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Response to “An Open Letter to the Wake County Board of Education”

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During my years in the classroom, I always taught my students to ask questions whenever they were presented with information from which they were supposed to draw conclusions. Specifically, we learned to ask the following questions:

- Who is sharing the information?
- Why are they sharing the information?
- What information are they sharing?
- What information do they fail to share?

With the framework of these questions, I read the *Open Letter to the Wake County Board of Education* very closely. To me, the letter appears to be based on a faulty premise. The authors write that

“The goal of this policy was to improve the academic performance of the children from low-income families 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.”¹

The writers seem to imply that the only driver of this policy was the desire to keep the number of economically disadvantaged children (ED) at or below 40% of a total school’s enrollment. That is, the writers assume that the policy was an effort to *avoid something*. They reference “the children you have targeted in Wake County.”² In reality, the Wake County Public School System adopted a policy to promote something: healthy schools. The policy is not aimed at individual students. The goal of the policy is to provide healthy schools where all individual students can benefit. Much more than the percentage of ED children attending a given school is taken into consideration when determining if a school is healthy. But even if the policy simply tries to maintain the percentage of ED students at or near 40% or comparable to surrounding schools, research supports this single goal.

Non-poor students attending high-poverty schools fall behind more frequently than poor students attending low-poverty schools. (Kennedy et al, cited in Lippman et al, 1996, p35) Conversely, research shows that children who grow up in poverty (and thus carry the same cognitive lags and ingrained effects of disadvantage) but transfer to middle-class suburbs and schools show rapid gains in behavioral measures and academic achievement. (Anyon, 2005a)

“That is exactly what socioeconomic integration promises: more academic benefit for less money than under alternative policies.”³

The authors of this letter compare the academic progress and current standing of Charlotte-Mecklenburg School (CMS) students with students in the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS). Their reasoning for making such comparisons is to show that the CMS policy of “neighborhood based” school assignment is as successful in terms of student achievement as the WCPSS assignment policy designed to promote healthy schools. As stated above, the authors fail to recognize, or do not understand, that the WCPSS policy is aimed at *schools*, not individual students. However, the overall goal of the healthy school policy is to help foster improved academic achievement for all students.

While laying out their case for equating the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools with the Wake County Public Schools, the writer’s state that “the two most important indicators of academic achievement” are the percentages of students achieving at/above grade level on both reading and mathematics.⁴ However, there are far more data about school and student sub-group success that others may believe are equally or more important.

In presenting their case, the writers included data from both CMS and the WCPSS elementary End-of-Grade tests for the 2001-2002 and 2007-2008 school years. They also included results from the 2007-2008 high school End-of-Course tests from both school systems. For whatever reasons, they did not include the 2001-2002 year results for the high school End-of-Course tests, even though these results are as easily accessed.

High School Data

Let’s look at the high school data first so we can partially answer the question, “What information are they not sharing?” A quick review of the End-of-Course test data, including data from the 2001-2002 school year, reveals that WCPSS surpassed students in CMS in overall percentage in all course exams, except the 2007-2008 U.S. History EOC. The second row of data in each chart is the State averages.⁵

Wake County EOC Composite 2001-2002

English I	Algebra I	Algebra II	Geometry	Biology	Chemistry	Physical Science	Physics	ELPS	US History
81.2	88.3	86.6	80.1	80.6	83.7	65.4	90.7	79.2	62.5
69.7	79.0	77.2	66.5	69.2	70.6	61.4	84.4	69.5	50.3

Charlotte-Mecklenburg EOC Composite 2001-2002

English I	Algebra I	Algebra II	Geometry	Biology	Chemistry	Physical Science	Physics	ELPS	US History
67.5	63.6	65.2	49.7	64.6	54.1	39.3	80.4	60.0	51.7
69.7	79.0	77.2	66.5	69.2	70.6	61.4	84.4	69.5	50.3

Wake County EOC Composite 2007-2008

English I	Algebra I	Algebra II	Geometry	Biology	Chemistry	Physical Science	Physics	C&E	US History
78.8	79.3	76.9	75.2	76.5	83.8	60.1	87.7	77.9	74.2
73.1	69.0	67.2	67.9	68.0	71.8	58.4	81.5	68.5	66.5

Charlotte-Mecklenburg EOC Composite 2007-2008

English I	Algebra I	Algebra II	Geometry	Biology	Chemistry	Physical Science	Physics	C&E	US History
74.1	70.6	67.3	65.5	72.0	64.0	53.1	76.7	70.8	74.3
73.1	69.0	67.2	67.9	68.0	71.8	58.4	81.5	68.5	66.5

A further review of the School Report Card shows that WCPSS students surpassed CMS students in all subgroups for the 2001-2002 year and in 10 of 13 subgroups for the 2007-2008 year.

