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WAKE COUNTY
PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

A Community Vision for Wake Children

Stakeholder Attitudes & Priorities

Peggy Moulton-Abbott PRC, Issues & Answers Network, **May 2014**

Table of Contents

Background, Objectives, Methodology	3
The Future of Education – Stakeholders’ Attitudes	7
Areas of Educational Focus – Unaided Exploration	10
Preparation for Life Beyond High School	18
Expectations of the WCPSS Experience	21
Next Steps	24



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Background, Objectives & Methodology

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Background

- The Wake County Public School System exists in a dynamic and ever-changing environment
- Planning for the future is an imperative at this time



Goal and Objectives

Goal

- In the course of planning for the future, WCPSS is striving to understand the attitudes of various stakeholder constituencies relative to public education at a very high level

Objectives

- WCPSS desires to identify the key issues that will drive planning educational priorities in the future
- Specifically, this study is designed to discover the most important areas of educational focus by using an open-ended approach to gather feedback from numerous stakeholder cohorts

Methodology

- WCPSS enlisted the services of Issues & Answers Network (I&A), an independent marketing research firm to collect data from stakeholders in May 2014
- The method utilized was telephone focus groups
 - Each group lasted 2 hours
 - A professional, certified marketing research consultant conducted each group
 - WCPSS identified and invited respondents to participate with assistance from I&A
 - Due to regulatory and time constraints, additional interviews were conducted by WCPSS staff with incarcerated students and former students
- All questions were asked on a totally open-ended, unaided basis
- A total of 105 stakeholders participated in the research
- Respondent cohorts included:

Board and Advisory Council	Former Students (College)	Current Students (Traditional)	Non-WCPSS Parents
Central Office	Former Students (Other Tracks)	Current Students (Alternative)	Community Groups
Current Parents	Business Leaders	Teachers	Principals/APs





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The Future of Education – Stakeholders' Attitudes

Peggy Moulton-Abbott PRC, Issues & Answers Network, May 2014

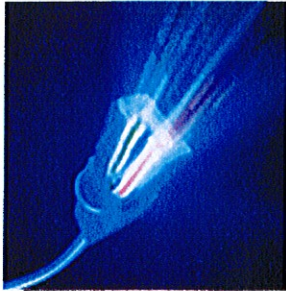
Stakeholders' view of the future is largely positive, with definite striation by cohort.

Using a word-association exercise, respondents defined their overall attitude about the general concept of “the future” both verbally and visually

- Most common phrases include:
 - Opportunity -Challenges -Connected -Communication -Change -Scary
 - Technology -Hopeful -Gaps -Possibility -Evolving -Diverse
 - Uncertain -Children -Fast-moving -Virtual Reality -Flying cars
- Predominant reaction is positive, upbeat, and hopeful
 - College bound current students and recent graduates are the most positive
- However, there is a definite undercurrent of anxiety
 - Current students in at-risk situations, business and community leaders express the most negative reactions and anxiety about the future

On an unaided basis, the visuals respondents see as representing the future center in a few categories.

