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**As Test Scores Jump, Raleigh Credits Integration by Income**

**By ALAN FINDER**

RALEIGH, N.C. - Over the last decade, black and Hispanic students here in Wake County have made such dramatic strides in standardized reading and math tests that it has caught the attention of education experts around the country.

The main reason for the students' dramatic improvement, say officials and parents in the county, which includes Raleigh and its sprawling suburbs, is that the district has made a concerted effort to integrate the schools economically.

Since 2000, school officials have used income as a prime factor in assigning students to schools, with the goal of limiting the proportion of low-income students in any school to no more than 40 percent.

The effort is the most ambitious in the country to create economically diverse public schools, and it is the most successful, according to several independent experts. La Crosse, Wis.; St. Lucie County, Fla.; San Francisco; Cambridge, Mass.; and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., have adopted economic integration plans.

In Wake County, only 40 percent of black students in grades three through eight scored at grade level on state tests a decade ago. Last spring, 80 percent did. Hispanic students have made similar strides. Overall, 91 percent of students in those grades scored at grade level in the spring, up from 79 percent 10 years ago.

School officials here have tried many tactics to improve student performance. Teachers get bonuses when their schools make significant progress in standardized tests, and the district uses sophisticated data gathering to identify, and respond to, students' weaknesses.

Some of the strategies used in Wake County could be replicated across the country, the experts said, but they also cautioned that unusual circumstances have helped make the politically delicate task of economic integration possible here.

The school district is countywide, which makes it far easier to combine students from the city and suburbs. The county has a 30-year history of busing students for racial integration, and many parents and students are accustomed to long bus rides to distant schools. The local economy is robust, and the district is growing rapidly. And corporate leaders and newspaper editorial pages here have firmly supported economic diversity in the schools.

Some experts said the academic results in Wake County were particularly significant because they bolstered research that showed low-income students did best when they attended middle-class schools.

"Low-income students who have an opportunity to go to middle-class schools are surrounded by peers who have bigger dreams and who are more academically engaged," said Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation who has written about economic integration in schools. "They are surrounded by parents who are more likely to be active in the school. And they are taught by teachers who more likely are highly qualified than the teachers in low-income schools."

To achieve a balance of low- and middle-income children in every school, the Wake County school district encourages and sometimes requires students to attend schools far from home. Suburban students are drawn to magnet schools in the city. Low-income children from the city are bused to middle-class schools in the suburbs.

Some parents chafe at the length of their children's bus rides or at what they see as social engineering. But the test results are hard to dispute, proponents of economic integration say, as is the broad appeal of the school district, which has been growing by 5,000 students a year.

"What I say to parents is, 'Here is what you should hold me accountable for: at the end of that bus ride, are we providing a quality education for your child?'" Bill McNeal, the school superintendent, said.

Asked how parents respond, Mr. McNeal said, "They are coming back, and they are bringing their friends."

Not everyone supports the strategy. Some parents deeply oppose mandatory assignments to schools. Every winter, the district, using a complicated formula, develops a list of students who will be reassigned to new schools for the following academic year, and nearly every year some parents object vehemently.

"Kids are bused all over creation, and they say it's for economic diversity, but really it's a proxy for race," said Cynthia Matson, who is white and middle class. She is the president and a founder of Assignment By Choice, an advocacy group promoting parental choice.

The organization wants parents to be responsible for selecting schools, and it objects to restrictions that, in certain circumstances, make it difficult for some middle-class children to get into magnet schools.

"If a parent wants their kid bused, then let them make the choice," Mrs. Matson said. "But don't force parents to have their kids bused across town to go to a school that they don't want to go to."

Supporters of economic integration contend that the county offers parents many choices but that the school district needs the discretion to assign some children to schools to avoid large concentrations of poor children. "I believe in choice as much as anyone," Mr. McNeal said. "However, I can't let choice erode our ability to provide quality programs and quality teaching."

The board of education had two motives when it decided to make economic integration a main element in the district's strategy: board members feared that the county's three-decade effort to integrate public schools racially would be found unconstitutional if challenged in the federal courts, and they took note of numerous studies that showed the academic benefits of economically diversifying schools.

"There is a lot of evidence that it's just sound educational policy, sound public policy, to try to avoid concentrations of low-achieving students," said John H. Gilbert, a professor emeritus at North Carolina State University in Raleigh who served for 16 years on the county school board and voted for the plan. "They do much better and advantaged students are not hurt by it if you follow policies that avoid concentrating low-achievement students."

One sign of the success of the Wake County plan, Mr. Gilbert said, is that residential property values in Raleigh have remained high, as have those in the suburbs. "The economy is really saying something about the effort in the city," he said.

About 27 percent of the county's students are low-income, a proportion that has increased slightly in recent years. While many are black and Hispanic, about 15 percent are white. Moreover, more than 40 percent of the district's black students are working- and middle-class, and not poor.

Wake County has used many strategies to limit the proportion of low-income students in schools to 40 percent. For example, magnet schools lure many suburban parents to the city.

Betty Trevino lives in Fuquay-Varina, a town in southern Wake County. Ms. Trevino drives her son, Eric, 5, to and from the Joyner Elementary School, where he goes to kindergarten. Students are taught in English and Spanish, and global themes are emphasized at the school, which is north of downtown Raleigh, more than 20 miles from the Trevinos' home. With traffic, the trip takes 45 minutes each way.

"I think it works," she said of her drive halfway across the county, "because it's such a good school."

Many low-income children are bused to suburban schools. While some of their parents are unhappy with the length of the rides, some also said they were happy with their child's school.

"I think it's ridiculous," LaToya Mangum said of the 55 minutes that her son Gabriel, 7, spends riding a bus to the northern reaches of Wake County, where he is in second grade. On the other hand, she said, "So far, I do like the school."

The neighborhood school has been redefined, with complex logistics and attendance maps that can resemble madly gerrymandered Congressional districts.

The Swift Creek Elementary School, in southwest Raleigh near the city line, draws most of its students from within two miles of the school, in both the city and suburbs. But students also come to Swift Creek from four widely scattered areas in low-income sections of south and southeastern Raleigh; some live 6 to 8 miles from the school, while others are as far as 12 miles away.

Ela Browder lives in Cary, an affluent, sprawling suburb, but each morning she puts her 6-year-old son, Michael, on a bus for a short ride across the city line to Swift Creek.

"We're very happy with the school," Ms. Browder said. "The children are very enriched by it. I think it's the best of both worlds."

Of the county's 139 elementary, middle and high schools, all but 22 are within the 40 percent guideline, according to the district's data. Some are only a few percentage points above the guideline, while others are significantly higher.

The overwhelming majority of the 120,000 children in the district go either to a local school or a school of their choice, officials said. Slightly more than 85 percent of students attend a school within five miles of home and another 12 percent or so voluntarily attend magnet or year-round schools.

Although the figures can be calculated many ways, Mr. McNeal says about 2.5 percent - or about 3,000 children - are assigned to schools for economic balance or to accommodate the district's growth by filling new schools or easing overcrowding in existing ones. Most of those bused for economic diversity tend to be low-income, he said.

A school board election will take place in October. While the board has continued to endorse economic integration, some supporters worry that that could change one day.

"It's not easy and it can be very contentious in the community," said Walter C. Sherlin, who retired two years ago as an associate superintendent. "Is it worth doing? Look at 91 percent at or above grade level. Look at 139 schools, all of them successful. I think the answer is obvious."

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