

PUBLIC ISSUES CONFRONTING THE WCPSS BOARD OF EDUCATION AS PERCEIVED BY FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

In an effort to understand the issues that the citizens of Wake County believe confront the Board of Education, two focus group interviews were conducted in November 2007 with the Community Relations Committee (CRC). Members of the CRC are appointed from each of the Board districts to advise the Board on issues of importance to the community and to the schools. A focus group interview, by definition, allows a group of people with some common characteristics and some differences to come together to discuss the topic or issues under consideration.

The two groups both identified population growth as a major root cause of many of the issues confronting the school system. Many of the issues identified by the interviewed groups may be thought of as nested, or embedded. The focus group interviews identified three major impacts of this rapid growth on the school district: providing high quality facilities and educational programs, creating a student assignment plan that is fair and provides some measure of predictability, and coping with the increasing diversity of the student population.

1. Providing high quality educational programs and facilities

The rapid and continuing growth of the student population of the county has created a need to build a number of new schools. Sites for these schools must be obtained even as the parcels of land appropriate for such schools become scarcer and, thus, more costly. Because not all areas of the county have enjoyed uniform growth, deciding how and where to site these new schools has presented a challenge for the Board of Education. All of this is complicated by the fact, in the view of many of the interview participants, that the Board of Education has no alternative but to act reactively. That is, the Board has no authority to control growth in particular areas of the county, nor has the Board any independent authority to raise money, through taxes or fees, to pay for growth. Paying for such building projects is the legislated responsibility of the Board of County Commissioners, who are also charged with permitting development. Thus, as was pointed out by several participants, the Board is constantly playing catch-up. One

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participant said that it would be good if the School Board were able to build schools before housing developments are created, or if developers could be required to provide land for schools before they start marketing. However, he recognized that that is impossible, since the Board has no role in permitting the development of new houses. Another participant thought it might be feasible to buy property in undeveloped areas of the county before prices increased. Students could be bused to the schools, since many students do not go to school in their neighborhoods anyway, and growth would probably occur around the school.

Despite these difficulties, the Board has been engaged in a program of building new schools in parts of the county that are experiencing rapid growth. The passage of two major bonds for school construction in recent elections indicates that the larger county community understands the population pressures to which the School Board is responding and has been willing to pay for the necessary facilities. However, there is a necessary delay between the creation of a need for schools and the actual construction and occupancy of those schools, thus creating a need for a creative plan of student assignment. Two participants discussed crowding within schools, with one suggesting a greater number of smaller schools would make management easier. The other said she had to pull one of her sons from public school into a private school because he was not thriving in the large schools and classes of his assigned high school.

Several focus group participants pointed out that the Board of Education is often locked in disagreement with the Board of County Commissioners about each of these aspects of the growth issue. One interview participant stated that she loses patience with the apparent inability of the two boards to get along. While the County Commissioners are legislatively responsible for providing the resources to pay for school construction and is the taxing authority, some Commissioners have publicly disagreed with the School Board about various aspects of the Board's response to growth. These political disputes were viewed as disheartening by many of the focus group members, since such disputes, at best, undermine the confidence of the larger public in decisions made by the School Board and, at worst, sometimes seemed petty, personal, and disrespectful. One participant felt that this was an issue of balancing the needs of individual families against the needs of the larger system. "We give too much power to individuals and their needs and it has an impact on the entire system".

Some participants in the interview said that the School Board may allow too much public discussion of the issues that they are trying to decide. This creates the opportunity for increasingly rancorous public comment and prolongs the debate leading up to the decisions that the Board will inevitably be required to take. One participant pointed out that the members of the Board are elected by the citizens of their districts precisely because of the confidence that the public has in the ability of the Board members to make these decisions. Too much public discussion only intensified the disagreement for this person.

Some participants mentioned instructional issues as important for the Board to address, such as responding to the Curriculum Management Audit and magnet offerings and issues. The feeling was that the Board had not had time to deal sufficiently with instructional issues. They saw this as unfortunate. One participant mentioned that he believed the Board should spend more time reviewing information on program or curriculum issues that were important district-wide. Addressing test scores and curriculum issues as they arose were given as examples (e.g., one

person had heard concerns about Math Trailblazers). One group discussed and agreed that, despite growth issues, students get an excellent education regardless of the school they attend in WCPSS.

