

Neighborhood Schools the Choice for Many Parents

RALEIGH—One of the rites of spring in rapidly growing Wake County is the release of the public school system's annual Student Assignment Plan. Many parents of school-age children dread the new assignment plan because it changes the boundaries for school districts. That means that some students are prevented from attending the school of their choice, or are uprooted from a campus they already attend.

"We go through this as a yearly ritual," says Jerry Diehl, a parent with two children in Wake County Public Schools. "The insecurity is always present."

Diehl was among hundreds of parents and students who spoke at a public hearing on the Wake assignment plan in March 1995. Most of the speakers were parents who expressed frustrations about their children not being allowed to attend the schools of their choice. For these parents, school choice isn't about wanting to send

their children to a private school or a school outside their district. It's about having some control over where their child attends public school.

Diehl and his wife, Lynne, bought a home outside Fuquay-Varina in 1993 so their daughters could attend a nearby elementary school. But the Diehls—like many parents—soon learned a hard lesson: When it comes to selecting public schools, the choice doesn't belong to them, but to the local school system. In March 1995, the Wake school system notified the Diehls that their younger child had been reassigned to another elementary school on the other side of town. That prompted the Diehls to speak against the student reassignments at the Wake County Board of Education's public hearing on the plan.

"My husband and I are from Air Force families," Lynne Diehl told the board. "As children, we were both yanked from one school to the next. We decided that when we had our own children,

Lynne and Jerry Diehl contested the Wake County Board of Education's reassignment plan when one of their children was transferred to an elementary school across town.



Karen Tam

this was not going to happen to them. So we built our home close to the school of our choice. . . . You have taken away my choice for my child's education."

Most Parents Seek Stable, Nearby Schools

Such sentiments are one of the factors pushing the drive for school choice. For many parents, choice isn't a way to switch their children to other schools, but to keep them from being transferred or bused across town. Surveys have shown that most parents of public school students have no desire to transfer their children to another public or private school.¹ Rather, they seek to keep their children in schools that are safe, disciplined, academically challenging, and close to home.

"The biggest reason why we're here today is that we all want our children to go to neighborhood schools," one parent, Elaine Röhlik of Raleigh, said at the Wake public hearing. Many students these days in urban communities, like Wake County, don't know what it's like to attend a local neighborhood school. "We have changed schools four times in six years," says Thomas Allen, a sixth-grader at East Millbrook Middle School in Raleigh. Under the new assignment plan, he would be transferred to East Wake Middle School—about eight miles farther from his home than his current school.

Another factor contributing to frustrations over school assignments in many communities has been the use of busing to increase racial diversity in public schools. Many of the parents who spoke at the Wake hearing complained about their children being bused to schools far from their neighborhoods. Such frustrations are shared by parents of all races.

"You're shifting these problems to other schools, rather than addressing them," said Jacqueline Winston, an African-American parent from Fuquay-Varina. "If the school board were concerned about the structure of education that our children are receiving, rather than the racial balance, our children would receive a much better education."

Wake school officials say they have no option but to reassign students. The explosive

population growth in Raleigh, Cary, Apex, and other communities close to Research Triangle Park has boosted the number of students attending Wake Public Schools by more than 2,000 students a year over the past decade. The school system has responded by building new schools and redrawing the base districts for existing schools.

"Since 1990, we've literally grown by about 3,100 students a year," says Scott Ragland, assistant public information officer for the Wake system. "That's the equivalent of three or four schools a year, but we obviously can't build three or four new schools a year. The majority of reassignments are because of space—simply because the schools are overcrowded. Racial balance figures in as well, but what really drives it is overcrowding."

To help deal with frustrations over school assignments, the Wake school system has offered parents more choices through magnet schools, year-round schools, and occasional transfers. The magnet and year-round schools program also has helped the school system achieve more racial diversity, by attracting suburban students to inner-city schools and vice versa. But the program has caused further frustrations for some parents, because the system has been swamped with more applications than it can accommodate. (See the related article, "Magnet Schools: The First Step Toward School Choice," on p. 12.) Nevertheless, more than 14,000 of the system's 77,000 students choose to attend a school outside their district of residence.

"In Wake County, it's pretty tough because of the space limitations and crowding," says Patrick Kinlaw, director of magnet programs for Wake public schools. "But still, that's a pretty good number—so about 19 percent of our students are exercising the choice option. . . . In addition, about 80 percent of our students either attend a school of their choice or their closest school."

—Tom Mather

FOOTNOTES

¹Ernest L. Boyer, ed., *School Choice*, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Princeton, N.J., 1992, pp. 10–11. The Carnegie study surveyed 1,013 parents with children in public schools and found that 70 percent did *not* wish to send their children to another school, public or private.