



**Position on the 2011-2012 Conversion of Schools
From a Multi-Track to Single-Track Calendar**

At the April 5, 2011 Committee of the Whole Meeting, Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) Superintendent Anthony Tata presented the idea of converting fourteen under enrolled year-round programs to single track programs. The fourteen schools being considered are:

Alston Ridge ES	Lake Myra ES	Timber Drive ES
Banks ES	River Bend ES	West Lake ES
East Garner ES	Wakefield ES	East Cary MS
Harris Creek ES	Ballentine ES	Holly Grove MS
Highcroft ES	Rand ES	

In a subsequent April 13, 2011 press release, Superintendent Tata stated, “Almost everywhere I’ve been in the county, parents, teachers and principals have asked about the idea of having the option for a single-track year-round calendar model. While we have a responsibility to ensure the efficient use of our resources, we must focus our efforts to maximize student achievement, and in order to do that, we need input from those schools’ communities on whether scheduling all students on a single-track would accomplish both those objectives.”

WCPSS first offered the calendar choice option to families in 1991. Multi-track schools provide 20-25% additional capacity, offsetting growth challenges at a lower cost than traditional calendar facilities. From 1993 to the present, WCPSS’ student population nearly doubled in size, going from 73,195 to 143,289. Wake County taxpayers felt this was a fiscally responsible move; educators saw great benefit to educating students in a year-round calendar environment.

(http://www.wcpss.net/demographics/enrollment/2010/annual_increase_93-10.pdf).

Superintendent Tata’s idea is to consider consolidating under capacity schools from a multi-track to a single-track calendar, until such time when growth would necessitate reassignment back to a four-track year-round program. Staff estimates a possible cost savings in the range of \$50,000/school per year, however the accuracy of this figure is uncertain, and would likely vary from school to school. If these 14 facilities are converted to single-track schools, capital costs will soar, negating the relatively small gain in annual operating expenses (14 x \$50,000 = \$700,000) that would be enjoyed only while the schools are single-track.

One or even two years of savings does not compare to the long-term capital costs of building new schools (we would lose capacity equivalent to four elementary schools at \$22 million each and need another middle school at a cost of \$47 million, totaling **\$135 million to construct the amount of capacity lost**).

Decisions regarding reassigning students into a single-track calendar have many implications, and must be considered in the context of their impact on system resources, calendar feeder patterns, siblings at other schools, and anticipated County growth.

Here are a just some of the challenges associated with converting a school from a four-track, year-round to a single-track calendar in the coming school year.

- 1) ***Insufficient Notice for Families*** – Many year-round families have already planned for their 2011-12 tracks and have scheduled track out camps, day-care coverage, vacations, etc. With the new school year starting in just a few months, there is insufficient notice for families on tracks 1 through 3 to plan to shift to track 4. With such short notice, this is an unnecessary hardship to families.
- 2) ***Inconsistent Feeder Patterns*** – For families who have children in both elementary and middle schools, it is important that they have the opportunity to have all of their children on the same track. If an elementary school converts to track four but the feeder middle school does not change, families will be forced to be on two different tracks.
- 3) ***Capacity Problems When Families Opt Out of Traditional Calendar to Return to Their Base Single-Track, Year Round School*** – Students who have opted out of these 14 schools in favor of a traditional calendar option (TCA) have an option to transfer back to their base (now single-track) school—especially if the base school offers the highly desirable track four schedule. The potential result could create over crowding at the single-track year-round schools and under crowding at the traditional calendar schools they leave. The fact that most TCA schools are farther away than year-round base schools and that there are no controls in place to allow WCPSS Growth Management staff to manage.
- 4) ***Complicated Multi-Track to Single-Track Conversion*** – Many of the fourteen schools under consideration for conversion are in high growth areas and will be over capacity in just a few years. For example, converting Highcroft Elementary to a single track would fill the school to 98 percent capacity, including the use of nine mobile units already on campus. With several new neighborhoods within two miles of Highcroft approved for construction, the school will soon be overcrowded.

Once schools are converted to a single track, there will be resistance from many parents who do not want to have their children reassigned again. Getting parents to go back to what are perceived as “less desirable” tracks (i.e. track three) will be a problem. Other families who like the year-round concept, but only want the fourth track will resist the move to another track. Getting public buy-in for converting back to multi-track, year-

round calendar is a potential public relations nightmare—just when growth will demand it.

- 5) ***New School Bond Referendum is Anticipated in 2013*** – WCPSS Growth and Planning staff has estimated that WCPSS will need to build another 33 schools by 2020. All are planned **as year-round** schools to handle significant anticipated enrollment growth, while being financially prudent. It simply does not make good sense to take away capacity today, in the face of significant projected growth. In 2011-12, WCPSS will add another 3,000-4,000 students to its rolls. In addition, the public will have to be convinced that we are maximizing the use of current facilities before they will support a bond referendum; the last bond promised to use year-round schools and going back on that promise to the public could affect the bond's success.
- 6) ***New Student Assignment Plan*** –WCPSS is in the process of developing a new, long-term student assignment plan. The locations of year-round, traditional and magnet programs will have to be assessed as part of a holistic plan. Changing school calendars for the 2011-12 school year without considering the impact of such change to the 2012-13 assignment plan, is both premature and likely to cause more problems than it solves. Of note is the fact that, when surveyed last year, families from many of these schools indicated their preference for a year-round calendar (Alston Ridge ES was not surveyed; Wakefield ES had a traditional preference, 57% vs. 40%). While some parents might be interested in converting to a single-track year-round program, the vast majorities of parents in these schools are committed to the year-round calendar and have already scheduled their calendars around their currently assigned track. Finally, the new Student Assignment Policy 6200 stipulates that, “Student assignment will seek optimal utilization of each school’s capacity.”