2. Creating a student assignment plan that is fair and provides some measure of predictability

One of the methods for responding to the growth issue has been through the crafting of a student assignment plan that allows the school district to try to utilize its existing facilities efficiently. This plan has been based on residential nodes that may be assigned for enrollment to schools that are at some distance from the neighborhood.

This has meant that while many students are assigned to a school relatively close to their homes, there are cases in which students are not assigned to the school closest to their home. One interview participant who no longer has children in school, but whose grandchildren live near her was concerned about the fact that these children were assigned to a school at some distance from their home. Her family has been politically prominent in the community and her son had been actively engaged in his high school activities. She reported that she had asked her son if it bothered him that his children would not attend his alma mater. His reply was that this did not bother him, since he knew that the school to which the students were assigned was a fine school where his daughters would be well educated.

Her view was echoed by another parent participant in the interview who observed that, because of the school construction program, her three high school-aged children would be attending two different schools. She stated that while this had initially bothered her, when she talked to her children it was clear that it didn't bother them. She acknowledged that supporting activities at two different schools created schedule conflicts sometimes, but that these could usually be worked out. She concluded by observing that, if her children were happy and successful at school, then she could deal with her fears and anxieties. Several participants shared similar views, stressing the fact that the assignment plan is made easier because all of the schools in the district are of high quality. A few participants indicated that we must recognize that reassignments can cause difficulties for families, e.g., neighborhood friendships, distance from school, and other logistical issues.

Finding ways to provide stability in student assignments was viewed as an important issue for the Board and Growth Management to address. If parents feel school assignments are secure, they will feel more comfortable planning ahead and more positive towards the system (with less nit-picking). A three-year assignment plan has been mentioned by Growth Management, and one participant thought that would go a long way to dealing with this need if it proved feasible. Parents fear re-assignment on an annual basis, and some students are reassigned more often in growing areas of the county.

One part of the response of the Board of Education to these conditions of rapid student growth has been the creation of a system of year-round schools. The year-round schools allow more efficient use of the existing school facilities by increasing the number of students who can be served in these schools by about 25-33%. Some parents, however, have decided against accepting assignment to such schools for their children, citing a number of concerns, including child care

issues, the perceived undemocratic way in which the assignment decisions were made and a general aversion to changes in the traditions of schooling. The outcome of the appeal of the lawsuit puts WCPSS in a state of limbo for now on whether year-round assignments can be made or must be voluntary.

One group discussed the positive impact of magnet schools as well as the sometimes negative impact. On the positive side, magnet programs were seen as providing a wonderful opportunity for children to get a strong basic education with some extra opportunities or methods used. On the other hand, one parent mentioned that some parents who do not want their children to attend school outside their neighborhoods, or who do not get accepted into a magnet program see it as unfair that every school does not have the same experiences available to students. This can lead to negativity towards the system overall for some parents. Parents with students in “rim” schools, which are not magnet but from which it is difficult to reassign students, could benefit from more flexibility in their offerings. The impact of having students in the neighborhood who attended a variety of schools was also discussed, with some seeing this as a problem for unity in neighborhoods and others not.

3. Coping with the increasing diversity of the student population

Moreover, the student assignment plan also allows the Board to balance the academic needs of students so that there is not a concentration of needy students in any one school. One of the goals of the student assignment policy of the Board is to ensure that all schools have student bodies that recognize the diversity of students, especially in the socio-economic dimension. This goal is complicated by the fact that people of different socio-economic status are not distributed equally throughout the county. There are, indeed, pockets of wealthy families in some areas, while there are pockets of disadvantaged families in other areas. Thus, in many cases, it may not be feasible to transport students great distances to ensure economic equity in every school. Instead the Board sets goals within ranges; the Board’s policy indicates that every school should expect to have up to 15% of its student body made up of students of limited English proficiency and up to 40% of its student body made up of students who qualify for free or reduced price meals.

The interview groups appear to share the Board’s goals but also understand that, as the school population grows, the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals and the percentage of students who are of limited English proficiency has increased disproportionately. This asymmetry has made it more difficult for the district administration to craft a student assignment plan that meets the Board’s criteria. This is further complicated by the fact that some communities or municipalities within the county are more likely to have disproportionate numbers of students of one socio-economic group or another, making it difficult to attain balance within schools at close proximity.

