



A Long Range Student Assignment Plan For The Wake County Public School System

Proposed By Wake Education Partnership And
The Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce

Feb. 11, 2011



Executive Summary

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Wake County is fortunate to have a community that cares deeply about its public schools. From its earliest days when the countywide system was created to current debates about how to handle student assignment, the unquestioned goal has been providing the best public education for all students.

The school system has enjoyed tremendous success – even exceeding some of the lofty predictions of early leaders. But the success also brought many challenges as it attracted thousands of new students each year.

For parents, the unparalleled growth means constant uncertainty about whether their child – and the families they have come to know – will be reassigned to a different school community.

Addressing this issue with a comprehensive plan for the future is critical to the academic success of all children and the economic interests of the county's business community. That is why Wake Education Partnership and the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce decided to work together on offering this student assignment proposal to the Wake County Board of Education.

This proposal, made in response to the school board's request for input on student assignment, provides the stability and predictability families need without sacrificing the quality of educational options in any part of what is a large and growing county.

This plan represents a fundamentally different way of assigning children to our schools. It would replace our current student assignment system. In brief, the plan:

- Gives parents more control over where their children attend school.
- Provides more school choices.
- Emphasizes proximity without the use of mandatory attendance zones.
- Allows families to remain in their chosen schools unless they decide otherwise.
- Promotes diversity of all types, but does not pursue diversity as a goal in and of itself.
- Redefines school assignment in a way that clearly makes student achievement the top priority for every child.

Mandatory assignments, which are controlled by the school system, served the county reasonably well for many years. Wake's business rankings and overall growth – driven in no small part by the quality of its schools – reflects that fact.

But the current approach never envisioned a day when 143,000 students would attend 163 schools. It did not predict 5,000 new students entering our classrooms year after year or a total enrollment approaching 200,000 students by the end of this decade.

The proposal outlined in the following pages, developed with help from Alves Educational Consultants Group, Ltd., meets those demands by allowing parents to shape the future of Wake County's public schools.

The Plan's Four Pillars

The proposal is built on four key principles that are the pillars of the plan. They are stability, choice, proximity and student achievement. Each component is equally important.

Before summarizing how students would be assigned, it is important to understand what these four principles mean.

Stability

A key component of this plan is the stability it offers families. The promise of stability begins the first year by allowing families to remain in the schools where they are currently enrolled. Transportation would be provided and siblings are automatically enrolled in the same school.

This is consistent with a 2010 school system survey suggesting more than 90 percent of parents are satisfied with their current schools. Parents who are happy with their current assignment can choose to remain where they are. It is guaranteed.

Parents who are unhappy with their current school assignments can choose another school close to home where seats are available. They may also apply to a magnet school.

This approach to the first year of a school choice plan would eliminate the need for mass reassignments while immediately shifting the emphasis of student assignment controls from the school system to parents.

In future years, the promise of stability means families can remain in the schools they choose until the end of that school's grade span. They would not be assigned to a different school unless they move to another part of the county or choose another school from among their available choices.

The proposal also recommends automatic "feeder patterns" be established from elementary to middle school and middle to high school. This would allow a family enrolling a child in kindergarten to know where that child will attend school through graduation, unless the family chooses another school during that time.

Choice

Choices are determined primarily by where families live. This proposal assumes most parents will choose a school close to home, but they can select from a list that also includes schools outside their immediate neighborhood. In every case, the list would include at least two magnet schools and two year-round

calendar choices. The node-based assignments currently used by the school district will no longer be necessary.

Based on an analysis detailed later in this report, we can say with confidence that the school system should be able to provide every family in Wake County with a choice of ten elementary schools, five middle schools and five high schools while increasing transportation efficiency.

The analysis, which is summarized in the following pages, strongly suggests that families will voluntarily distribute themselves more efficiently than the results of the current mandatory-assignment process.

