

On November 7, 2006, the citizens of Wake County approved the sale of \$970 million in General Obligation Bonds to fund the \$1.1 billion Capital Improvement Plan which provides for new facilities, renovations in existing facilities, and technology and other upgrades needed by the Wake County Public School System for 2007-2009.

The final vote on the bond was 53 percent (107,333 votes) in favor and 47 percent (94,457 votes) opposed. Support was greatest in Raleigh (particularly inside of the Beltline) and Cary, with significant opposition in the southern and eastern parts of the county.

The debate surrounding the bond revealed division in our community on several major issues, most notably the conversion of schools to multi-track year-round calendars. In an effort to gauge the opinions of Wake County citizens and provide information to our elected officials and community leaders in addressing these matters, Wake Education Partnership invited individuals to respond to an online survey.

The results of this survey are intended as a catalyst to meaningful conversation and action to address the challenges revealed by the debate over the school bond referendum. The diversity of opinions which exist in our community on key education issues should not be ignored. In order for our community to continue its support of public schools it is imperative that our elected leaders acknowledge and address citizens' concerns.

For more information and to download this report and the executive summary, visit www.WakeEdPartnership.org.

Overview of the Survey

The findings presented in this document are based on the results of 1,227 responses to an online survey Wake Education Partnership conducted on its website from Nov. 8 – 22, 2006. (See Attachment A for a copy of the survey questions.) The survey was advertised through a variety of mediums, including stories by local media, and was open to the general public. Wake Education Partnership presents this information as a reflection of the views of those who took the survey. The survey is not intended to be a scientifically based poll of Wake County citizens.

Overview of the Survey Respondents

- While response to this survey was voluntary, those who completed the survey represent an important mixture of perspectives in our community.
- **Participants in the survey tracked closely with the actual bond vote:**
 - 53.2% of survey respondents indicated they voted for the bond (the exact percentage of those voting in the actual election)
 - 42.1% of survey respondents indicated they voted against the bond (slightly lower than the 46.9% who voted against the bond on November 7)
 - The remaining 4.6% of survey respondents indicated they did not vote on the bond issue November 7.
- Eighty-eight percent of respondents are **parents**, while 60 percent of respondents currently have children in the Wake County Public School System.

- **Survey responses came from across Wake County.** Respondents were asked, but not required, to give the zip code in which they lived; 78 percent of respondents provided their zip code (956 of 1,227 respondents). Below is a comparison between each geographic area’s representation in the survey compared to each area’s proportion of our county’s population. Most areas have good alignment between these two, but some areas are over or underrepresented in the survey. This is to be expected in a voluntary survey.

Municipality (as identified by Zip Code)	Percentage of Wake County’s Population	Percentage of the Survey Respondents Identified by Zip Code Who Came From This Area * (N = 956)	Percentage of Respondents Identified from This Area Out of the Total Survey Respondents * (N = 1,227)
Apex	3.60%	19.98%	15.57%
Cary	15.35%	19.14%	14.91%
Fuquay Varina	1.62%	2.82%	2.20%
Garner	2.97%	1.15%	0.90%
Holly Springs	2.01%	4.18%	3.26%
Knightdale	0.92%	1.67%	1.30%
Morrisville	1.70%	1.05%	0.81%
Raleigh	44.74%	43.93%	34.23%
Wake Forest	2.60%	3.97%	3.10%
Wendell	0.67%	0.73%	0.57%
Zebulon	0.61%	0.52%	0.41%
Other (New Hill, Willow Springs, etc.)	N/A	0.83%	0.65%

* 956 = Total number of respondents who provided a valid zip code; 1,227 = Total number of survey respondents. 78% of survey respondents provided a valid zip code.

Survey Results

Respondents who indicated they voted YES for the bond were asked “What were your reasons for voting to support the bond?”

- Respondents were given ten options – nine closed ended and a tenth option of “other” – and were asked to check all that applied.
- The growth in student enrollment and the bond being a cost effective method to pay for schools were the two most popular choices.

Student enrollment growing by 7,500 each year	88.7%
Bond is the most cost effective way to pay for schools	76.5%
Bond includes renovations for older schools	70.6%
Bond includes money to purchase land for future schools	69.8%
Bond includes technology upgrades for all schools	64.1%
I have children attending Wake County public schools	48.3%
I work for the Wake County Public School System	36.2%
Money will be held in a restricted account	24.6%
Oversight by the Citizens Facilities Advisory Committee	20.3%
Other	16.3%

- What was included in “Other?”
 - Many of the comments mirrored other choices in this question – they directly related to the lower cost to pay for schools through a bond than other means, or schools were overcrowded.
 - Some responses were very positive – good schools are important to our community and our economy, they had children or grandchildren who have attended or will attend the public schools, or they hoped this would help keep property values high. Several respondents spoke about their belief in children’s right to a good education or in public education in general. One respondent simply said “It was the right thing to do.”
 - Other responses indicated people did not want to support the bond or were reluctant to vote yes, but felt they had to for some reason – because other options were limited, to avoid more year-round schools, or because they hoped this would lead to discussions about other funding sources such as impact fees.