Conclusion

Great Schools in Wake appreciates the efforts to accommodate parent input around year-round programs where utilization is lower than desired. However, in order to spend Wake County tax dollars wisely, we must maximize the use of all school facilities. Therefore, we are recommending that no changes be made for the 2011-12 school year. To change calendars for certain schools without a more comprehensive idea of how we will deal with growth, and without considering the pending long-term student assignment plan or the likelihood of selling the public on a bond referendum will result in a piecemeal approach to assignments and cost taxpayers more money.

We encourage WCPSS Growth and Planning staff to look at the capacity study that is in progress, align it with the new student assignment plan and growth expectations, then conduct a thorough analysis of where year-round programs are distributed across Wake County. In doing so, we strongly recommend assuring that elementary-middle feeder patterns exist for all year-round programs and that calendars not be changed with less than six months’ notice so families can prepare.

If WCPSS gives up capacity in light of significant annual enrollment growth, it will end up with three costly options with which to deal with the lack of sufficient seats:

1) Overcrowded schools: Schools at some locations will simply become more overcrowded with lunch at beginning at 10:30am, limited bathroom capacity, and classes that are held in media centers and cafeterias.

2) Modular (trailer) units: Expensive modular units (costing upwards of \$50,000) will have to be purchased to address the lack of adequate space in a school. Trailers can only be placed where there is capacity on campus to park them, and most WCPSS campuses have no capacity for placement of additional trailers.

3) Build Schools: Capital costs will grow exponentially. See Appendix A and Appendix B for further analysis.

The challenge to maximize attendance at under enrolled/under chosen schools presents the Superintendent and the School Board with an opportunity to find creative ways to follow Policy 6200 and optimally utilize each school's capacity. Sometimes, difficult choices must be made in assigning students to fill vacant seats. Offering unique themes that make schools more appealing is one way to encourage choice, instead of closing tracks and diminishing capacity. This is the challenge—and the potential benefit—of expanding WCPSS' current school choice model.

Appendix A: Impact of Converting 14 Year-Round Schools

Schools Proposed for Conversion	Loss in Capacity If Schools Are Converted
Alston Ridge	278
Banks	278
E. Garner	278
Harris Creek	278
Highcroft	278
Lake Myra	278
River Bend	278
Wakefield	278
Ballentine	119
Rand	119
Timber	119
West Lake	119
TOTAL Elementary School Capacity Lost	2700
East Cary Middle	286
Holly Grove Middle	312
TOTAL Middle School Capacity Lost	598

The loss of 2700 elementary seats by converting schools from a multi-track to a single-track calendar, **four** new elementary schools, each with an 800 seat capacity are needed to replace the lost seat capacity ($2700/800 = 3.50$ schools).

Based on the cost to build one new elementary school (\$22 million), the cost to replace these seats with new facilities would cost approximately **\$88 million**.

It is possible that WCPSS could absorb the 598 middle school seats lost by reassigning students to existing schools—in the short term. However, it is likely that an additional middle school (cost: \$47 million) would need to be built sooner rather than later.

Appendix B: Savings from Full Utilization of Year Round Schools

Since four-track, year-round schools became an option for Wake County families in 1991, taxpayers have saved **\$316 million** in construction costs. Here are some additional details.

Elementary Schools:

How much has operating elementary schools on a four track, year-round calendar saved Wake County taxpayers in capital costs?

There are currently 40 four track, year-round elementary schools in operation. There are two types of year-round facilities:

- 22 schools are “small prototype” that can accommodate 119 more students than a traditional calendar school when operated on a four-track, year-round calendar.
- 18 schools are “large prototype” that can accommodate 278 more students than a traditional calendar school when operated on a four-track, year-round calendar.

Small prototype: 22 schools x 119 students = 2,618 seats gained

Large prototype: 18 schools x 278 students = 5,004 seats gained

TOTAL SEATS GAINED = 7,622

How many additional, single-track elementary schools would be needed to make up lost capacity if all 40 schools operating on a four-track calendar were converted to single-track?

Divide 7622 by 800 (capacity of large prototype traditional school) = 9.52 schools

→ **10 new schools** needed to make up lost capacity

10 new schools x \$22 million to construct each school means we have saved Wake County taxpayers **at least \$220 million** in today’s construction costs by building four-track, year-round elementary schools.

Middle Schools:

How much has operating middle schools on a four track, year-round calendar saved Wake County taxpayers in capital costs?

There are currently nine four track, year-round middle schools in operation. There are two types of year-round facilities:

- Eight schools are “small prototype” that can accommodate 286 more students than a traditional calendar school when operated on a four-track, year-round calendar.
- One school is “large prototype” that can accommodate 312 more students than a traditional calendar school when operated on a four-track, year-round calendar.

Small prototype: 8 schools x 286 students = 2,288 seats gained

Large prototype: 1 school x 312 students = 312 seats gained

TOTAL SEATS GAINED = 2,600

How many additional, single-track middle schools would be needed to make up lost capacity if all 40 schools operating on a four-track calendar were converted to single-track?

Divide 2,600 by 1,311 (capacity of large prototype traditional school) = **2 new schools** are required to make up lost capacity.

Two new schools at a cost of \$47 million each school means we have saved Wake County taxpayers **at least \$94 million** in today's construction costs by building four-track, year-round middle schools.