It was pointed out, for example, that more families with students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals live in the eastern part of the county while fewer such families live in the western area. It is simply not feasible to transport students far enough to attain uniformity with respect to the percentage of FRL students at each school. Moreover, as one participant pointed out, more affordable housing units are being built in the eastern part of the county than in the west, which is likely to exacerbate the problem, since children cannot be bused to schools across the county.

On a related topic, one participant reported that many people in her community are becoming increasingly concerned about illegal immigration and the requirement that children of illegal immigrants must be educated. There is a growing concern that such children are increasingly enrolling in the schools and creating more pressure on the educational services available. While she did not share such views, she stated that they are becoming increasingly part of the discussions she hears with her neighbors. Thus, there is at least a growing perception of this issue as creating problems for the schools. Again, she pointed out, the School Board can only react to the increase in the numbers of immigrant children, whether they are from families legally in this country or not. Nevertheless, the growth of children of limited English proficiency creates a new need that the schools must respond to.

The complex issues centering around growth are difficult for the larger public to understand and the school district does not do a good enough job of communicating. Several participants observed that many of the new residents of the county have moved from parts of the country in which local boards of education govern much smaller—both with respect to population and area—districts. Not only do these new arrivals not understand the differences between the boards that controlled the schools in their old community and their new Board of Education, but there have been few efforts to educate them, according to some participants. New arrivals need to become educated to the legal limits of the Board's authority, the need to address quite diverse needs as experienced in different parts of the county, as well as to understand the relationship between the Board of County Commissioners and the Board of Education. One participant suggested WCPSS may have to consider breaking into smaller units at some point.

While stopping short of proposing specific solutions to this need for public outreach, at least some interview participants suggested that the Board cannot be content to remain in a reactive mode on this issue. It was pointed out that the need for information is not confined to those new to the district or to parents of our students. One participant observed that the school district has “a ton of data” but is not skillful at communicating it. But, this is not simply a data issue. One participant stated that when the student assignment plan is being drafted, it is not well communicated, and so people “nit pick” it. Citizens need to better understand the assignment process, the length of time it takes to build a school, and the need for mobile units. Because people may be confused by various plans and policies, they become critical. One participant suggested community forums be held on a regular basis for input on issues other than reassignments (which had been successful in a prior school district in which he had students). Within the participant groups, there was disagreement about the impact of the media, especially the print media, on the need for public information. One participant stated his belief that the newspaper has become more positive in its coverage in recent months. Other participants disagreed, saying that reporters often misinterpret what they hear at the Board's meetings. Another mentioned that the N&O recently cut back on staff, so coverage may be sometimes inadequate as well. Others talked about getting out good news about district and school accomplishments more.

In summary, then, participants in these two focus group interviews concurred that most of the issues that the Board of Education has dealt with in the recent past are related to the rapid growth of the county population. The proportionate increase of students with greater needs has not been

seen uniformly in different parts of the county, but has, nevertheless been a complicating factor in the decisions that the Board is expected to make. The Board has been seen in a reactive mode.

Issues related to growth, the authority (or lack thereof) of the Board to impose taxes and the apparent unwillingness of the various municipal and county authorities to impose impact fees, and the continuing increase of students at risk will remain important to the Board in the coming months. The focus group participants also believed that the Curriculum Management Audit was an area that the Board would need to address in the near future. As with all the areas of future challenge, this will require the Board to communicate clearly what it is doing, why it is doing that, and how the changes will be undertaken. How and whether the public will be invited to participate in following up on the recommendations of the audit team is not clear.

One of the themes expressed in a variety of aspects of the discussion was the complexity of the issues that the Board confronts and the need and challenge to communicate this complexity to parents and other citizens clearly. Much of the frustration that many parents experience results from their lack of understanding of the procedures that are established, for example, to deal with school assignment. More needs to be done to communicate with the larger public clearly and precisely. This will be especially important as the lawsuit related to the student assignment plan moves forward. However, there was general agreement that these efforts are worth investing effort in and that, despite all the frustrations, the education offered in the Wake County Public Schools is an excellent one for children and for the future of our community.