Respondents who said they voted NO on the bond were asked “What were your reasons for voting against the bond?”

- Respondents were given six options – five closed ended and a sixth option of “other” – and were asked to check all that applied.
- By a considerable margin, the two most popular choices were opposition to year-round schools and lack of trust in the school system.

Oppose mandatory year-round schools	66%
Mistrust or lack of confidence in the school system	63.2%
Prefer other solutions for dealing with growth	53.7%
Oppose a tax increase to pay off the bond	27.2%
Other	28.6%
Education lottery should cover construction costs	17.1%

- What was included in “Other?”
 - As with those voting yes, many of the “Other” responses directly related to one of the other options – there were several comments related to mistrust of the school system or a desire for greater fiscal accountability, or opposition to year-round schools.
 - Many of the comments expressed frustration with schools perceived as too costly, or a belief that there had been no planning for growth.

- Other comments expanded on the notion of “other solutions for dealing with growth” – impact fees were frequently mentioned, as was support for lifting the charter school cap, and public private partnerships.
- Respondents also expressed anger about issues they equated with the need for the bond – illegal immigrants taking up seats in the schools, or reassignment and busing of students.
- One respondent stated “I’m not against a bond to help our school system. I’m against this specific bond.”

What does our community need to do to address the concerns of those who opposed the bond?

- This open-ended question was posed to all survey respondents and was answered by 75% of those taking the survey.
- Of the 914 responses, 718 were included in the analysis of this question. The remaining responses were not included for several reasons, such as they related to matters other than those posed by the question or they did not contribute constructively to the discussion.
- The following are themes from respondents’ comments:

1) If multi-track year-round calendars must be used, it is critical that family disruptions are minimized to the extent possible.

The overwhelming majority of respondents who commented on multi-track year-round schools (more than 200) expressed their dislike of them and their desire to either get rid of them or make them voluntary.

“Mandatory year-round schools are going to tear many families apart,” commented one respondent. “Forcing one part of the county to have mandatory year-round while others get improved school facilities and aren’t forced into year-round situations is neither fair nor equitable.”

Even those who oppose year-round schools, however, indicated how essential it is that the Wake County Public School System does everything it can to lessen the burden of year-round schools on families. There were repeated requests to ensure all children in a family are kept on the same track, and that families with children in both elementary/middle school and high school be allowed first choice of tracks.

There were also more than two dozen responses indicating a desire for more year-round schools.

2) Greater financial oversight and accountability of funds spent by the school system should be implemented and communicated to the public.

One hundred and twenty-five respondents indicated they want more public reporting of how WCPSS spends taxpayer dollars. This was for the bond specifically, as well as the overall budget. As one respondent said “My concern has always been – I just hope it [the bond money] gets spent the way it should and that the school system will be as thrifty as possible...We voted yes, now we’ll be watching and making sure WCPSS is responsible.”

Many respondents lacked knowledge of what processes are already in place, however, as they called for annual audits, the release of the annual school budget, or some other

measure that currently exists. Perhaps greater dissemination of the information already available would be helpful; this also builds on the next theme.

3) Education of the public should be an ongoing process and not confined to the months prior to a bond vote.

Respondents called for more continuous conversation about issues in which the public needs to be knowledgeable. Topics for discussion included growth, the capital and operational needs of the school system, how proceeds from the lottery are used, and the roles of the Board of Commissioners and Board of Education. One respondent suggested public tours of schools to increase taxpayer understanding of the need for school renovations. The overall message was that a well informed citizenry is important and the process for educating the public should be continuous and not arise in conjunction with a bond. “Reach out to the community, not just at bond time, and provide information,” one respondent urged.

4) New solutions to dealing with the growth in student enrollment are needed—including lifting the cap on charter schools, entering into public-private partnerships, implementing impact fees or some other way for growth to help pay for itself, and finding ways to build schools more cheaply.

More than 150 respondents felt there were ways to alleviate the burden on Wake County taxpayers when it comes to providing facilities for the growing student population. One respondent remarked “Find new streams of revenue to pay for growth – particularly impact fees or real estate transfer taxes. Make it clear that, though every little bit helps, no single revenue source is a panacea.” Another citizen said “I will continue to vote no in the future until builders shoulder some of the responsibility.” Another suggested that “Our elected officials...need to have regular strategy meetings and work together to find additional revenue sources for school construction.”

The most popular option, mentioned by nearly 50 respondents, was reducing the cost of schools through constructing larger and/or multi-story buildings and repeating building plans.

While only a dozen respondents called specifically for public-private partnerships, nearly three dozen wanted the cap on charter schools lifted and urge our elected officials to take action.

5) The Board of Education and Board of Commissioners must work to improve their relationships with Wake County citizens and do a better job of planning for growth.

Seventy-five respondents specifically mentioned their concerns about our elected officials and their interactions with Wake County citizens.

