

MEMORANDUM

TO: Wake County Board of Education Members, Superintendent Tony Tata

FROM: Public Education and Child Advocates

RE: Concerns about the establishment of single-sex academies in Wake County

DATE: December 1, 2011

This memorandum of concern regarding the proposed single-sex leadership academies is presented to you on behalf of a variety of organizations that advocate for educational excellence for all children. The names of the organization are listed at the end of this correspondence along with a name and email address if you seek additional information from any of our organizations.

In the face of severe budget constraints facing the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) in the coming years, it seems clear that creating two new schools with completely new programs requires a deliberate and well-considered development and implementation plan. Instead, these schools are being rushed and pushed through with inadequate information and no public input, which raises serious concerns about this Board's process.

At an October 2011 Board work session, the public—and several members of the Board—were *first made aware* of Superintendent Tata's intent to create two new, single-sex academies for grades six to 12. While an elaborate video documenting a visit to Greensboro schools was shown at the meeting, the presentation was scant on many program details. Little information was provided on the Guilford schools' curriculum; other than the cost for the two programs, which is approximately \$14,000 per pupil for each of the 100 or so students in the program. Despite the lack of information and the fact that several recent scholarly articles make the case *against* single-sex schools, Superintendent Tata and some Board members continued to press for these academies.

In light of a move toward a student assignment "choice" model and a heightened focus on "community engagement," the lack of transparency in the hurried steps leading up to the presentation and subsequent approval of the two single-sex academies is stunning. In an assignment model that relies on "market demand" to fill schools, the absence of any parental input defies the notion of creating attractive programs based on sound data and reliable information. The absence of public comment in the process of approving the single-sex academies is also in direct violation of Board Policy 1035, which stipulates that Board members "...seek systematic communications between the Board and students, staff and all elements of the community," and Board Policy 1000, which charges the Board with providing "...for the dissemination of information relating to the schools necessary for creating a well-informed public."

The rush to approve these two new schools—with an indeterminate curriculum and admissions policy—for the 2012-13 school year raises multiple additional concerns within the community, including concerns about alternative schools, single-sex learning environments, the combination of children age nine to 19 in the same learning/social setting, and the reliance on JROTC as a core component of a leadership program. Further, it appears that William Peace University was only suggested since it is downtown and would allow closer "busing" of the students. Peace University

reportedly does not have the space but would build space and lease it back to WCPSS. These cost implications are of serious concern when we have under-enrolled schools sites and we are facing a \$30 million plus deficit in our budget for 2012.

In addition, there has been no clear explanation of why these academies are needed in WCPSS and which deficits in program offerings the academies will fill. For example, although the academies are being framed as leadership academies, there has been no articulation of the connection between these new schools and the magnet schools with a leadership focus that already exist in Wake County. Combs Elementary, Centennial Middle School, and Southeast Raleigh High School are all magnet schools that focus on leadership development. How are these existing program offerings similar to or different from those being proposed in the new schools? Why are two new leadership academies needed when schools with a clear leadership focus have already been established in WCPSS? It may be possible to address the needs (though unclear to the public) that drove the proposal for these new single-sex leadership academies through existing leadership programs.

The injudicious creation of these single-gender academies exemplifies the same concern the community has consistently raised regarding the rushed development and adoption of WCPSS's larger 2012-2013 student assignment plan: a refusal to prioritize diversity to the detriment of students' overall education quality and learning environment. Superintendent Tata's single-minded push for single-sex academies in Wake County was seemingly based on his visit to similar programs in Guilford County—Middle College for male students at NC A&T University and the Middle College for female students at Bennett College. According to North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) statistics, both of these programs are racially hyper-segregated and majority low-wealth: during the 2010-2011 school year, 106 of 109 students in the NC A&T University program were African American and 51.5% were free and reduced price lunch (F&RL) eligible; 104 of 114 of the Bennett College students were African American and 53.5% received F&RL. This racial and socio-economic isolation—and the well-documented impacts such isolation has on access to resources, educational outcomes, and the stigma of exclusion—has been ignored. Once again, WCPSS seems determined to pursue another new education policy without adequate research, analysis, disclosure, or community input. In fact, with regard to these proposed programs, the only thing the community can be certain of is the board's refusal to prioritize or adequately consider racial or socioeconomic diversity.

