

JANUARY 5, 2010 - Board of Education meeting

Committee at the Whole--At the working meeting at noon, the Board members revisited plans for the parent interest survey on year-round school. Plans changed from sending home a paper survey with an online option to conducting the survey only online, with a letter going home next week to all parents. Parents who do not have access to a computer or need a paper version can request one from the school and then send it back to the school. Details at http://www.wcpss.net/news/2010_jan5_survey_planned/. The deadline for parents to complete the survey is January 25, and Board members also sped up their request for final data from WCPSS staff to early February. BoE member Keith Sutton asked whether adding public hearings would be another good way to gather community feedback--Chair Ron Margiotta said public hearings were not helpful during the reassignment process in the last few years. After significant discussion, it was decided to hold public hearings through late February. Board member Deborah Prickett stated the intent of the survey is to gather parent preferences for calendar choices throughout the county so that they Board can make decisions on Year-Round schools for the 2010 school year.

In another change to the survey, the Board also will survey all high school parents as well and will add questions specifically focused on year-round vs. traditional calendar preferences so that these parents can also participate and give preferences for year-round. While there are no plans to have year-round high schools, board members Debra Goldman and Deborah Prickett want input from high school parents who may have been through the year-round experience. So all parents will be surveyed, not K-8 as decided before. (Note: in previous posts, I'd mistakenly stated it was K-7.)

The Board also heard a presentation from Asst. Superintendent Chuck

Dulaney on utilization of the Year-Round schools. Some summary statistics, as of Dec. 11, 2009:

33,157 students were in 42 year-round elementary schools, K-5. 10,925 students were in 9 year-round middle schools, grades 6-8. Utilization of seats in the 42 year-round elementary schools was 85 percent. Three new YR elementary schools (Laurel Park, Mills Park, and Sycamore Creek) were opened in 2008-09, and three additional (Herbert Akins, Lake Myra, and Banks Road) were opened in 2009-10, are not completely filled. Nine YR elementary schools are 100 percent to 112 percent over-capacity (Carpenter Village, Durant Road, Hodge Road, Jones Dairy, Morrisville, North Forest Pines, Oak Grove, Pleasant Union, and Timber Drive). Utilization of seats in the 9 year-round middle schools was 91 percent. Target utilization is 95 percent.

The first year-round multi-track year-round school in WCPSS was Morrisville Elementary (then called Crosstimbers Elementary) in 1990-91. Board of Education official meeting, January 5--3 pm meeting--To open the meeting, Chairman Ron Margiotta announced the formation of two Ad Hoc Committees: one on Student Achievement for Economically Disadvantaged Students (which BoE member John Tedesco said he wanted to serve on) and a Student Assignment Advisory Committee. Mr. Margiotta said he hopes parent/community members can serve on both. The Student Achievement ad hoc committee will examine graduation rates and academic achievement for Economically Disadvantaged students; the Assignment group will reexamine the 3-year reassignment plan approved by the past Board. The committees were approved later in the meeting.

After Supt. Del Burns' announcements, the Board voted on the agenda. Ms. Prickett asked to add an item to the agenda that was a resolution on ending mandatory Year-Round. This was a proposal that was not included in the agenda that was released more than one week ago, and some

Board members had not been given the resolution prior to the meeting. The resolution is as follows: "We strongly oppose the mandatory assignments of students to year-round calendar schools and support calendar choice for all families. Beginning with the 2010-11 school year, there will be no mandatory year-round assignments. Every effort will be made to accommodate families into the calendar of their choice, whether it is year-round or traditional, at a school within proximity of their residence. We will no longer deny calendar applications based on socio-economic status. We will use each and every seat efficiently." The item was added to the agenda by a 5-4 vote.

In discussing the resolution later in the meeting. Mr. Sutton asked Ms. Prickett why the Board should not wait until the results of the survey on year-round preferences were completed, and he also noted it had no financial implications attached or explained. Ms. Prickett said the survey had a different intent--to gauge interest in year-round. When asked by Dr. Carolyn Morrison how many seats would be lost, Ms. Prickett said she would leave it to WCPSS staff to determine the impact of the change. Mr. Tedesco noted that at the last meeting, Asst. Supt. Dulaney, of Growth and Planning, stated that only approximately 140 students who requested a transfer back to traditional were denied and placed in year-round, so he thought the impact would be minimal. Dr. McLaurin asked Ms. Prickett what her definition of "mandatory year-round" was, and Ms. Prickett replied that it was what the current definition of the district was. When pressed for details, Mr. Margiotta cut off discussion to prepare for the Student Spotlight presentations. (The Spotlight on Students program has been a project of the Wake County Public School System since 1982 and honors selected students for outstanding achievements and accomplishments.)

