



In Context

An independent review of Wake County public school issues for business leaders, elected officials and the education community.

Nov. 7, 2008

Welcome

Welcome to the first edition of the newsletter *In Context*, produced by Wake Education Partnership. This newsletter, which will be sent out twice a month, will focus on issues that affect Wake County's public schools.

That means it will often highlight local school issues with an eye toward educating readers about the importance of current events. But the newsletter won't be limited solely to local school news.

If state or national news is likely to have an effect on Wake school issues, this newsletter will cover those topics. If major reports or studies are likely to shape the way Wake County runs its classrooms, *In Context* will bring that to your attention.

Developed during the past 25 years, the mission and core values of Wake Education Partnership emphasize high standards, quality teaching, well-trained leaders and diverse schools where all students succeed. This newsletter, in turn, will naturally gravitate toward those issues. We hope you enjoy it and learn from it.

Testing

Wake County's reading scores for the 2007-2008 school year dropped significantly, according to results released Thursday by the state Department of Public Instruction. About 65 percent of Wake's elementary and middle school students scored at grade level, compared to a passing rate of almost 90 percent in 2006-2007.

A quick recap of how we got here makes the flurry of numbers easier to understand.

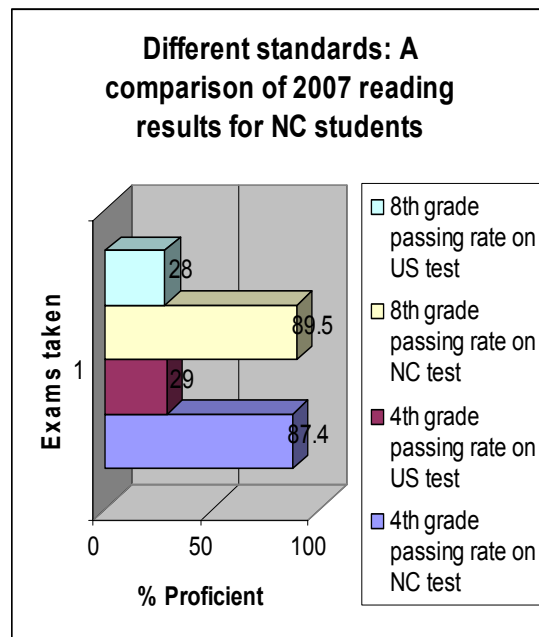
First, scores dropped mostly because state officials made the test harder to pass. It was an opportune time for the state to raise the bar seeing as how it tweaked the state's entire reading curriculum last year and then changed the test itself.

A higher standard is also overdue. In 2006-2007, about 87 percent of North Carolina's fourth graders scored high enough on statewide end-of-grade tests to be considered at grade level. Without argument, that performance represents a steady improvement over the past decade resulting from a lot of hard work in the classroom.

But on the one exam that comes closest to being recognized as a national standard – the National Assessment of Educational Progress – only 29 percent of the state's fourth graders scored at the proficient level in 2007. Reading results for eighth-graders were almost identical. Something was seriously out of sync at the state and national levels.

In a country where public education has always been a local endeavor, comparing local and national standards will never be simple. Those who jump into the alphabet soup of ABC's, EOGs, NAEP, SAT and a host of other tests are in for a never-ending debate. And plenty of public school critics are willing to exploit the confusion.

But the drop in scores for Wake schools offers a simpler lesson. When you raise the academic bar, students must jump higher to clear it. Given the state's standing in comparison to national standards, that's a good thing.



Source: NC Dept of Public Instruction

Commissioner's race changes county board

The most closely watched local race among many public school leaders in Wake County was the commissioner's race between Democrat Stan Norwalk and Republican incumbent Kenn Gardner.

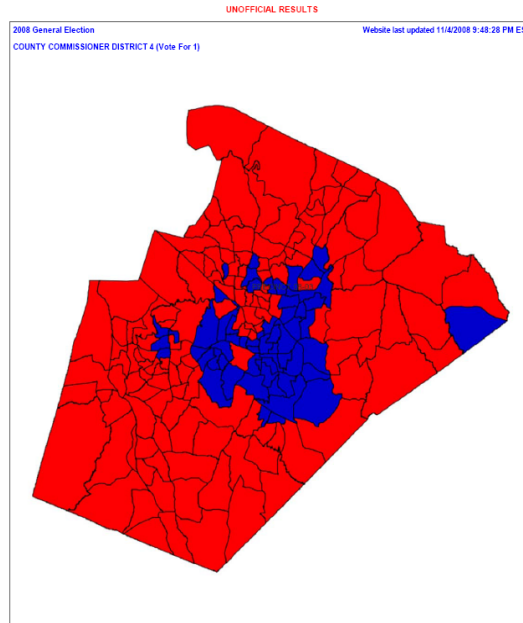
Norwalk, an outspoken supporter of using real estate transfer taxes to help pay for growth, easily defeated Gardner. He is viewed by many in the public schools as someone likely to be more sympathetic to school funding requests.

Norwalk will take his seat Dec. 1. The first joint meeting with the school board is scheduled for Dec. 17. Observers will be watching to see whether his presence has any immediate effect on the sometimes prickly relations between the boards.

School board members are particularly hopeful Norwalk's election will lead to a more cooperative spirit during budget negotiations. But his presence won't change most of the

basic challenges facing the county in terms of growth, student assignment, year-round calendars and construction needs in a soft economy.

His public support was also far from universal. A map generated by the Wake County Board of Elections shows Norwalk's base of support on Election Day. He coupled that with a huge lead among early voters of 148,269 to 84,993. The map does not assign early votes to precincts.



Source: Wake County Board of Elections

National report takes NC to task on dropouts

A recent report by The Education Trust in Washington, D.C., details a sobering development among American schools.

“The United States is the only industrialized country in the world in which today’s young people are less likely than their parents to have completed high school,” the report states.

The reasons for this are predictably complex, but the thrust of the report is that states cannot expect to significantly improve graduation rates if they don’t set reasonable goals. Under federal law (No Child Left Behind), states must establish an annual goal for improving graduation rates. North Carolina’s goal is to improve rates by one-tenth of one percent a year.

At that rate, it would take 95 years before the state’s current graduation rate of 70.3 percent reached a full 80 percent. If you break that down by ethnicity, it would take African-American students, who now post a graduation rate of 60.8 percent, 190 years

before four of every five students got a diploma. It would take Latinos literally more than two centuries.

North Carolina, however, does not have the lowest targets. Maryland requires that rates increase by one-hundredth of one percent (.01 percent) a year and a handful of states require only that graduation rates not decrease.

Most schools, of course, are not content to report virtually zero progress in this area. And it's likely political compromise and gamesmanship lies behind the meager federal requirements. But in schools, what gets measured is often what improves.

The report from The Education Trust, an influential policy group that cuts across political boundaries, suggests it is time for many states such as North Carolina to use a bigger measuring stick.

<http://www2.edtrust.org/EdTrust/Press+Room/countingongrad.htm>

Wake Education Partnership is a 501(c)(3) non-profit created in 1983 to support public schools, in part by educating the community on current school issues. Most of its financial support comes from local business. To comment or ask question related to this newsletter, contact Tim Simmons, vice president of communications at tsimmons@wakeedpartnership.org.