Concerns about Single-Sex Learning Environments

While there is general agreement that students in Wake County do benefit from a variety of learning opportunities, it is not clear that Wake County students would be better served in a single-sex educational environment rather than a coeducational environment. While not all of the undersigned organizations categorically oppose single-sex education, we all agree that such an educational environment must be carefully planned and implemented. Indeed, single-sex education is too often based on unproven and widely discredited gender stereotypes repackaged as science—that are harmful for all students, boys and girls alike. Around the country we have seen examples of this stereotyping play out in common teacher training materials suggesting that boys should be shouted at and allowed to jump around in class while girls should be allowed to take off their shoes and not given timed tests because they do not perform well under stress.¹ In addition, some proponents of single-sex education claim that boys are naturally better at math because of daily surges of testosterone and that full participation in sports by females is “unrealistic” due to girls' biology.²

¹ Leonard Sax, *Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know About the Emerging Science of Sex Differences*, 88-92, 179-83, 188 (2005).

² Michael Gurian, *The Boys and Girls Learn Differently Action Guide for Teachers*, 100 (2003).

Moreover, separation of students on the basis of sex raises significant legal concerns, and may violate the constitutional guarantee of equal protection. In *United States v. Virginia*, the Supreme Court said that stand alone, single-sex schools are only appropriate when based on “exceedingly persuasive justification,” and the government “must show ‘at least that the classification serves important governmental objectives and that the discriminatory means employed are substantially related to the achievement of those objectives.’”³ Such a justification may not be based on “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities or preferences” of young men and women⁴—like the stereotypes about boys’ and girls’ learning styles, discussed above.

To the best of our knowledge, the district has not demonstrated that separating students on the basis of sex is substantially related to achieving the objective of improving educational outcomes—or to any other objective. In fact, there is considerable doubt as to whether any sound education data currently exists that would support such a finding.⁵ Two recent studies have actually found no scientific evidence that girls and boys learn differently or that single-sex education improves educational outcomes.⁶ Thus, instead of adopting this unproven—and legally risky—educational trend, WCPSS should focus on factors that have been proven to improve student achievement, like smaller class sizes, highly-qualified teachers, parental involvement, and an emphasis on core academics; these are the opportunities that we should all seek to create for Wake County students.

Concerns about JROTC Programs in the Academies

The establishment of single-sex academies with a mandatory core requirement that students attend JROTC is a radical proposal that effectively makes public schools more like private military academies.

JROTC is a high school curriculum taught by retired military personnel. The military promotes the program, in part, because its cadets join the military at a higher rate than the general population. JROTC is not an "academic" subject and is not counted toward entrance requirements for many universities and colleges. Its advocates claim that it teaches leadership and imply that it is good for troubled youth. Part of the curriculum is teaching drill, military culture and traditions, and how to handle guns. It seems ironic that we ban guns from school campuses but allow JROTC to promote familiarity with them.

JROTC is partially funded by the federal government but can still be expensive compared to regular classes because, for example, JROTC programs require two instructors per class instead of one. After approving JROTC programs, most school administrators never realize that the partial subsidy offered by the Pentagon does not match the additional expenses generated by the high staffing requirements of the JROTC contract.⁷ The instructors may not have a college degree or teaching credentials comparable to Wake County teachers, and it is not clear who they are accountable to for course content.

³ 518 U.S. 515, 523-24 (1996), quoting *Mississippi Univ. of Women v. Hogan*, 458 U.S. 718, 724 (1982).

⁴ *Id.* at 533.

⁵ See U.S. Dept. of Ed., *Single-Sex Versus Coeducational Schooling: A Systemic Review* (2005) (finding that there is no clear evidence that students will do better in single-sex schooling); Diane F. Halpern et al., *The Pseudoscience of Single-Sex Schooling*, *Science Magazine*, Sep. 23, 2011, 1706-1707.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Jahnkow, R. How Jr. ROTC contributes to the school funding crisis.

<http://www.projectyano.org/pdf/JROTC%20and%20school%20funding.pdf>

So why would JROTC be a core requirement at the new single sex academies? It would seem to exclude from enrolling children with disabilities and children whose parents do not want a military-style academy. Instead, the new academies could consider alternative leadership curricula that emphasizes consensus in decision-making, critical thinking, conflict-resolution, and life skills appropriate for all citizens of a democracy.