Wake County EOC Subgroup Composite 2001-2002

Male	Female	White	Black	Hisp.	Am. Indian	Asian/Pacific Islander	Multi Racial	E.D.	N.E.D.	L.E.P.	Migrant Students	S w/D
80.9	79.2	87.9	56.9	65.7	74.1	87.4	78.8	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	55.8
69.5	68.4	78.3	47.6	58.3	55.8	74.8	72.7	N/A	N/A	N/A	55.6	38.0

Charlotte- Mecklenburg EOC Subgroup Composite 2001-2002

Male	Female	White	Black	Hisp.	Am. Indian	Asian/Pacific Islander	Multi Racial	E.D.	N.E.D.	L.E.P.	Migrant Students	S w/D
60.5	60.5	77.8	38.9	46.6	48.7	68.5	64.8	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	21.4
69.5	68.4	78.3	47.6	58.3	55.8	74.8	72.7	N/A	N/A	N/A	55.6	38.0

Wake County EOC Subgroup Composite 2007-2008

All	Male	Female	White	Black	Hisp.	Am. Indian	Asian/Pacific Islander	Multi Racial	E.D.	N.E.D.	L.E.P.	Migrant Students	S w/D
77.1	77.8	76.5	89.0	53.2	61.5	73.9	89.1	79.3	52.4	83.1	49.6	N/A	53.9
68.4	68.8	68.2	78.5	48.6	59.1	58.6	80.6	71.9	53.6	76.0	45.4	40.2	39.5

Charlotte-Mecklenburg EOC Subgroup Composite 2007-2008

All	Male	Female	White	Black	Hisp.	Am. Indian	Asian/Pacific Islander	Multi Racial	E.D.	N.E.D.	L.E.P.	Migrant Students	S w/D
70.1	70.4	69.8	86.5	55.2	60.7	62.1	81.7	74.7	55.3	78.8	52.3	N/A	39.7
68.4	68.8	68.2	78.5	48.6	59.1	58.6	80.6	71.9	53.6	76.0	45.4	40.2	39.5

As a former high school administrator, I believe that any final comparison of high school student performance between Wake and Charlotte-Mecklenburg should also include two additional pieces of data; SAT scores and four year graduation rates.⁶

WCPSS 2007-2008	Participation Rate (%)	Average Total SAT Score	Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rate
District	74%	1,059	78.8%
State	63%	1,007	70.3%
Nation	45%	1,017	

CMS 2007-2008	Participation Rate (%)	Average Total SAT Score	Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rate
District	68%	1,006	66.6%
State	63%	1,007	70.3%
Nation	45%	1,017	

My conclusion, relative to high school performance, is that students in the WCPSS are outperforming students in CMS across a broad range of measurements. While it is true that students in the CMS have made strong gains in recent years, my training as an educator has taught me that statisticians believe it is easier to help students (or cohorts of students) increase their academic performance, over time, 20-30 percentage points when significantly behind cohorts of students performing at higher levels. Meaning, it is not as simple as equating one

cohort's 10-20 percent improvement if they were performing at the 40-50 percent level, to another cohort's performance that was already at the 75-80 percent level. The comparison is not apples to apples. Indeed, students in CMS have improved their performance over the last seven years and should be commended for their improvement. The unknown for the CMS is if they will be able to continue their growth in the coming years as student scores climb above the mean.

Elementary Data

Because of my years as an elementary school administrator, I believe that the elementary years are the formative years. These are the years when both the skills and attitudes needed to be a successful learner develop. I also believe "drop out seeds" are sown during these early years. Therefore, it is extremely important that we provide support, quality academic tools, excellent teachers, and a quality educational environment in which our children can learn and prosper. The WCPSS goal of maintaining healthy schools strives to provide that quality educational environment for all students to be successful.