The state Department of Public Instruction considers Wake County's bus system to be among the best in the state. But it is efficient relative to the restrictions it faces. Trying to accommodate a quarter century of growth has created a complex web of assignments that can be improved upon in the future by using a school choice model.

Proximity

The school choices offered to families in this plan would be based primarily on where students live. As Wake County reshapes its assignment process for the future, this plan recommends families living within 1.5 miles of a school – based upon driving distances – be given assignment priority to that school.

According to the analysis that follows in this report, about 31 percent of Wake County's elementary students currently attend a school within 1.5 miles of their homes. Under this proposal, that number could be expected to increase to nearly 50 percent.

It is important to understand that this plan is not suggesting student assignments can be based solely on proximity. Other factors such as capacity and overarching interests of academic achievement must also be considered. But even with such considerations, this plan suggests the vast majority of families can attend the schools they want and, in the process, attend schools that are often closer to home.

It is also important to note that many students, especially in middle school and high school, will not have a choice within 1.5 miles of home. In those cases, enrollment priorities would be granted for the closest available school.

Student Achievement

An assignment plan must be sensitive to the core mission of public education – student achievement. It is critically important to understand that assignment plans in isolation do not teach students. Teachers teach students. But the mix of students attending a school can both aid and hinder teachers in their work.

Countless studies make it clear that student expectations lag and teacher quality declines in schools that are persistently low-performing. That is why this plan recommends no school be designed as low-performing. To do so is unfair to principals, teachers, students and the core mission of schooling.

Wake County does not need to create low-performing schools given the relatively high achievement level of its public school students. The key to making this work is the school choices that families are offered and the enrollment priority system described below. The priorities guarantee enrollment for siblings and heavily emphasize proximity without ignoring a school's overall academic mix.

This plan does not recommend the school system use a fixed percentage in determining the appropriate achievement mix. We believe a range is more flexible, particularly if that range is tied to the results of statewide mandatory testing.

A recent proposal by the school board's Student Assignment Committee suggested at least 70 percent of the students in every school perform at or above grade level. We believe that is educationally sound. The school system in past years set a goal suggesting 95 percent of all students perform at or above grade level – a laudable target.

We recommend the school board keep these goals in mind as it decides how to address the fourth pillar of student achievement. A specific achievement quota is not educationally necessary or operationally practical. It is critical, however, that every student have access to the teachers and principals that allow them to succeed.

Addressing the pillar of student achievement will create diversity of all types in our schools. We believe this is appropriate. Diversity is important in all facets of life. However, this pillar does not pursue diversity for its own sake. The purpose of this pillar is to focus on student achievement in a way that naturally incorporates the benefits of diversity.

Among other things, this means the district's current magnet school program must be retained. The measure of a magnet school's success, however, will change significantly.

Wake County's magnet schools were created primarily to fill seats and create diversity. This plan suggests magnet schools be used to increase parental choice and improve student achievement.

This is a natural extension of a magnet school program that has been a national success story since 1983. It allows Wake to better prepare students for the future by building on the successes of the past.

