

Strengthening the Newark-Wilmington Partnership

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by John Mackenzie, Christina School District Board of Education

The Christina School District is at a critical junction right now. Created pursuant to a 1978 federal court desegregation order, it combined two non-contiguous areas ten miles apart--a predominantly black section of Wilmington matched with an overwhelmingly white population three times the size in Newark. Over the last 25 years Christina's Newark area has grown and diversified a great deal. Christina's Newark area now has more black residents than its Wilmington area, and six times the total population.

Christina's current grade configurations and busing patterns reflect the past more than the present. The desegregation order was lifted years ago, and Delaware now has a neighborhood schools law, but Christina has just muddled along until now. We still bus our Wilmington second, third and fourth graders (those not diverted to Wilmington's many charter, parochial or private schools) to distant elementary schools in Newark. We still bus our Newark fifth and sixth graders (those not diverted to charter, parochial or private schools) to distant schools in Wilmington. And we still bus our Wilmington middle and high school students to Newark.

The Newark area is still growing rapidly, but more people than ever are voting against Christina with their feet. Christina is Delaware's biggest school district, but our total enrollment has gradually declined to 19,400 students because one third of the school-age population living within the district boundaries now attends non-CSD schools. That is one of the highest rates of non-public school enrollment in the country.

The good news is that we have a new, high-energy superintendent, Dr. Joseph Wise, who is determined to make Christina a truly great school system. There are two paths to choose from.

Looking down one path, Dr. Wise, the Christina School Board and the district's Task Force on Grade Configurations are in the process of crafting reform proposals that would build new synergies between Newark and Wilmington. The Task Force is holding public meeting and soliciting public input from all parts of the Christina community on eight proposals. The *News-Journal* has been reporting on reactions to these proposals without ever telling its readership what the eight proposals are! In brief, they are:

1. Move Christina's central administration to the Drew-Pyle building in Wilmington. Displaced Drew-Pyle students would get preferential choice to other schools. Move the NetWorks programs to the current administration building.
2. Create a new state-of-the-art high school in Wilmington. Achieve Advanced Placement certification for all high schools, and establish top-quality school-within-a-school programs at each high school, such as an Institute for Visual and Performing Arts at Newark High, a Culinary and Hospitality Institute at Christiana, an International Baccalaureate Program at Glasgow, and a Math and Science Institute at the new high school in Wilmington.
3. Add 5th grades at Newark elementary schools, starting with 60 seats at each of seven elementary schools this fall. Add 1st, 2nd and/or 3rd grades at five Wilmington elementary schools. Add 6th grades at the three middle schools.

4. Standard grade configurations would be pre-K-5, 6-8 and 9-12, with alternatives pre-K/K or pre-K-8 at some sites. Children would ordinarily have no more than two school transitions in 13 years of schooling.
5. Establish a comprehensive school choice plan to replace the current fixed feeder patterns.
6. Extend bilingual services to Brader Elementary School.
7. Create new programs for 3- and 4-year-old children at three elementary schools.
8. Alter district boundaries so that Christina assumes responsibility for the Wilmington children currently in the Colonial School District—approximately 500 kids—plus the Martin Luther King school, which would house a state-of-the-art pre-K program.

If you want to see more details or provide comments on-line, check out the district's website at www.christina.k12.de.us/taskforce/. We want your input! These proposals are still taking shape, and it is important that the entire Christina (and Colonial!) community weigh in on them.

Moving the district's administrative offices to Wilmington would symbolize a new commitment to the Newark-Wilmington partnership. None of the other (contiguous) school districts are currently administered from Wilmington. A new high school near the riverfront would provide another engine for the economic revitalization of the area. It could even spark development of light-rail services between Newark and Wilmington that could cut commute times dramatically and get our school buses out of the I-95 traffic! Shifting the district boundary to include Colonial's Wilmington kids in Christina makes sense because if we are going to make major school investments in Wilmington, we need to maintain the critical mass of students in Wilmington to justify these investments. The proposed boundary change is not a slight against the Colonial School District.

There's another path, the path of least resistance, where we just keep muddling along. Simply by virtue of the demographics, we will become just another mediocre suburban school district with a forgotten little island of poverty ten miles away. Wilmington has only one of seven Christina school board seats, and in the next reapportionment of nominating districts it may not be guaranteed any seat. If Christina loses its urban/suburban identity, Dr. Wise, being an urban schools specialist, will leave. This would be Wilmington's loss more than Newark's. This isn't 1978, and Newark doesn't need Wilmington for diversity any more. Under the punitive consequences of the federal No Child Left Behind law, failing schools in Wilmington could end up being cut loose from the district and left to flounder on their own. The choice options the law promises to students in failing schools won't mean anything if there aren't any decent schools to choose into.

As a member of the Christina School Board (although I am speaking strictly for myself here—not the Board or the district!), I am excited to see a promising reform package taking shape. None of this is a done deal. Big changes are scary, there are a lot of interrelated issues--political, logistical, contractual and financial—that need to be addressed. A lot of people will object to one particular or another, and there is a risk that this reform effort will suffer death by a thousand cuts. I don't want this to happen. We need to take some chances and step away from the entrenched positions we have held for years. Instead of wallowing in our past failures and wasting resources on uncoordinated, piecemeal fixes, we need to muster the courage for a bold restructuring of the whole district. Public education is the highest-return social investment our society can make. Our kids—*all* our kids!--deserve better schools.