produce middle schools and high schools with sharp imbalances in achievement levels.

III: To the extent it can be done consistently with Guidelines I and II, the policy should make sure existing schools are used to their optimum long-range capacity.

Wake County public schools have two different capacity ratings: an optimum, long-range school campus capacity and an annual school campus capacity. The former depends on the number of mobile units a campus can readily accommodate. The latter depends on the number of mobile units it actually has, which may be more or less than the ideal.

To the extent it can be done without increasing the number of low performing schools and without constantly reassigning students already in place, any new assignment system should drive long-term school usage towards optimum capacity. The existing node-based assignment system, including its network of magnet schools, does something similar by assigning nodes away from overcrowded schools and using both assignment and magnet programs to draw students toward schools that would otherwise be underused. A choice-based system, which can adjust attendance rosters one student at a time, should aim to do better: it should, over time and consistent with maintaining high achievement and stability, enable Wake County to shift away from filling school sites with as many mobile units as they will hold and toward filling them with an optimal number of mobile units and students.

IV: To the extent it can be done consistently with Guidelines I-III, the policy should fairly distribute opportunities for students to take advantage of high performing schools, system-wide magnets, and other enrichment opportunities.

As noted above, any new assignment system must prevent the proliferation of low performing schools, provide stable assignments, and use school facilities efficiently.

To support high achievement, a choice system whose rules strongly encourage parents to favor their neighborhood school, like the Wake School Choice plan, must also find a way to ensure that those rules do not result in the creation of new low performing schools. Furthermore, every

family should be given an opportunity to make meaningful choices. Care should also be taken to ensure that every parent is actually exercising those choices, because no child—and particularly no child who is under-prepared for school—should default to a low performing school environment because her parent failed to act.

Once the essentials of achievement, stability, and efficiency are addressed, choice becomes a good thing. But what kinds of choices are desirable? We believe the most desirable choices are the choices most Wake County parents already have: a choice among an excellent community-based school, year-round schools, and multiple award-winning, countywide magnet programs. A choice system that removes those options is unlikely to enjoy widespread support.

The role of magnet and year-round schools should be clear in the plan. Magnet schools in Wake County have a proven track record in utilizing downtown and older facilities, reducing economic isolation, and providing choice to families. Magnets must continue to reduce racial and economic isolation of students (based on any variety of criteria, with socio-economic status and student achievement being two important categories) and to utilize school capacity efficiently and in a cost-effective manner. Year-round schools have saved taxpayer dollars by reducing the need for more school construction by more than \$300 million and by more fully utilizing existing school capacity by 20 to 25 percent. Magnets and all schools of choice should provide transportation, in order to be a real choice for families and students.

A choice system could improve the availability of magnet and year-round programs. Since a choice system recognizes no “base” assignment and handles crowding in a different way, it should no longer be necessary to deny magnet applications from students who now attend an underutilized “base.”

V: The policy should be transparent and easily understood, meaning that parents understand not only their choices but also the likely outcome of those choices as can be predicted from past experience.

Finally, any choice system should be understandable. There should be transparency and equity of opportunity in assignments.

An understandable system is one in which parents comprehend not only their choices but also the likely outcome of the exercise of that choice. What, for example, is likely to happen if a parent foregoes identifying a child's nearest school as the first choice? How successful have parents been when they chose a more remote school that may be highly desirable? What is a child's historical likelihood of acceptance to a given magnet program or a year-round school? An assignment system that provides no information about such things does not offer choice; it offers only chance in disguise.

Conclusion

With remarkable foresight, the Wake Education Partnership posed the following questions in 2003—questions that now haunt us in 2011:

How long will this trend continue before, like other North Carolina communities, a political change on the Wake County Board of Education results in a shift away from a commitment to balanced enrollment? If the school board should walk away from its commitment to diversity, a larger question looms. As schools re-segregate and as additional funds are required for schools with disproportionate levels of poverty, how long will taxpayers be willing to make the additional investment in these schools? Can an investment in equity funding be sustained throughout political cycles?²³

The changes brought about with the election of a new school board in 2009 have been quick, dramatic, and unsupported by a large proportion of Wake County residents. A survey of nearly 40,000 parents released in February 2010, found that nearly 95 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with their schools. Why would we jettison our current system to placate just 5 percent of parents? We believe that the Wake County Public Schools' Student Assignment staff has the knowledge, talent and good judgment needed to fine tune our current node-based system and create greater stability in assignment. And by augmenting our magnet program, we can extend choice to more students. In sum, we already have a modified choice plan with great potential to be enhanced for the benefit of all.

²³ Wake Education Partnership, *Making Choices: Diversity, Student Assignment and Quality in Wake's Public Schools*, p. 26.

After careful consideration, we believe that the changes contemplated by the Wake School Choice plan could very possibly set us on a course toward costly high poverty schools on the one hand and overcrowded low poverty schools on the other. As parents make their preferences known, and as kindergartners are sent down the path of a predetermined feeder pattern, choice could very quickly lead to racial and economic stratification and consequently create the need for millions of extra dollars to prop up low performing schools.

The plan proposes only one important moment for determining achievement levels of students: before entry into kindergarten. This is an unreliable moment, at best, at which to determine the achievement level of a student. This determination will carry great weight, however, because the plan includes a natural disincentive *against* exiting one's feeder pattern. Leaving one's feeder pattern at any point, including at the entry to middle and high school, comes with the risk of not getting one's desired school. This regime of stability will exacerbate the racial and economic stratification patterns that will likely occur in the first two to three years. In addition, it is far from clear how the Wake School Choice plan can adequately accommodate continued population growth or areas where the student population has aged out of the system. Late arrivals to the system will always be at the back of the line in terms of choice and may face capped schools or schools that are far from their homes.

If the Wake School Choice plan or similar controlled choice plan is ultimately accepted as the only politically palatable compromise for our current situation, then strict guidelines must be in place in order for such a plan to succeed. Foremost among these is a bedrock commitment to having no schools with high concentrations of low achieving students. Whatever student assignment plan the Board adopts, it must consciously and aggressively balance schools so that countywide resources are not drained by high poverty, low performing schools. If the Board of Education bows to the loud voices of the privileged few and builds extra capacity in the highly desired, low poverty areas of the county, there will be no way to balance poverty or achievement levels across all schools. We will follow Charlotte's fate, even though we have the opportunity not to repeat their mistakes.

Stability, choice, and proximity are all important values in a student assignment policy, but achievement, above all else, should be the goal of our public schools.