Technology



Connectedness



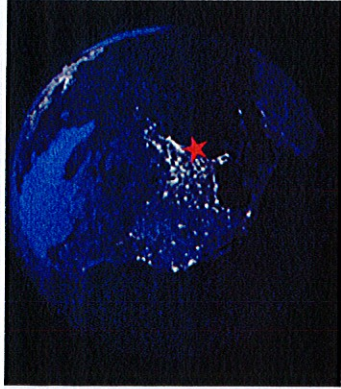
Virtual life / Classrooms



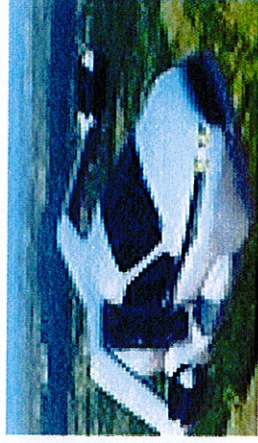
Children as the Future



Unlimited Possibilities for NC

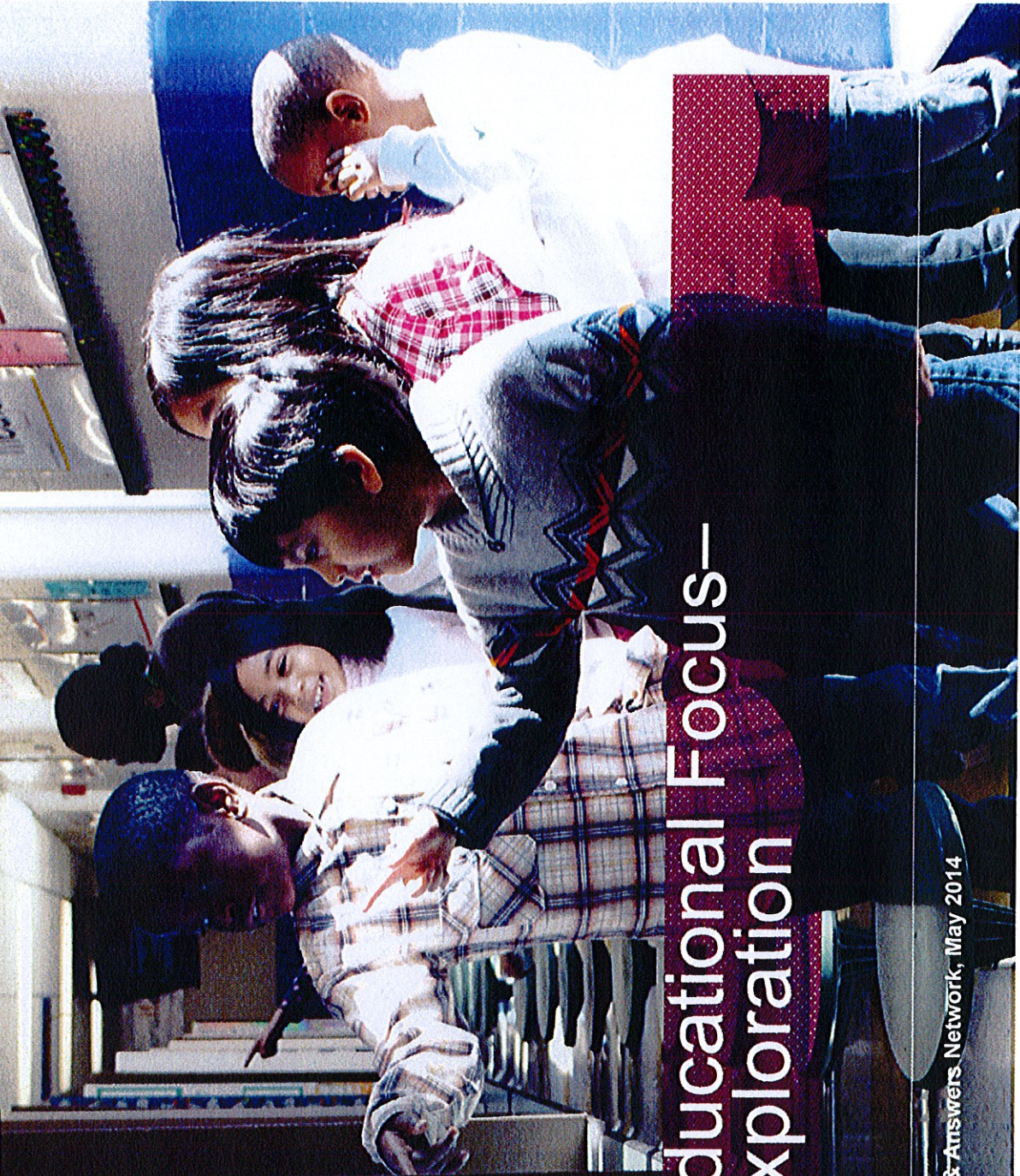


Flying cars





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Areas of Educational Focus— Unaided Exploration

Peggy Moulton-Abbott PRC, Issues & Answers Network, May 2014

Stakeholders voice unaided concerns about education in five main categories, with remarkable synergy across the cohorts.