Concerns about Alternative Schools

In a move that surprised families and staff at alternative schools, WCPSS announced that: the male academy would be housed on the current campus of Longview School;⁸ River Oaks Middle School and Mary Phillips High School would be combined; and Longview School would move to the current site of River Oaks Middle School.⁹ Then, on November 1, 2011 in a dramatic turn of events, Superintendent Tata reported that the male academy would instead be located at William Peace College; however, he planned to audit alternative schools.¹⁰

These developments have left the community confused, with more questions than answers. Are alternative school students still going to be shuffled around, and if so, how? How and when will the audit be conducted? Will it include alternative services, such as the Second Chance Online Resource for Education (SCORE) program and home/hospital, in addition to the alternative schools? How will students, parents, teachers, and community members be involved?

However these changes occur moving forward, there are many problems with alternative education in WCPSS that must be addressed. The problems include:

Capacity: The alternative school capacity in WCPSS is lower than most other districts.¹¹ Moreover, "WCPSS does not provide a physical site for long-term suspended students and most other districts do."¹² This is particularly problematic given WCPSS' huge suspension rates.¹³

Quality: The quality of alternative education programs is abysmal. For example:

- Students who participate in the SCORE program are already behind academically and at risk of eventually dropping out, yet they are expected to sit in front of a computer for five to seven hours per day, five days per week, with no teacher physically present. Students in need of transportation and free and reduced price lunch do not receive these services.

⁸ *Board Approves Leadership Academies as Part of New WCPSS Facilities Plan*, Press Release, Wake County Public School System, Oct. 4, 2011. Available at www.wcpss.net/news/2011_oct4_facilities/.

⁹ "Leadership Academies" presentation by Ann Dishong to the Alternative Strategies Subcommittee of the Economically Disadvantaged Student Performance Task Force on Oct. 13, 2011.

¹⁰ *Wake County Public School System and William Peace University Developing Leadership Academy Partnership*, Press Release, Wake County Public School System, Nov. 1, 2011. Available at www.wcpss.net/news/2011_nov1_peace-leadership/.

¹¹ Anisa Rhea, *An Evaluation of the Wake County Public School System Alternative Educational Options*, Wake County Public School System, Evaluation & Research Department, 2009-10, p. 3. Available at www.wcpss.net/evaluation-research/reports/2010/1015alt_options.pdf.

¹² Anisa Rhea, *An Evaluation of the Wake County Public School System Alternative Educational Options*, Wake County Public School System, Evaluation & Research Department, 2009-10, p. 3. Available at www.wcpss.net/evaluation-research/reports/2010/1015alt_options.pdf.

¹³ See *Annual Study of Suspensions and Expulsions 2009-10*, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, p. 77. Available at www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/research/discipline/reports/consolidated/2009-10/consolidated-report.pdf.

Finally, there are no opportunities for kinesthetic learning, group work, physical education classes, elective classes, or honors and advanced placement courses.¹⁴

- For two consecutive years, the NC DPI, Exceptional Children Division found that WCPSS violated state and federal laws protecting long-term suspended students with disabilities.¹⁵ These students were only receiving four hours per week, on average, of tutoring during their suspensions. For many children the tutoring was limited to math and English, and some of the tutoring was taking place at fast food restaurants.¹⁶
- In 2010, an internal academic audit of in-school suspension (ISS) found that: a) WCPSS did not have an underlying philosophy, set of procedures, or referral guidelines; b) WCPSS does not collect data on or have performance measures for ISS; c) students do not get work in a timely manner, do not have enough work, and are not prepared when returning to class; and d) there is limited opportunity for behavioral change.¹⁷ Even though alternative learning centers (ALCs) have been started in all middle and high schools, some schools are still running ISS rooms with the same problems.