More than three-fourths of these comments were made in regards to the Board of Education. Most often cited was their perceived aloofness, and concern that the public hearings the board holds (on reassignment, year-round schools, etc.) play no real role in their decisions. “I will continue to fight for WCPSS’ needs but not if I feel the concerns of the families are not adequately addressed. The school board must make it a priority to regain the confidence of the community. I fought hard to help get this bond approved. I hope it was not in vain.” Another commented that the “School Board needs to hear the

community. The issue of reform carried a lot of weight with the 92k+ residents who voted against the bond.”

Both boards were cited for not doing a better job of planning for the growth we face and convincing the community of why the bond was needed. “There were 47 percent of the voters casting a negative vote against the bond referendum for various reasons. This cannot be ignored and will have to be addressed by the BOC [Board of Commissioners] and the BOE [Board of Education]. We need to build trust, confidence and support for future school financing strategies.”

What does our community need to do to meet the demand for school facilities to accommodate future growth in Wake County?

- This open-ended question was answered by 70% of respondents.
- Of the 855 responses, 731 are included in this analysis. The remaining responses were not included for several reasons, such as they related to matters other than those posed by the question or they did not contribute constructively to the discussion.
- Several themes emerged from the respondents comments:

1) Growth should help pay for itself, including the use of an impact fee or some other mechanism for new development to help pay for schools.

Respondents’ clearly indicated a desire for an impact fee or some other mechanism for new development to help pay for schools. In addition, many respondents called for developers to provide schools through donations of land or other means. Nearly 225 respondents expressed a preference for these types of solutions. As one respondent said, “The discussion of ways to fund increasing capital improvement needs, assuming that enrollment growth continues as projected, must include an increase in taxes on those who are contributing to this growth.”

2) Alternative means or less expensive means of providing school facilities should be employed.

Building larger schools, entering into public-private partnerships, reusing school designs, putting schools in nontraditional buildings such as retail spaces, and providing more space through mobile or modular units were commonly cited. One citizen remarked, “If...portables are good enough for some of our students, then they ought to be good enough for ALL of our students.” In addition, an interest in virtual schools, split high school sessions, and half-day kindergarten were suggested. More than 240 respondents supported these types of strategies.

3) Lifting the cap on charter schools should be pursued.

Sixty respondents specifically mentioned seeking legislative approval to lift the state’s cap on charter schools. “We need to pressure the General Assembly to lift the cap on charter schools,” said one respondent. “Instead of just dismissing this issue because the school system and the county cannot effect such a change directly, the school board and county leaders need to put constant pressure on the Wake County delegation...We need to partner with other school systems...who are or will soon be dealing with growth challenges to present a unified voice to the General Assembly.”

4) More year-round schools should be used.

Nearly 100 respondents said year-round schools are an important tool for dealing with student enrollment growth. One respondent challenged the community to “Accept that significant growth means significant change and address it. Either fund even more schools or convert all the schools...to year round.”

5) Slow growth or, at a minimum, plan better for growth in our community, including having an Adequate Public Facilities ordinance (APF).

More than 110 respondents said the pace of growth in our community is too high and our elected officials should do more to manage it effectively. One citizen commented, “As a native of Wake County, I feel that we need to grow more responsibly.” Another simply said, “Be smart about growth.” Having an Adequate Public Facilities ordinance (APF) was specifically mentioned by more than a dozen individuals.

Wake Education Partnership’s Plan of Action

Wake Ed Partnership believes this survey is just the first step as we as we work to bring people together for more information and discussion. Our role is to serve as a catalyst for a smarter conversation and as a resource for the kinds of information our community is asking for in this survey. To that end, we are announcing a three-part strategy in response to the results presented today.

- **First**, we have started a new online resource center on our site.
 - A recurring theme in the survey responses was a desire for more information, much of which is already available but not always simple to access.
 - We will provide an easy one-stop location for citizens links to other sites for data, reports and further information about topics ranging from school construction and finance to student achievement and graduation requirements.
 - Regular updates to the site will continue to expand access for those seeking more information.

- **Second**, we invite Wake citizens to continue this conversation through our website.
 - A new link on our website will allow people to send us e-mails with questions and comments, additional resources to add to the site, and other ideas for future discussion.
 - As we gather a critical mass around a particular question or topic, we’ll use the information to update the resource center and guide our efforts in this area.

- **Third**, we will launch the Education Exchange series beginning in March.
 - The first of these town-hall-style meetings will be held in Knightdale. The public is invited to come hear a report from the Citizen Facilities Advisory Committee about how school sites are selected. We’ll also have time for questions, ideas and comments—we want the Ed Exchange to be a dialogue with the community.
 - The second meeting will be held in April and will focus on the Citizen Facilities Advisory Committee’s report on how schools are built – once the site has been selected, how do you design and finance your school? This report will include comparison information between Wake County and other school districts.
 - Two more meetings will follow in May and June – anyone interested in learning more about the Ed Exchange series can register on our website to receive an e-mail notice as details are set.