

February 6th, 2009

CMS Schools make noticeable progress relative to WCPSS

By Eric Blau, William Lynch, Ph.D., Ron Margiotta, Kent Misegades and Keith Weatherly

Overview

- Five well-informed Wake County citizens send an Open Letter to the Wake County BOE.
- The “NC Schools Report Cards” for the school year 2007-2008 was released in January.
- Test scores for ED and LEP students in CMS and WCPSS systems were compared, showing:
- ED and LEP student achievement in CMS schools has made rapid progress relative to WCPSS and state averages since income-based assignments were abandoned in 2001.
- ED and LEP student achievement in WCPSS schools has declined relative to CMS and state averages since income-based assignments were instituted in 2001.
- The authors recommend abandonment of income-based assignments in WCPSS and make a number of proposals to improve lagging performance in ED and LEP student groups.

The Authors:

Eric Blau

Wake County graduate and parent
Software engineer

William Lynch, Ph.D.

Wake County resident
Retired physicist/engineer and research manager
Integrated Circuit Consultant, owner of 60 patents, Fellow in his professional Society
Extensive teaching, mentoring, and statistical experience

Ron Margiotta

Wake County resident, retired business owner
Member, Wake County Board of Education

Kent Misegades

Wake County parent
Chairman, Board of Trustees, Thales Academy - Apex
Scientist/Engineer, President, AeroSouth, Cary, NC

Keith Weatherly

Wake County parent
Mayor, Town of Apex

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An Open Letter to the Wake County Board of Education

By Eric Blau, William Lynch, Ph.D., Ron Margiotta, Kent Misegades and Keith Weatherly

To the members of the Wake County Board of Education:

You have been elected by the citizens of Wake County to represent their will in setting policies affecting the education of their children.

In 2001 you adopted a policy of school assignment based on family income, as determined through enrollment in the federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program. The goal of this policy was to improve the academic performance of the children from low-income families (denoted today as “Economically Disadvantaged” or ED students; non-ED students being denoted as NED) through an annual scheme of reassignments across the county to gain an arbitrarily-chosen balance in the percentage of ED children enrolled in public schools. This policy has resulted in sending tens of thousands of young children away from their communities, producing great hardships for their families, and with no factual evidence provided by you of this policy’s benefit to our children’s academic achievement. Yet, you have persisted.

By comparison, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System (CMS) abolished assignments based on family income in 2001, adopting instead in 2002 a policy favoring neighborhood schools and providing parents with “open enrollment” options should they deem the quality of education inadequate for their child. It should be noted that the percentage of ED children in CMS schools is significantly higher (50%) in February 2009 than in WCPSS schools (30%).

In January, the State released its latest “NC Schools Report Cards” for the school year 2007-2008 (www.ncreportcards.org). Based on this data and the Report Card from 2001-2002, the overall results for WCPSS, CMS and the state average are summarized below. Shown are the percentages of students achieving passing scores on the End of Grade (EOG) examinations in **both** Reading and Mathematics, the two most important indicators of academic achievement. The End of Course (EOC) results included here are reported as “The percentage of passing scores on the state End-of-Course tests grouped by gender, ethnicity and other factors.” Thus the EOC results are an average of the passing scores in the various high school subject areas.

Results for ED, NED and LEP (Limited English Proficiency) students are shown. We ask that you pay particular attention to the performance of WCPSS children relative to those in CMS schools for a given school year. Since frequent changes have been made to the EOG and EOC tests since 2001, it is not attempted here to derive any conclusions regarding absolute progress for a particular school system since 2001; however this is irrelevant. A comparison of the two school systems to the state average yields a difference that is independent of the actual test given or the school year considered, provided that the same examination was used across the state in a particular year, which has indeed been the case in the two school years considered here.

Performance of Student Groups on ABCs End-of-Grade (EOG) Tests 2007-2008

WCPSS: ED - 31.3, NED - 74.5, LEP - 22.7

CMS: ED - 31.1, NED - 70.3, LEP - 21.5

State: ED - 33.3, NED - 66.9, LEP - 19.8

Performance of Student Groups on ABCs End-of-Grade (EOG) Tests 2001-2002

WCPSS: ED - 61.4, NED - 90.6, LEP - 53.0

CMS: ED - 51.4, NED - 86.0, LEP - 44.2

State: ED - 59.3, NED - 84.9, LEP - 46.2

Performance of Student Groups on ABCs End-of-Course (EOC) Tests 2007-2008

WCPSS: ED - 52.4, NED - 83.1, LEP - 49.6

CMS: ED - 55.3, NED - 78.8, LEP - 52.3

State: ED - 53.6, NED - 76.0, LEP 45.4

We conclude the following from this data:

1. The academic performance of the children you have targeted in Wake County, those from lower income families, has not improved relative to the state average.
2. The academic performance of children from low income families in CMS schools has improved significantly relative to WCPSS and the state average.
3. The difference of 10.0% in ED EOG scores that existed in favor of WCPSS relative to CMS in 2001-2002 has been reduced to 0.2% for 2007-2008.
4. A difference of nearly 3% in ED EOC scores now exists **in favor of CMS schools** (52.4% for WCPSS compared to 55.3% for CMS)
5. The difference in NED EOG scores in WCPSS relative to CMS has **decreased** slightly from 4.6% to 4.2%, suggesting no benefit to NED students in WCPSS for the current policies.
6. While CMS ED students have made significant progress relative to the state EOG averages (7.9% below the state average in 2001-2002 compared to only 2.2% below for 2007-2008), WCPSS scores have plummeted (2.1% above state average in 2001-2002 compared to 2.0% **below** in 2007-2008).
7. LEP students in CMS have made good progress, reducing the difference relative to WCPSS from 8.8 % in 2001-2002 to only 1.2% for 2007-2008. CMS LEP EOG grades now

exceed the state average by 1.7%, whereas they were below the state average by 2.0% for 2001-2002. More remarkably, CMS LEP EOC scores for 2007-2008 were 6.9% **above** the state average. Trends in WCPSS were the opposite for its LEP students, with the EOG difference relative to the state average **falling** from 6.8% to 2.9%. WCPSS LEP EOC scores for 2007-2008 were 4.2% **above** the state average, but below CMS' difference of 6.9%. Clearly CMS LEP students are making progress relative to their counterparts in WCPSS and across the state, whereas WCPSS LEP student performance is declining relative to CMS and state averages.

The authors stress that no conclusions have been made, nor can they be made from the NC Report Cards, concerning the absolute progress of a given school system over time due to many factors, the most significant being frequent changes to "cut lines" that define what constitutes a passing grade, and the questions on the exams themselves. The conclusions above are made from the relative passing percentages between groups of students in a given school year using common tests, making them independent of the test administered as well as the year it was given. However it is reasonable to compare the differences between these groups as it changes over time.

It must be noted again that this analysis is based on the percentage of children who have passed **both** the reading and math portions of the North Carolina's ABCs EOG tests, and average scores in several subjects on the EOC tests. In order to accurately assess the effectiveness of any policy aimed at improving academic performance and progress, a more thorough analysis of representative groups, or "cohorts", should be carried out. The authors are qualified and experienced in such analyses, however their requests for the detailed performance data needed for such work has been repeatedly denied from the WCPSS and the NC Department of Public Instruction.

The difference in passing percentages is not a proper indicator of the true gap. There are proper metrics for the true gap, and these metrics are totally independent of test difficulty, choice of cut lines to distinguish Fail and Pass, and totally independent of actual passing percentages. These metrics allow past tests to be properly connected to current tests, independently of any changes in the tests. We are employing "difference in passing

percentages" only to keep with current DPI practice, but we have actually calculated more quantitative true gap values.

Expenditures: No mention is made here of the expenditures for education in WCPSS or CMS schools. It is very difficult to obtain accurate information from WCPSS on this matter. Our best estimates range from \$9,600 - \$14,000 per year per pupil (total for county, state and federal funding), depending on what is counted. However this matter is irrelevant. Real expenses for education in our state and in the CMS and WCPSS systems in particular have risen significantly in recent years, with no meaningful correlation between spending and results. Outlays for these two systems is significantly greater than the state average, however as is shown above, in some comparisons WCPSS performance is lower than state averages. The authors concur with the recent *Report Card on American Education* from the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), that concludes "... there is no direct correlation between public funding and achievement ... " in America's public schools. However the authors do advocate targeting resources to specific low-performing schools, which indeed has been documented as aiding in the improvement of academic achievement for ED students in CMS schools in recent years.

Recommendations:

The authors urge the following actions on your part, effective school year 2009-2010:

1. Abolish the current income-based assignment policies in Wake County. Use the cost savings to focus additional resources on the poorest performing schools and children with special needs.
2. Adopt assignment policies favoring neighborhood schools, i.e. children are assigned to the schools closest to their homes.
3. Institute open enrollment options for families who are not satisfied with the education their children receive in their assigned schools.
4. Send a strong statement to the General Assembly urging an end to the arbitrary cap on charter schools in North Carolina.
5. Send a strong statement to the General Assembly urging a vote of approval in favor of education tax credits for children with special needs, as was brought before the 2008 session with broad bipartisan support.

6. Request the NCDPI to institute national normed testing to provide a means to measure progress in WCPSS schools relative to others across the state and nation.
7. Pay teachers according to their individual performance instead of their seniority and credentials or the school where they work.
8. Provide the authors with the needed detailed performance data to make more accurate assessments of academic progress and high school graduation. Gaining cooperation from the NCDPI is essential in this regard.

Furthermore we urge you to study and adopt the education reform recommendations announced on February 3rd by North Carolina House Representative Paul Stam and State Senator Phil Berger, and we urge you to consider the recommendation made on January 12th, 2009 by Joel Klein (Chancellor, NY City Dept. Education) and the Reverend Al Sharpton in their letter to President Obama, "Charter Schools Can Close the Education Gap." Both of these statements provide numerous viable options to improving the education for ED students that do not involve frequent, disruptive reassignments or additional expenditures.

Lastly, recent studies published in the *Carolina Journal* provide strong evidence of fraud in the free lunch program administered by the WCPSS. According to these reports, based on information provided by the NCDPI and WCPSS, 64% of all recipients of these taxpayer-provided meals in Wake County schools are unqualified to receive them. Since enrollment in this program serves as the basis for your current assignment scheme, we urge you to perform a 100% audit of its recipients, any objections from the NCDPI or USDA notwithstanding. Our nation can no longer afford taxpayer fraud and wasteful government spending.

In the interest of Wake County families and taxpayers, we look forward to your response.

Respectfully yours,

Eric Blau
Wake County graduate, parent and software engineer

William Lynch, Ph.D.
Wake County resident
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President, AeroSouth, Cary, NC

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Mayor, Town of Apex

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