When asked to define areas of educational focus, respondents named more than 200 distinct issues centered around:

- **People/Human Resources:** the students, teachers, principals, parents, administrators and community involved in the process
- **Ideology/Culture:** the thoughts and ideas that drive the system and its offerings
- **Resources:** the material things like buildings, books, technology and software that allow learning to happen
- **Funding:** the money to pay for staff and resources
- **Legislature/Politics:** the source of funding and public oversight for the entire system (includes the media)

Each major Area of Educational Focus will be discussed in more detail (by stakeholder cohort) on the following pages. A full database of all responses by cohort is included as an addendum to this report.



Most participants' initial thought is that primary emphasis should be on the human beings involved.

Stakeholders' concerns about PEOPLE involved in the WCPSS include:

- **Students** are should be served to the highest possible degree – it's all about the children
 - Delivering world-class educational curriculum and opportunities is desired
 - Academic rigor/performance should be competitive at an international level
 - Equitable treatment of every student with teaching and testing is imperative
- **Teachers** play a pivotal role – without them there is no learning
 - Recruit, screen, train, pay, and retain them or risk failure at an overall level
 - Recognized need to reduce focus on anything other than teaching, including testing
- **Parents** should be actively courted to be involved in the entire process
 - Students are a product of their home environment, over which WCPSS has limited control, but it can equip, empower, and encourage parental involvement
- **Principals/A.P.s** provide the leadership to make it all work
- **Administrators/Central Office** also play a key supporting role
 - Doing a great job gathering data, but need to be more strategic with its use/application
- **Communities** must also be encouraged to be engaged and active in schools



Stakeholders' name more desires related to ideology and culture for WCPSS than they had in any other area of focus.

Basic areas of focus related to IDEOLOGY/CULTURE include:

- **Curriculum** is the primary concern of most stakeholders
 - This defines the basic “product” of WCPSS so it deserves serious attention and emphasis
 - Common Core is a good baseline, but there must be equal focus on developing “lifetime learners” who are curious and motivated to keep learning
- **“The Basics” of education** have been lost and need to be found, according to many stakeholders
 - Reading, writing, arithmetic, and communications skills of graduates are lacking
 - Attitudes of students/recent graduates need adjustment to a more respectful, less narcissistic posture
- **Students’ Critical Thinking Abilities** are valued by almost everyone
 - This is how WCPSS proves its value to the community, since it’s a predictor of later success
- **Preparation for Life After High School** is a universal concern for all
 - Emphasis on identifying students’ paths forward is crucial to everyone’s future
- **Standardized Testing** is a powder-keg issue for students and educators
 - Stakeholders’ key complaint is about teaching to pass tests and make teachers/schools look good, rather than teaching children to learn

Stakeholders' name more desires related to ideology (continued).

Additional areas of focus related to IDEOLOGY/CULTURE include:

- **Community Engagement** matters to almost all stakeholders
 - Respondents strongly believe all citizens of the county are stakeholders in WCPSS, whether they have/had students in the system or not
- **Leadership** at the school level is believed to make students successful
 - More emphasis on the role, authority, and involvement of principals is deemed advisable
- **Special Needs Populations** are often mentioned as areas of concern
 - One size does not fit all – Stakeholders want all students served according to their needs
- **Equity** of education, resources and assignments is a concern to many
- **Advocacy for Public Education** matters deeply to school board/advisors, principals, teachers and community leaders
- **Behavioral/Disciplinary Issues** matter due to questions of even-handed policy enforcement, classroom disruption to other students and litigation threats
- **Segmentation of Schools by Type** matters due to the choices it implies
 - Defining the “draw” of traditional vs. specialized schools is an area of confusion and doubt
- **Re-segregation** is a fear for a vociferous minority of respondents

Availability and distribution of resources that are key to providing WCPSS' educational "product" are not always up-to-par.

