

January 10, 2012

There are three problematic assumptions in the new choice plan that I have been thinking about since it was first unveiled and they have nothing to do with the cost of the plan, which is a separate problem. They have to do with human nature.

The three problematic assumptions are these:

- 1) that people will naturally choose different schools
- 2) that people will not exit the system if they are unhappy
- 3) and that people will willingly embrace risk

Allow me to explain.

1) The purpose of this plan seems to be to redistribute students across schools as evenly as possible. That's a fine idea in growing school district with too much capacity in some areas and not enough in others. But in order to work well, this plan needs 100 different families who are given the same 5 school choices to rank those 5 choices differently. Ideally, each of the 5 schools would be the top pick of only about 20 families. Unfortunately, this neat and tidy distribution of preferences is counter to the reality of human nature. People will want what they perceive to be the best schools and the more people who choose those schools, the more in demand they will become. The plan's proponents claim this imbalance in desirability can be overcome by spurring the underchosen schools to make themselves more attractive so they can compete more successfully for students. But this assumes that those schools will have the resources to make themselves more attractive. It also conveniently overlooks the possibility that schools might work very hard to become more attractive and *still* be underchosen. There are winners and losers in any market, after all. What then? Will those schools be closed?

2) Second, there seems to be an assumption that parents who don't get their first or second choice will stay in the system and be happy with their third or fourth choice. Of

course, many families will have no choice but to stay and make the best of what they get. But people who can afford to leave will exit the system if they are not happy with the school they are given. They will choose private schools, charter schools, or they will leave our community all together. Other cities that have attempted choice plans in the U.S. have seen this occur. Why would we expect Wake County to be any different?

3) Third, many of the inner workings of this plan seem to assume that human beings happily embrace risk, like buying a house when you don't know what school is tied to that address, or willingly giving up the safety of a feeder pattern to take a chance on a getting into a new middle school or high school. This doesn't sound like many people I know, but maybe I know the wrong people.

My point is this: fundamentally flawed assumptions can't be fixed with little tweaks or minor adjustments. They need to be openly examined and discussed. The new choice plan hasn't been subjected to that level of debate -- at least not out in the open -- and there's no reason in the world why it shouldn't be. If it's a good enough plan, it ought to be able to withstand some tough questioning. Unless it is positively infallible, the plan ought to be able to be modified -- yes, even now -- with the best insights that all 9 board members can bring to the table.