Achievement: The poor quality of alternative education programs is reflected in unacceptably low student academic achievement. For example:

- During 2010-11, only 28.3% of middle school students in WCPSS alternative schools were proficient in reading and math, and only 32.5% of high school students were proficient on all of their end-of-course exams.¹⁸ None of the schools made adequate yearly progress (AYP).¹⁹
- "Longview has a high dropout rate and does not expect that all students will graduate on-time or at all...Twenty of the initial 30 students in the Longview cohort could be followed over five years. Three of the 20 students graduated on-time during the 2008-09 school year, 14 students dropped out, and the other three were still enrolled at Longview as of December 2009. Of the 72 students in the Mary Phillips cohort, 20 students graduated from Mary Phillips early or on-time, over half (44 students) dropped out, and eight moved out of the district."²⁰ Only 44.5% of EOG exams completed by students in SCORE received passing scores and only 41.7% of completed EOC exams received passing scores.²¹ DPI reported the following about

¹⁴ See *Declining School Suspension in Wake County: Context & Questions*, Issue Brief, Advocates for Children's Services, Oct. 2011, pp. 4-5. Available at www.legalaidnc.org/public/learn/statewide_projects/acs/ACS_Publications/IssueBrief_Oct_11_DecliningSuspension.pdf.

¹⁵ See Media Release: Wake County Public Schools violate State, Federal Law, Advocates for Children's Services, Aug. 8, 2011, www.legalaidnc.org/public/learn/Media_Releases/2011_MediaReleases/2011_MediaRel_ACS_WakeCountyPublicSchoolsViolateStateFederalLaw_Aug_08_11.aspx; see also Joe Swartz, *Wake County Students with Disabilities Get Short Shrift--Again*, Independent Weekly, Aug. 17, 2011, <http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/wake-county-students-with-disabilities-get-short-shriftagain>; Keung Hui, *State Finds Wake Violated Law for Special Education Students*, The News & Observer, May 10, 2010, www.newsobserver.com/2010/05/10/475932/state-finds-wake-violated-law.html.

¹⁶ Report dated July 29, 2011.

¹⁷ The audit was conducted by Meredith Weinstein and Douglas Kinney.

¹⁸ Reports of Disaggregated State, School System (LEA) and School Performance Data, Accountability Services Division, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/reporting/leaperformancearchive/.

¹⁹ Top News, Wake County Public School System, July 22, 2011, www.wcpss.net/online_newsletters/school-community-news/newsletters/2011_july22.html.

²⁰ Anisa Rhea, *An Evaluation of the Wake County Public School System Alternative Educational Options*, Wake County Public School System, Evaluation & Research Department, 2009-10, pp. 31, 99. Available at www.wcpss.net/evaluation-research/reports/2010/1015alt_options.pdf.

²¹ Public records request received on July 28, 2011.

SCORE: "[T]he evidence from grades and EOC test results indicates that the students are not benefitting from the services delivered via the computer[.]"²²

- DPI reported the following about WCPSS' home/hospital services: "Student grades and EOC test results indicate that a vast majority of the students are failing."²³

Disproportionality: Black students and economically disadvantaged students are disproportionately pushed into alternative schools. For example:

- On the twentieth day of the 2011-12 school year, Black students represented 24.7% of the total student population but 71.5% of students in alternative schools, whereas White students represented 49.3% of the total student population but only 13.3% of students in alternative schools.
- Students receiving free and reduced price lunch represented 33.3% of the total student population but 75.6% of students in alternative schools.²⁴

In short, more alternative school (not alternative program) seats are needed that are higher quality and used in a non-discriminatory manner.

In the face of severe budget constraints facing WCPSS in the coming years, it seems clear that creating two new schools with completely new programs to Wake County requires a deliberate and well-considered development and implementation plan. This plan must include justification of exactly which students these single-sex academies are intended to serve and why these two new academies are the best method of serving them. Adequate time must be provided to engage the community in discussion about the new leadership academies and gauge interest in them before any money is spent on purchasing or remodeling buildings to house the academies. To date, there has been virtually no effort by WCPSS to seek input from the public about these new academies. Given the lack of research supporting any benefit of single-sex programs, all new programs in WCPSS should be coeducational. In addition, the requirement that all students enroll in JROTC should be eliminated. Instead of spending precious funds on the proposed single-sex academies, spend them on improving and expanding alternative educational programs for struggling students.

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²² Report dated July 29, 2011.

²³ Report dated July 29, 2011.

²⁴ Demographics, Wake County Public School System, <http://www.wcpss.net/demographics/>.

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