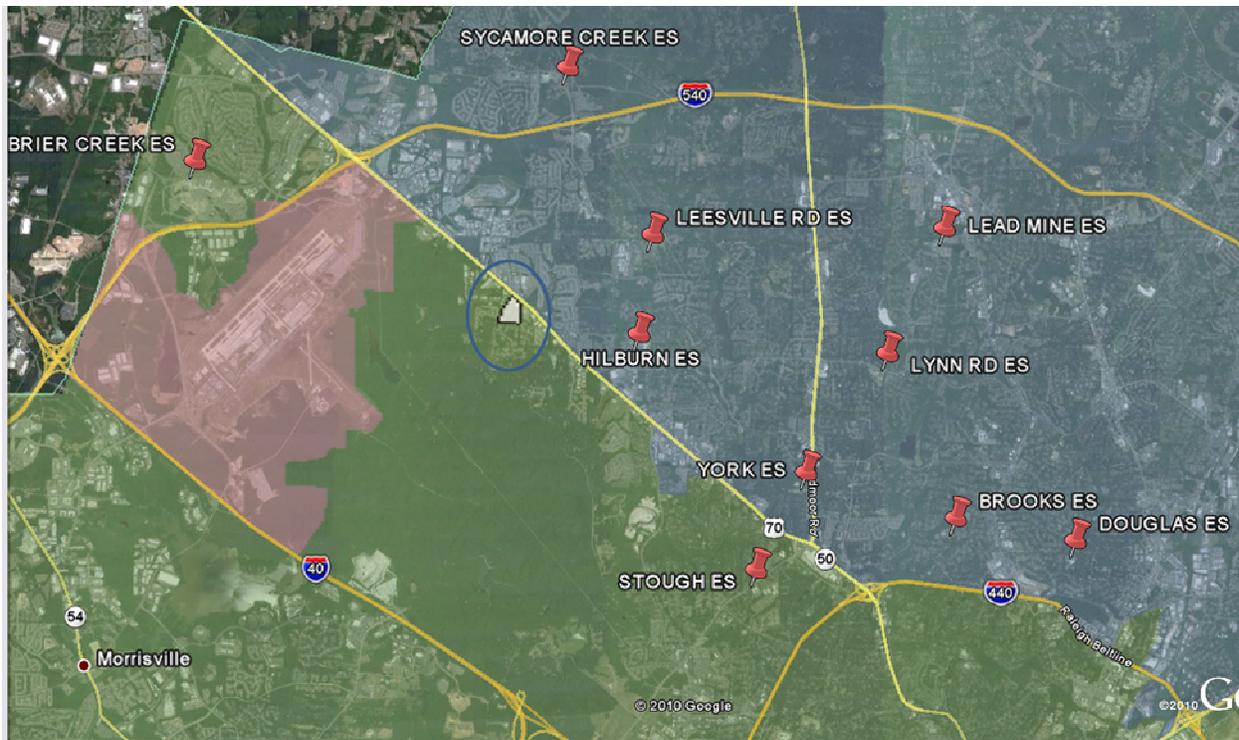
How It Works

A student assignment plan for a district the size of Wake County involves countless details. Some are addressed in the narrative, maps and charts that follow. Others can be decided only by the school board. However, an overview of how the plan works is fairly straightforward.

As described earlier, school choices are offered based on where families live. Students would have choices of at least ten elementary schools, five middle schools and five high schools.

Using the following map as an example, that means families that live within the small area highlighted below would have the choice of elementary schools listed.

To see the projected school choices for any address in the county, go to www.wakeschoolchoice.com.



Please note: These are proposed choices generated by a computer model. Only the school board has the authority to create final choices. This plan anticipates and recommends adjustments to the choices shown and discussed as part of this proposal.

Parents would choose a school by applying. The first step in that process is for parents to rank their top five choices of the ten schools on the list.

It is important to remember that all students have the option of remaining in their current school during the first year of the plan. This is true even if that school is not among the choices offered. This is commonly known as a “grandfather option.”

If a family decides it does not want to be grandfathered in the first year of the plan – meaning the student wishes to attend a different school – the parents would simply rank their top five choices from the list of ten offered.

The “grandfather option” would be available to parents only in the first year of the plan. After that, it would be assumed all families are attending a school they have selected.

For families that rank their choices in the first year – and for all families in the following years – applications would be accepted using the following criteria in order of importance: sibling priority; proximity; school type desired (magnet, non-magnet and year-round calendar), and the receiving school’s overall academic mix.

These priorities are used only if the number of students who apply exceeds a school’s capacity. According to the Alves Educational Consultants Group, the track record of this approach in other districts suggests more than 80 percent of families will be granted their first choice and roughly 93 percent will be granted one of their first two choices.

If a desired school is over capacity, a student who cannot be seated is given a priority for his or her next choice on the list. Parents who do not apply to a school will be placed by the school system.

