

July 27, 2010 - Student Assignment Committee Meeting

Educational consultant Michael Alves said Controlled Choice, a student assignment method he first developed in 1981 for public schools in Cambridge, Massachusetts, could help Wake County's Board of Education develop a Student Assignment Plan that was fair and equitable and worked to help plan for growth while maintaining diversity. The presentation, which included [this summary](#), was part of yesterday's Student Assignment Committee, chaired by Board member John Tedesco. In addition to Mr. Tedesco, board members Chris Malone, Debra Goldman, Carolyn Morrison, Anne McLaurin and Kevin Hill attended, as well as parent/citizen appointees from each of the nine Board districts.

Mr. Alves said all schools under [this type of plan](#) would become "magnetic," not magnets as the term is used in WCPSS, but rather all schools would have attractions for parents. Each student (all addresses/neighborhoods) would be assigned to a zone, and parents would apply for schools for their children within their zone--you would put down first, second, third, etc choices of schools within your zone. This would end the zone assignment of students. For example, a household would not have a base school, but rather would be assigned to a zone with several school choices for elementary schools and likely for middle schools, although perhaps not for high schools. In past experience, Mr. Alves said 75 to 85 percent of parents received their first choice for schools. He estimated the ideal size for a zone would be 20,000 students. [A video of the meeting and presentation are on WRAL.](#)

He said the WCPSS magnet schools could remain as they are now as countywide (not zone-based) choices. In addition, new magnets could be added that are zone-specific.

He spoke in generalities, giving a background to the concepts of this type of plan. He said he'd worked with districts in the northeast with declining enrollment, but also with districts in Florida with increasing enrollment. The choice system strengthens public support for public education by giving universal choice across the district, he said, and more families in the past have left private or home schooling to re-enter public schools, he said.

Zones should be "microcosms" of the community, they should be diverse, they should be designed with student achievement as a goal, and each school should seriously work toward School Improvement Plans that result in high quality education. "Fairness," "equity," "accountability," "student achievement" were recurrent themes. He also said the plan would not necessarily assign students to their closest schools. "You want to have diverse schools, and you achieve that through parent choice," he said. The concept makes sound economic sense, he said--the district gets direct feedback on what schools are popular, which ones are not highly chosen, and it can work toward making all schools attractive.

At the end of his presentation, Alves answered questions from Board and Committee members, he wished the committee "good luck," and then departed--he has met with other stakeholders, such as the Raleigh Chamber of Commerce, the NAACP and others

during his time here, which was sponsored by Wake Education Partnership and the Chamber. At one point, Alves said he had toured many Wake schools and remarked how excellent the schools he saw were--"I've not seen any bad schools in Wake," he said.

At one point, Ms. Goldman said she was excited that someone came in and said such positive things about our school system--she said she supported a plan that was fair, practical and stable with student achievement and equity as important factors.

Once Alves left, the Committee began to discuss possibilities under this plan. The Committee had asked staff member Laura Evans, from the Growth and Planning department, to develop some possible maps of zones for a "Controlled Choice" plan. (Mr. Tedesco in the past has said he'd like to call it "Smart Choice"--saying he did not like the word "controlled.") Ms. Evans said she and the staff were "just playing around," wanting the committee not to take the maps as already drawn. One map drawn by zip codes was quickly discarded. The Committee also looked at maps based on high school attendance zones, school planning regions, area superintendent districts, and transportation regions. The N&O has the [proposed maps online](#).

There was a spirited exchange between two committee members, Dr. Morrison and Mr. Tedesco, with Dr. Morrison and Anne Sherron (committee member) asking Mr. Tedesco how the zones would be sure to avoid creating high poverty schools. Mr. Tedesco cited the [Voluntary Desegregation Plan](#) approved by the board in April, though he said the district will no longer use Free and Reduced lunch as a "label." When asked about what benchmark would be used, Mr. Tedesco said did not cite a benchmark but rather stated what would not be used. He also gave no clear answer to how the zones would avoid creating schools with concentrations of poverty. Chairman Margiotta has said the Board would not create high poverty schools through its new plan, though he also has given no details.

Alves was on David Crabtree's "On the Record" on WRAL on Saturday, July 31st. A replay of the show is available at:
<http://www.wral.com/news/local/politics/video/8052529/>