Stakeholders understand that resources cost money, but they feel the investment is worthy in order to properly equip teachers and students to learn. Their unaided areas of focus on RESOURCES include:

- **Infrastructure** needs attention
 - Cleanliness, age of equipment, physical space in classrooms
- **Technology** is the two-ton elephant in the room that demands constant care, feeding, updating, and training
 - IT security and performance are all felt to be lacking in performance and usability
 - EVASS is a thorn in teachers' sides due to slow performance
 - Smart Boards in classrooms are under-utilized
 - Additional devices for student use are in high-demand
 - Virtual learning is of interest, but there are doubts about adequate resources
- **Transportation** is not often mentioned, but a concern over availability is expressed
 - A public transportation option is viewed as being advisable for older students who need to get to internships, activities, and volunteering assignments

Funding is an area of concern, and stakeholders have some ideas how to tackle this in the current economy.

As one respondent said: *“I know money can’t buy me happiness, but everything that makes me happy costs money.”* FUNDING areas of focus include:

- **Teacher Pay, Additional Pay for Advanced Degrees, and Training** top the list of hot-button areas where they want more money to be spent
 - Nearly every stakeholder cohort mentions the need to pay teachers more
 - Most agree, teachers should have more and better training, and continuing education paid for by WCPSS
- **Increasing Staff Pay** is another area of agreement among participants
- **Special Education** is mentioned often as an area in need of more funding
- **Other Special Programs** such as AIG, daycare for HS students who have children, and field trips are also mentioned spontaneously
- **Funding Matched to Student/School Needs** instead of based simply on head count is desirable
 - This would require making “bankers in the county commissioners’ office and legislature” understand why per-capita spending does not properly serve the needs where they exist
- **Collaborative Efforts with Business** can be a solution
 - However, business leaders warn, they will expect desired results for their investment

Stakeholders hurl their worst epithets at politicians using the school system as a strategic pawn.

Political maneuvering comes up in almost every cohort, and all agree, students are the losers.

POLITICAL/LEGISLATIVE areas of focus include:

- **Feeling Threatened** by politicians, legislators and the news media who use education as a political football
 - Programs like vouchers and open enrollment are highly controversial and particularly threatening to school leadership and community groups
- **Influence of Non-Educators on Education** is an area of concern for almost everyone, and is even mentioned by students
 - Most stakeholders agree: principals and teachers should be choosing what is taught and how, not politicians, lawmakers or groups like ALEC
 - These non-educators are viewed as having something to gain; that is not always in the best interests of all WCPSS students
- **Construction** of new schools is a big-ticket item that gets noticed, and as a result, eliminated from the county and state budgets
- **Department of Public Instruction** is a source of heartburn to educators

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Preparation for Life Beyond High School

Peggy Moulton-Abbott PRC, Issues & Answers Network, May 2014

Effectiveness of post-HS preparation is a source of great debate, but most share a strong desire for improvement.

Most cohorts are able to name some things WCPSS is doing to prepare students for life beyond high school.

Positive areas of focus on PREPARATIONS FOR LIFE BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL:

- **Opportunities for Self-Discovery** are available
 - Varied course offerings allow students to find out what interests them
 - A plethora of activities/clubs help students to identify strengths and leadership abilities
- **Guidance counselors** help with college application and financial aid processes
- **Career Days** are occurring, even at the elementary level
- **College Fairs** are being held with great representation from many fine universities
- **Critical Thinking** and problem-solving are being taught even at the earliest ages, and stakeholders feel this is very important in preparing students for life as adults
- **Internships** are available in a wide variety of settings with great results for students
- **CTE Academy** is the rising star in WCPSS' efforts to prepare students for the future
- **Wake Early College Education** is almost as exciting as CTE
- **NJROTC** does a great job of preparing students for real life
- **STEM** is mentioned often by many cohorts as great training for careers
- **Common Core** is thought to provide a good, basic education for future workers

Stakeholders are vociferous in their support of better preparations for students' life beyond high school.