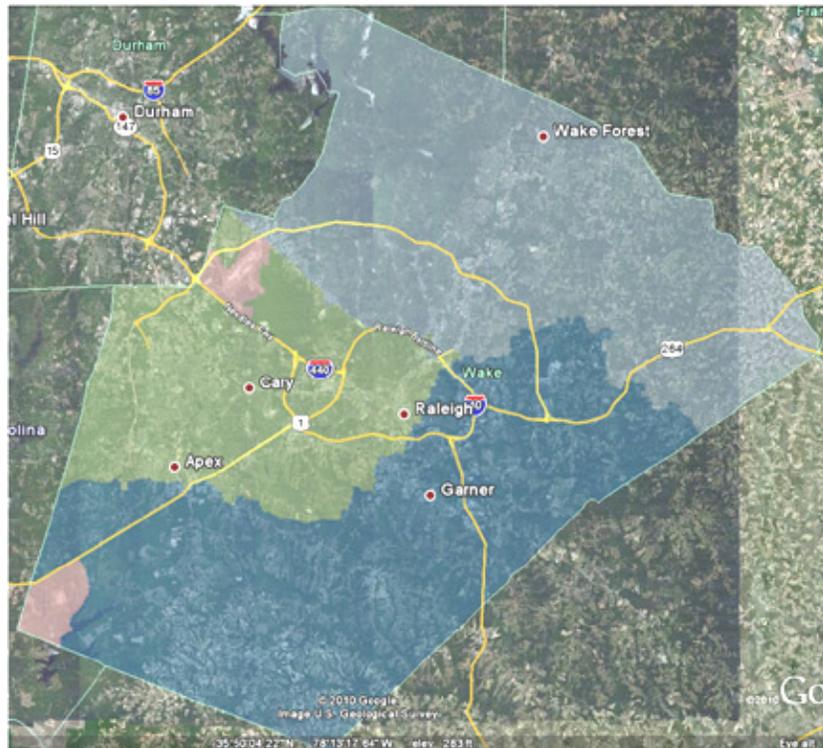
The ability of families to choose a school – and remain there – offers parents significantly more control over student assignment than the district’s current approach. The control of the school system rests in the choices offered, assignment priorities and management of building capacities.

Organizing the District Into Areas

As an organizational tool for school system administrators, the district is also divided into three areas. These areas *do not* affect the choices of families who happen to live near the borders.

Using the map above as an example, families who live near the area border that is shown would still be offered a choice of the closest ten elementary schools. (For middle and high school students, it would be five choices each.)

The value and purpose of the areas, shown in the map below, is that each one is roughly equivalent in terms of current enrollment, school capacities, demographics and student achievement levels. The boundaries also consider projected growth rates in different parts of the county so the three areas remain roughly equivalent over time.



We believe the three areas provide the school system with an excellent administrative tool. As the school board refines the final list of available choices for each family – a necessary process in order to meet all four pillars of the plan – understanding the mix of students within each area will be critical.

Given the current debate about the use of demographic measures in Wake County, it should be noted that the measures of ethnicity and socioeconomics are discussed for only one reason: to make sure the plan will clear any legal review. The only specific mix of students this proposal is concerned with is a mix based upon the core mission of a school – student achievement.

It is not the intent of this executive summary to anticipate every assignment question. Its purpose is to offer a high-level summary of the underlying principles and basic mechanics of how the proposed plan would work. For that reason, other important details are addressed in the following pages as well as an accompanying website www.wakeschoolchoice.com. Those topics include:

- Details about assignment priorities.
- The critical role of information centers to ensure all parents are aware of available choices.
- Suggestions for how to monitor the goals of the plan.
- A timeline that would allow for a transition beginning in 2012-2013.

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We believe this proposal provides the framework for a new student assignment plan that allows Wake County to build upon its past achievements with a focus on future needs.