

10-18-10 Community Meeting with Keith Sutton

Keith Sutton spoke to a mix of magnet and base parents at the Martin Street Baptist Church. There were about 70 people in attendance. Mr. Sutton reviewed some of the history of the last few months regarding the Student Assignment Committee's work and noted the public's discontent about how zones were taking shape. He also noted the discontent of non-committee members who felt shut out of the process by which the assignment plan was being developed. He said that Debra Goldman approached him about how to change or redirect the process, and the new directive presented at the October 5 Board meeting was the result. That directive halted all work on the 16-zone plan.

Mr. Sutton explained that we are back to the three-year assignment plan, which is node-based, and that we are in the second year of that plan. WCPSS grew by 3600 students this year. He said the opening of new schools to accommodate expected growth would continue to create the need for reassignment in coming years.

He also explained that the Board's new directive for student assignment calls for stability, proximity, and equity across our schools. By equity, he said he meant both financial and human resources and "program equity." He cited discontent about program inequity across the county, specifically comparing magnet programs to suburban schools.

His two main questions with regard to where we go from here were as follows:

- (1) How do we promote stability and proximity in one of the fastest growing areas in country, regardless of whether we go with a node-based or zone-based structure?
- (2) How do we minimize high poverty schools, noting the Board's legal obligation to make some substantial effort to provide a sound, basic education to all children?

He said the Board is going back to the framework of nodes, for now, and will be guided by the revised Policy 6200, which no longer considers diversity in student assignment. Mr. Sutton expressed his view that the Board must ensure poor students have an equal opportunity to realize their potential and that therefore it must find some way to "balance" our schools. He did not know whether some measure of poverty or student achievement or some other factor would provide the best means of "balancing" schools.

Mr. Sutton stated that he did not believe the magnet program is in jeopardy. He said the magnet schools "will continue as they are." However, he noted the inherent challenge of creating "program equity" across the county while also keeping the magnets attractive. One idea under consideration is an "equity based approach" to making all schools attractive while avoiding the duplication of programs at different schools. He gave a few examples of new programs or theme schools being considered, which were similar to those presented at the most recent SAC meeting, including an extended day school, an extended calendar school, and a STEM school (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). Another idea for providing program equity is to use technology, such as

teleconferencing, to provide students access to programs available at other schools. He gave the example of Knightdale High School students using teleconferencing to take advantage of AP Government at Green Hope High. Knightdale didn't have enough students to fill a class and hire a teacher, but Green Hope has three sections of AP Gov't.

There was then a lengthy question and answer period covering a range of topics. Several parents voiced significant concern about the looming budget shortfall and asked what the Board's plans are to cope with it. Mr. Sutton said that the Board intends to show the public a budget in December or January, which is 3-4 months earlier than usual. The staff are doing "webinars" right now with DPI. He also said that most of the Race to the Top grant money will go to DPI, so that money will not be available to Wake County to help with our shortfall.

In addition to concerns about dramatic budget cuts and how we will meet the needs of low-performing students in the context of significantly reduced resources, there were two main themes that stood out -- to me -- in the Q&A period:

(1) How are we going to avoid high poverty schools? To answer this question, Mr. Sutton explained that we must first clarify our definition of high poverty and how it will be measured. Will 40, 50, 60 or some other percent qualify as high poverty? Right now, as of 10/18, Hunter Elementary has 39.5% students receiving free and reduced lunch. Fifty-three percent of the students at Hunter this year are magnet students. Although the parents in attendance did not specifically address this with Mr. Sutton, perhaps two follow-up questions for Hunter parents to consider are: what can we do to help our low-performing students improve academically and what can we do to support our teachers if our school begins to feel the strains of a "high poverty school"? A parent did ask Mr. Sutton if there was any chance of persuading the Board to repeal the changes to Policy 6200 or at least make an explicit commitment to avoid the creation of high poverty schools in its assignment policy. But Mr. Sutton seemed doubtful, noting, "Debra Goldman is pretty proud of the new 6200."

(2) How are we going to create program equity across all schools without reducing the attractiveness of magnets? Mr. Sutton was very clear that the purpose of magnets is to integrate schools. Some parents voiced their concern that not everyone has had the same odds of getting into the magnet schools, even if everyone technically has a magnet option, and that this perceived unfairness has fueled discontent. There was no resolution to the question of what would constitute a fair admissions process for the magnet schools, nor was there any resolution to the question of what constitutes "program equity," but this whole area is in need of much further discussion. One parent voiced her concern that white parents are more worried about saving "their magnet schools" than they are about diversity. Another parent, a white father and base parent, expressed his commitment to both diversity and the magnet program at Hunter.

Finally, Mr. Sutton expressed his appreciation for the public's input throughout the last several months. He said there is no governing authority over the BOE, just the "court of public opinion." And that our emails to BOE members, the public comments at

meetings, the letters to the editor, and the activities of organizations like CCCAAC, the NAACP and WakeUP Wake County are making a difference.