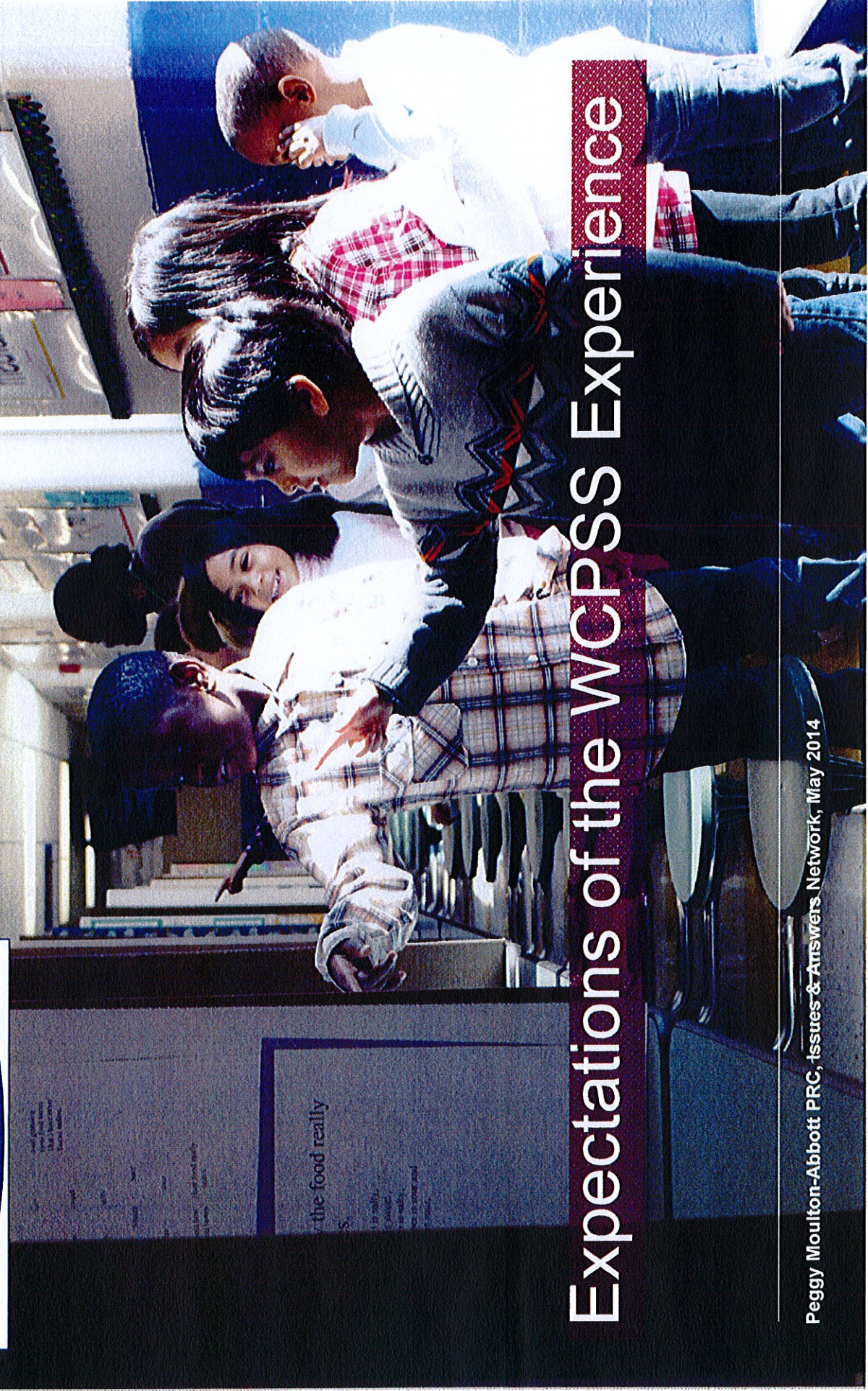
Many stakeholders are initially stumped by the question of how WCPSS supports students getting ready to go out into the world, but they quickly amass a “wish list.” Areas where LIFE BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL PREPARATION needs work are:

- **Real World Experience** is desirable, and somewhat lacking
 - This includes internships with businesses, but also volunteering with non-profits
 - Students and businesses agree; this exposure to real work life is invaluable
- **Assessment of Aptitude/Ability** doesn't appear to be done any more
 - Some favor the German model of assessing students at middle school level
 - Others don't want students pigeon-holed into a single path too early in life
 - Most agree, all students need help to establish some sort of path to their future and school guidance counselors are too over-loaded to help them properly
- **Life Skills Training** is mentioned by students as a major deficit area
 - Learning to cook, balance a budget/checkbook, apply for a loan, buy/rent a home
- **A More Well-Rounded Education** is thought to prepare students for adult life
- **Identifying Potential Drop-outs Earlier** and finding ways to motivate them is a concern for principals, teachers and even students
- **Promoting Alternative Learning Programs** to students, parents and the community seems to be an area of opportunity, since many stakeholders appear to lack awareness. Additional marketing and communication is advisable





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Expectations of the WCPSS Experience

Peggy Moulton-Abbott PRC, Issues & Answers Network, May 2014

Stakeholders don't actively think about their expectations from WCPSS, but when prompted there is great synergy.

EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE IN WCPSS include:

- **Student-Centric Focus** with strong emphasis on character traits:
 - Self-determined, confident, students empowered with a can-do attitude
 - Respectful, cooperative, collaborative young people
 - Community-connected students, not narcissists with entitlement mentality
 - Students possessing basic life skills to be productive members of society
- **Great Teachers**
 - Passionate professionals who inspire students to be inquisitive, lifelong learners
 - Competitive compensation and opportunity for professional development
 - Empowered to impact what is taught in WCPSS and their own schools
- **Rigorous Curriculum**
 - Teaching critical thinking, communications skills, and proficiency in Common Core subjects necessary to satisfy the need of future employers
 - Well-rounded education with exposure to arts, clubs, and activities so students stay engaged and connected to their schools
- **Equity of Educational Opportunities**
 - All students are equally encouraged and challenged to succeed
 - Resources are allocated fairly, according to need, to all schools in the system



Stakeholders expectations (continued)

EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE IN WCPSS include:

- **Preparing Students for Life Beyond High School**
 - Strong guidance, career counseling and experiential options that identify each students' unique talents, abilities, and interests, and puts them on a path to their future
 - Training for Non-College-Bound Students available to all students, regardless of which school they attend
- **Parents and Community Fully-Invested in the success of WCPSS**
 - Constant two-way communication and collaboration between WCPSS and these cohorts
 - Businesses involved in helping to train students for work life
 - Informing and convincing Wake County citizens without students in WCPSS about the benefits and importance of strong public education
- **Adequate Funding to provide the resources and pay the educators and staff competitively**
 - Stemming the outflow of talent and students to other areas helps keep the entire community strong and viable
- **A Safe Environment conducive to learning by all students**



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Next Steps

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Much more quantification of this data is needed. Ergo, the next step will be a large-scale quantitative survey.

Methodology of the next phase:

- WCPSS has utilized the results of this qualitative study to formulate questions for a quantitative survey
- WCPSS will recruit, field, and collect data
- Issues & Answers will analyze the data and provide final reporting of both phases of research
- A final presentation of all findings will be made to WCPSS SLT by Issues & Answers on July 21, 2014 at our Leadership Retreat