When the meeting resumed, Ms. Prickett stated she had "no hidden agenda" with the proposal. She was just seeking to reverse WCPSS policy

on mandatory year-round. Ms. Goldman noted that it could help some parents who want year-round enroll their children in that type of school. BoE member Kevin Hill asked about the impact of the resolution--he noted that nine of the 17 schools in his District 7 area were overcrowded and that seven of those nine were year-round schools. Mr. Hill and BoE member Dr. Anne McLaurin noted the possibility for further overcrowding in many schools. Mr. Sutton asked Ms. Prickett why she had not discussed this proposal with other Board members during the working meeting earlier in the afternoon. BoE member Chris Malone answered by saying he was "proud to be doing what we are doing," and then moved to vote on the resolution. After a bit more discussion, the resolution was passed 5-4 (Prickett, Malone, Tedesco, Goldman and Margiotta in favor).

The agenda also had been revised Monday to include the proposed terms of engagement for an interim special legal counsel to the school board. The precis and proposed terms of engagement of Thomas A. Farr, from the firm of Ogletree, Deakins, Nash, Smoak & Stewart, P.C., can be accessed at

http://www.wcpss.net/announcements/archives/2010/01/revised_board_a.html. However, during a procedural motion, the item to approve Mr. Farr's contract had been inadvertently removed from the agenda, and when Mr. Margiotta sought to place it back on the agenda, doing so would require a 2/3rds vote. Mr. Sutton said he was in favor of discussing it then, but the measure fell by a 5-3 vote, with Mr. Hill, Dr. McLaurin and Dr. Morrison voting against putting it back on the agenda. (As Chair, Mr. Margiotta only votes in case of a tie, so the measure failed, as he could not vote and the 2/3rds needed is based on the full board of nine.) Mr. Margiotta said he would call an emergency meeting to approve the contract as he said he was "under an obligation" to get the contract approved that night. No emergency meeting has been posted yet.

In another procedural irregularity, Ms. Prickett asked that an item on software licenses be removed from the consent agenda and added to action, but she did so as the consent agenda was being voted on, not at the beginning of the meeting, as required. Mr. Margiotta informed her that such an action was not allowed at that point of the meeting. After discussion, it was decided that the item would be pulled from this meeting's agenda and then made an action item at a future meeting.

The Board also discussed the Race to the Top grant, which could bring \$3 million to \$4 million to Wake County. Funding will go to eight to 10 states nationally from the Federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, and North Carolina is competing to get a grant of between \$200 million and \$400 million. Mr. Tedesco said reforms such as lifting the cap on charter schools and merit pay for teachers are part of the criteria. Staff said it is unknown if final guidelines will include pay-for-performance for teachers, but that teacher evaluations will somehow be linked to student achievement. Goals under the grant are to focus on increasing student achievement, reducing the achievement gap between socio-economic groups, and increasing graduation rates. The grant winners will be announced in the spring of 2010.

During the public comment period, 26 people spoke, 18 opposing the Board's actions and six supporting them; two I'll classify as neutral. Some highlights:

Four spoke against hiring Mr. Farr and his contract. One speaker asked, "At a time when principals are rationing toilet paper, how can the Board justify (hiring Farr)?"

One speaker noted that \$400 million in construction would be needed to build the 16 new schools that would be necessary if all year-round schools were converted back to traditional calendars, as they would be able to

serve 10,000 fewer students. She noted that taxpayers are left out of the debate and that 70 percent of Wake County residents do not have children in the school system.

One speaker supporting Ms. Prickett's proposal (who said she lived in District 7, Ms. Prickett's district) said it was a "family-friendly" policy.

Another speaker said the Board was passing "simplistically worded" resolutions without any financial or analytical analysis. She said the Board was being fiscally irresponsible.

Another speaker said, "I have never been more ashamed to be a resident of Wake County than tonight. I am ashamed of the Board."

Another called it a "travesty of democracy." "We expect our students to do their homework," he said, "so we expect you to do your homework." Two speakers chastised high school students who spoke at earlier meetings for giving simplistic views on diversity.

One high school student said his experiences in a diverse student body taught him a great deal--"no class comes close to that." He contrasted his experience in Wake County to being in a privileged suburban school district in upstate New York, where he received a great education but students five miles away in the inner-city school district did not. Three other students spoke in favor of keeping schools diverse, saying they relished being with a diverse group of peers and learning from those experiences.

Another speaker said he worked for an international communications firm and recognized that the strong Wake School system, with its emphasis on diversity, attracts business and commerce to the County. The meeting adjourned at approximately 8:10 p.m.