With this in mind, let's turn to the elementary End-of-Grade test results. The authors of "An Open Letter," begin with a headline "CMS Schools make noticeable progress relative to WCPSS."⁷ The data they cite are both selective and incomplete. I agree that CMS students have made good progress over the years and they should be commended. But, when looking at the complete picture, their progress is "relative" to their own previous scores. To better understand how students have performed in both Charlotte and Wake County, one should compare the 2001-2002 and 2007-2008 End-of-Grade scores for all students, not isolated subgroups.

WCPSS 2001-2002 End-of-Grade Composite (Passed BOTH R&M)

	Male	Female
End-of-Grade	83.5	85.7
ABCs	80.9	79.2

CMS 2001-2002 End-of Grade Composite (Passed BOTH R&M)

	Male	Female
End-of-Grade	69.1	74.6
ABCs	60.5	60.5

WCPSS 2007-2008 End-of-Grade Composite (Passed BOTH R&M)

	All	Male	Female
End-of-Grade	61.0	58.9	63.3
ABCs		77.8	76.5

CMS 2007-2008 End-of-Grade Composite (Passed BOTH R&M)

	All	Male	Female
End-of-Grade	50.5	48.1	53.0
ABCs		70.4	69.8

While presenting their case for the success of elementary schools in CMS, the authors did not include information readily available on the NC Report Card that compares the percentage of elementary schools in the WPCSS and the CMS that met their AYP target performance goals. One can see from the chart below, that Wake County has a higher percentage of elementary schools meeting their AYP performance targets for the school year 2007-2008 than Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

2007-2008 AYP Performance Targets – Elementary Schools

WCPSS	63 of 76 schools	82.2%
CMS	55 of 78 schools	70.5%

As with the high school comparisons, elementary students in the WCPSS are outperforming elementary students in the CMS. If one looks at all subgroups on the NC School Report Card, one will see that is the case in almost all subgroups. Are students in the CMS gaining ground on students in the WCPSS? Yes, and they should be. As stated above, they had much more ground to cover since 2001-2002. After reviewing the data on elementary schools, one should not believe that schools with high degrees of economically disadvantaged students are always successful. Please carefully review the chart at the end of this paper. It charts “Achievement vs. Poverty by elementary school” in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System.⁸ One can clearly see the decline in student achievement once the poverty indicator of a given school rises above the 50% mark.

Conclusion

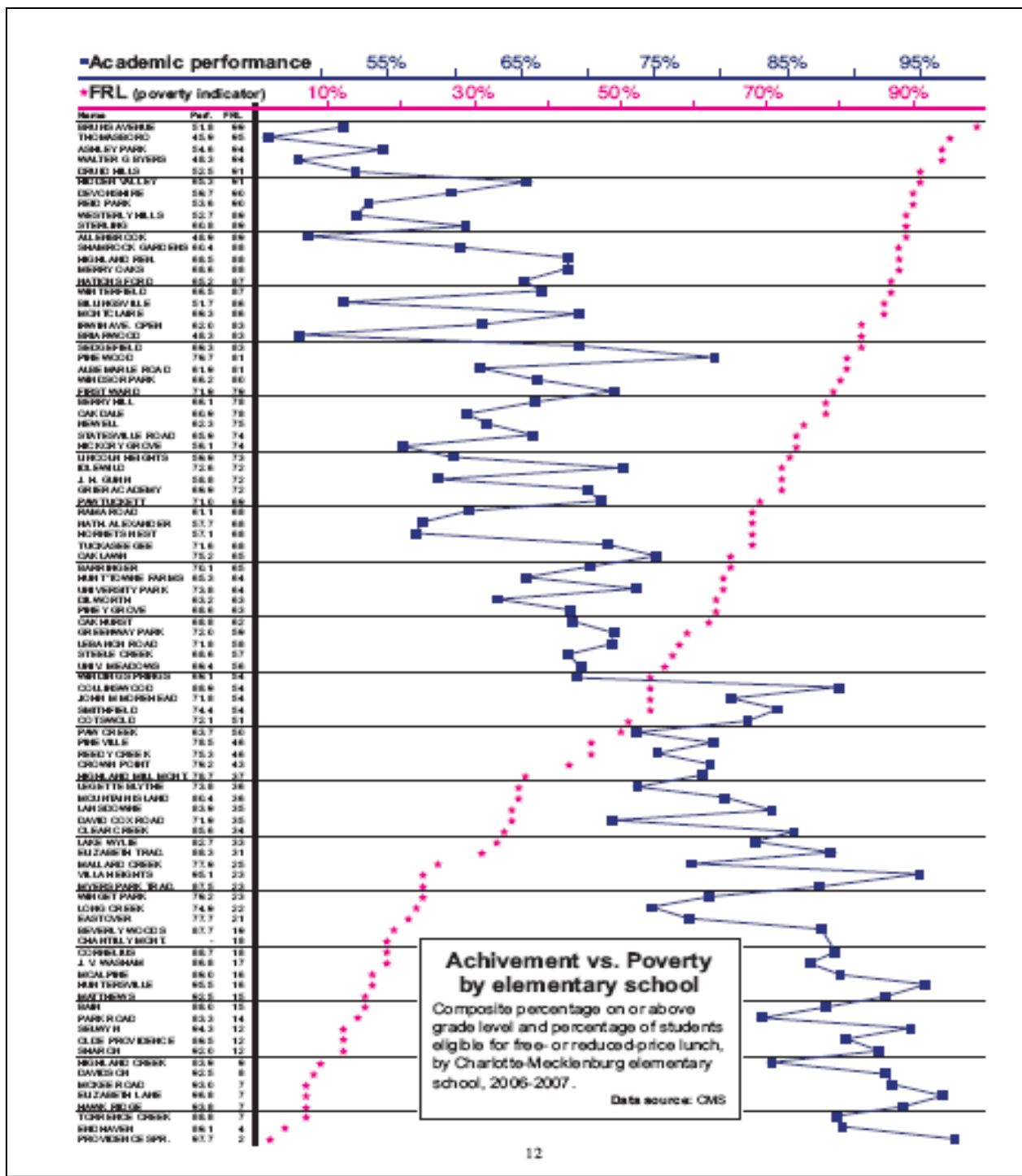
Let me conclude by returning to my original questions.

