

**The Price of Retreat:  
Paying More for a Divided and Less Well-Educated Community  
in Wake County, North Carolina**

March 29, 2010

After four months of debate, a newly configured school board voted on March 23, 2010 to end Wake County's long-standing commitment to promoting racially and socioeconomically diverse schools. A brief glimpse into the past—or a look at school systems around the South no longer working towards the goal of integration—suggests that serious, negative consequences await North Carolina's largest district.

Decades of social science research, the experiences of countless educators in school districts across the nation, and subsequent legal decisions have all confirmed a core proposition of the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision: separate is not equal in the realm of public schools. Inequality of opportunity persists in schools that enroll high concentrations of students of color, which are nearly always schools that also have high concentrations of poverty. Such schools are also, as a rule, less likely to attract and retain high-quality, experienced teachers. They are less likely to offer advanced courses to students and less likely to provide contact with middle-class peers. All of these important factors are strongly associated with academic success and the exposure to networks that increase post-graduation opportunities. Further, U.S. public schools should prepare their students for citizenship in a country that will soon have a majority of nonwhite residents while also shaping future employees for a global economy. Racially and economically segregated schools are not environments that allow for students from different backgrounds to become more comfortable with each other and counteract stereotypes or prejudice. Wake County has decided to put its students at a disadvantage in all these areas.

Wake County had long been a leader in understanding the importance of diverse schools. For more than thirty years, the district devised and implemented policies to achieve diversity amid demographic and legal changes. The county began comprehensively desegregating its schools in 1976, the same year a controversial merger plan won approval. After the North Carolina state legislature passed a bill making it easier for school districts to consolidate, strong and decisive leadership pushed a city-suburban merger forward. Since then, the Wake County Public School System has drawn students from the City of Raleigh and its surrounding suburbs. This arrangement originally promoted a racial desegregation strategy that included a system of magnet schools and a 15-45% balancing mechanism stipulating that African American enrollment at the school level should not fall below 15 percent or above 45 percent.

In 2000, Wake County officials voted to voluntarily begin using a “race-neutral” plan that relied heavily on socioeconomic and student achievement factors. Based on research linking integrated student enrollment and healthy, good schools, Wake County school officials implemented a policy stipulating that no more than 40 percent of students at a given school should be eligible for free and reduced lunch prices and no more than 25 percent of students at any given school in the district should have scored below grade level on statewide reading tests. When assigning students to schools, district officials balanced this commitment to diversity in student

composition with other factors, such as the capacity of a building, whether a student has siblings at a school and how close a student lives to a school (e.g., a majority of students attended a school within five miles of their home).

The history of Wake County and other southern districts is particularly instructive to the current situation facing Wake County. Prior to *Brown*, southern states operated separate schools for black and white students. In the hopes of maintaining the pretense of “separate but equal” as the Supreme Court began taking the requirement more seriously in the cases leading up to *Brown*, districts tried to ameliorate funding inequities between black schools and white schools. Yet, despite those increased expenditures, separate did *not* produce equal educational opportunities. Although the post-*Brown* period of reform witnessed temporary but distinct success, with the South boasting the most integrated schools for decades, this accomplishment is rapidly coming undone.

We, the undersigned researchers, hope for a future in which neighborhoods and their schools will be integrated, making it unnecessary for children to travel to achieve diverse, good schools. The current reality is, however, that high levels of segregation still exist in many of our communities. Thus, when students are assigned to schools based on where they live, such assignments tend to create segregated schools. This recent decision by the Wake County School Board will only further the trend of resegregation seen in other districts that have also returned to neighborhood-based student assignments.

At a time when school systems around the country are coping with dramatic funding cuts, Wake County’s decision regarding the district’s diversity plan will increase the school system’s expenses in the short-term and will, more than likely, add greatly to the costs per successful graduate over the long term. Ending the commitment to school integration may also make the system ineligible for federal funding specifically tied to diverse schools. Ultimately, the experience of other districts that have returned to neighborhood schools suggests that the costs of segregation will linger. Neighborhood-based assignment plans tend to facilitate a situation where white children access affluent schools with multiple assets, while black and Latino students enroll in high-poverty, low-performing and unstable schools with few community resources. Furthermore, since many metropolitan areas do not have enough schools in the center of urban cores, and districts making decisions like Wake County may incur the expense of constructing new, segregated schools that often are subjected to achievement sanctions almost as soon as they open—requiring even more district resources.

We urge reconsideration of the decision to end Wake County’s diversity policy. We stand with the many parents, students, teachers, civil rights activists, faith leaders, and members of the business community in Wake County who oppose the school board’s decision. In the coming months, we offer our support and expertise to the district as it considers how to pursue high-quality, diverse schools that will prepare all of its students to be productive members of what we hope will be a more integrated Wake County and nation.

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