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ON EDUCATION

Seeking Integration, Whatever the Path

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Published: February 27, 2011

RALEIGH, N.C. — For decades, the Wake County Public School System — the nation's 18th largest — has been known as a strong academic district committed to integration.

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Travis Dove for The New York Times

Ligon Middle School in Raleigh, N.C. The Wake County school system, after abandoning one integration approach, is considering another that would assign students based on achievement.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, that meant racial integration.

In 2000, after courts ruled against using race-based criteria, Wake became one of the first districts in the nation to adopt a system of socioeconomic integration. The idea was that every school in the county (163 at present) would have a mix of children from poor to rich. The target for schools was a 60-40 mix — 60 percent of students who did not require subsidized lunches and 40 percent who did.

Then in 2009, a new conservative majority was elected to the Wake school board, and last spring it voted to dismantle the integration plan. Instead, families would be assigned to a school nearer their neighborhood. This meant a child who lived in a poor, black section of Raleigh would be more likely to go to a school full of poor black children, and a child living in a white, upper-middle-class suburb would be more likely go to a school full of upper-middle-class white children.

In most places that would have been it. Not here. This is a well-educated labor force (50 percent of employees are college graduates) that works in the high-tech Research Triangle and is predisposed to finding new ways to solve complex problems.

And that's just what they set out to do. Two weeks ago, civic leaders here unveiled their proposal for a third generation of integration: integration by achievement. Under this plan, no school would have an overwhelming number of failing students. Instead a school might have a 70-30 mix — 70 percent of students who have scored proficient on state tests and 30 percent who are below grade level.

The plan — believed to be the first of its kind in the nation — was developed by community leaders who sound nothing like the civil rights leaders of the 1960s. They

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sound more like members of the Chamber of Commerce — which they are. “We believe our proposal is consumer friendly,” said Harvey A. Schmitt, president of the [Greater Raleigh Chamber](#). “We believe it will sell well in a market of high expectations.”

The initial reaction has been positive. In interviews last week, a conservative board member (John Tedesco) and a liberal member (Kevin Hill), a leader in the African-American community (Bill McNeal, a former Wake school superintendent) and the current superintendent, Anthony Tata, all said the same thing — the plan is a good start and could work.

This may be the first time these four have agreed on anything.

The board is split five Republicans to four Democrats, and for the last 15 months meetings have looked like a Cartoon Network special, featuring in the lead role Mr. Tedesco, 36, the most verbal member of the majority. He is single with no children and has lots of time on his hands to stir things up.

Since he was elected, his ups and downs have been chronicled practically daily in the media: his house was in foreclosure; he’d been interviewed by Fox News; he’d lost his job; he was a featured speaker at a [Tea Party](#) rally; the county [Republican Party](#) was asking for donations to support him; he refused to accept those donations and said he would give them to charity.

Things got so out of hand that last fall, the board committee headed by Mr. Tedesco, which was supposed to develop a plan to replace socioeconomic integration, voted unanimously to disband itself.

“Every day, something I said was a story,” Mr. Tedesco said in a recent interview. “I said the school system is kind of like the Titanic, it’s hard to turn around. Next day the headline is ‘Tedesco Compares Wake County Schools to Titanic.’ ”

Nevertheless, the school system did seem to be sinking. After a complaint from the [N.A.A.C.P.](#), the United States [Department of Education Office for Civil Rights](#) launched an investigation into whether the new board’s policies had led to the resegregation of schools. A national school accreditation agency is conducting a similar investigation.

In January, [Arne Duncan](#), the federal secretary of education, called the board’s action “troubling” and “backward.” Gov. Bev Perdue has called it “one of the most disheartening things” she’s seen. And last week, [Bill Clinton](#) chastised the board for being insensitive to the poor.

Perhaps most devastating of all, [Stephen Colbert](#) devoted one of his very faux newscasts to eviscerating the board, describing the abandonment of the socioeconomic policy as “disintegration.” “What’s the use of living in a gated community,” Mr. Colbert asked, “if my kids go to school and get poor all over them?”

For people who worried about Wake County’s image, this was a disaster. “The business community asked us a hundred times, ‘What’s going on here?’ ” said Tim Simmons, a vice president of the [Wake Education Partnership](#), the educational arm of local business groups. “ ‘Isn’t there something that could bring order to this debate?’ ”

Since last summer the Chamber of Commerce had been working on a plan that would do just that. In September the chamber hired Michael Alves, a nationally known consultant who has been developing school integration plans since 1981.

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A version of this article appeared in print on February 28, 2011, on page A11 of the New York edition.

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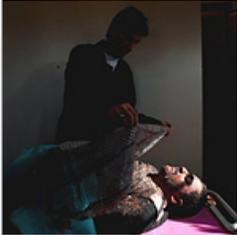
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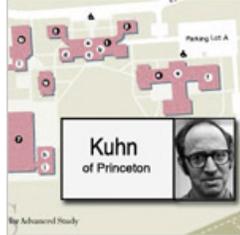
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