- Who is sharing the information?
- Why are they sharing the information?
- What information are they sharing?
- What information do they fail to share?

The “Open Letter” was written by supporters of a “neighborhood based” school assignment policy. They shared selective data to compare student success in three subgroups in the CMS and the WCPSS. My belief is that the authors are using this data to suggest that the “neighborhood based” school assignment policy in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System is successful in promoting academic success for all their students. Furthermore, they oppose the Wake County healthy schools policy that includes a diversity component. They failed to share data that would help analyze the rate of success for all students and schools in both the CMS and WCPSS, in particular

- High school data from the 2001-2002 NC School Report Card
- EOG scores for all students, as opposed to three subgroups
- Elementary schools meeting AYP target performance goals
- SAT results
- Graduation results
- Per Pupil allocations (see below)

I conclude that the WCPSS policy designed to promote healthy schools is working. The policy is aimed at academic success for all students and schools, not just students in a handful of AYP subgroups or schools in certain neighborhoods. Overall, WCPSS students in grades 3-12 are outperforming students in the CMS with a per pupil allotment that is \$478 less than the CMS per pupil allotment.⁹ With a school system enrollment of 137,000 students, that is a difference of \$65,486,000! If the WCPSS were to abandon their policy aimed at healthy schools and turned to a “neighborhood based” assignment policy, I strongly believe we would end up with a school system of schools defined as “haves” and “have nots.” We would also be turning our backs on a large percentage of students who need and deserve what a quality education can provide. As a lifelong educator, I will continue to advocate and support policies designed to benefit ALL of our children, regardless of where they live!



¹ Blau, Lynch, Margiotta, Weatherly. *An Open Letter to the Wake County Board of Education*. p.2. March 6, 2009.

² Blau, Lynch, Margiotta, Weatherly. *An Open Letter to the Wake County Board of Education*. p.3. March 6, 2009.

³ Angela Ciolfi, and James E. Ryan. "Socioeconomic Integration: It's Legal and It Makes Sense." *Education Week*. June 18, 2008.

⁴ Blau, Lynch, Margiotta, Weatherly. *An Open Letter to the Wake County Board of Education*. p.2. March 6, 2009.

⁵ Education First: North Carolina School Report Cards. 2009

⁶ Education First: North Carolina School Report Cards. 2009

⁷ Blau, Lynch, Margiotta, and Weatherly. *CMS Schools make noticeable progress relative to WCPSS*. p.2. March 6, 2009.

⁸ J. Mitchell Aberman. *Education and Poverty in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools*. The Swann Fellowship. Charlotte, North Carolina. p.12. July 2008.

⁹ Education First: North Carolina School Report Cards. 2009.