

**Seven Things That I Believe Are True About the Assignment of Students to Schools:
Based upon my experience as a teacher, a principal, a program evaluator, and as Assistant
Superintendent for Growth and Planning in Wake County Public School System**

Chuck Dulaney

1. The distance that students travel to schools has no direct relationship to student achievement.
 - a. It is misleading when Board of Education members cite the frustratingly low graduation rate for minority students as a reason for concentrating more minority students in so-called “neighborhood” schools. There is no evidence that students have higher achievement when they reside closer to a school or spend less time on a school bus.
 - b. Most of the low-performing urban schools around our state and our country utilize “neighborhood” assignment. If proximity to school was a major determinant of success, than millions of students in economically isolated and largely segregated urban schools would be graduating and going on to college rather than dropping out.

2. While student assignment can’t create better student achievement, it can be a very important enabler of better student achievement.
 - a. For a variety of reasons including teacher expectations, peer influences, and parent and community support, classrooms with diverse student populations have been shown to achieve higher overall student growth. Assigning a mix of students to a school keeps expectations high and challenges all students.
 - b. Students who attend schools with diverse student populations are better prepared for our increasingly diverse society.
 - c. Research that goes beyond simple comparisons of average test scores and looks at the “growth” that students achieve from the start of a school year to the end of a school year has shown that the greatest growth is achieved in schools that have diverse student populations.

3. When schools have high percentages of students who have special needs or come from home environments that are not supportive of education, those schools face a variety of challenges that undermine efforts to improve student achievement. Those challenges include a higher percentage of inexperienced teachers, greater turnover in their teaching and administrative staff, greater turnover in their student population, and fewer teachers who have achieved national board certification.
 - a. Efforts around the country to provide the best teachers to the neediest students have largely failed. Surveys have shown that most teachers value the quality of their working environment more than salary bonuses. The most experienced and skilled teachers tend to migrate to schools with the most satisfying working environments—schools with high percentages of middle-class families that support the efforts of the teachers.

- b. While there are examples of successful urban schools that serve student populations with high percentages of the students coming from low-income, minority, and non-English speaking homes, those examples are the exceptions and not the rule and there is no place that has shown systematic sustainable success.
4. When schools are located near one another but have very different student populations, the school that serves more middle-class families, that has a more active PTA and a more stable faculty, will be seen as the “better” school. Concerned parents will seek out assignment to the “better” school for their children and seek to avoid assignment to the “worse” school.
 - a. The decision about which school is a “better” school will often be made by over-simplified summaries of student achievement such as which school has more students scoring on grade level or which school has a higher average score on tests such as the SAT.
 - b. These school comparisons and judgments usually ignore factors that play a major role in student test performance such as parental involvement in homework, pre-school preparation of students, home exposure to broad vocabulary development, diet, health, and other things related to the socio-economic status of the family. As more middle-class families try to attend only the “better” schools, the differences between schools are exacerbated and it will become even more difficult for more challenged schools to be acceptable to parents who reside within the areas assigned to those schools.
5. While many urban school systems cannot create a strong middle-class core for every school because the middle class has fled the urban system, Wake County has the ability to assign a strong middle-class population to every school because of the population demographics of our county.
 - a. The percentage of families that apply for assistance through the federal lunch program is lower than many other large school districts.
 - b. While not all of the 12 municipalities in Wake County have worked to provide affordable housing for low-income families, pockets of affordable housing can be found in many areas across the county.
6. The two keys to maintaining a strong middle-class core in every school in Wake County are the mandatory assignment of some low-income neighborhoods away from their closest school and into suburban schools, and the replacement of those students with the voluntary movement of middle-class families to magnet schools which provide special themes and opportunities that are attractive that would otherwise attend closer suburban schools.
 - a. If we did not operate magnet schools, we would have about 20 schools that would be largely racially segregated and overwhelmingly populated with students from low-income families. These schools would primarily be in Southeast Raleigh and along the Capital Boulevard corridor in Northeast Raleigh.

7. If the “core” of the school district is composed of schools that only serve minority and low-income families, social forces will accelerate the migration of middle-class families toward newer suburbs. The aging of residents in older established neighborhoods and the construction of apartments and rental housing in transportation corridors will expand the number of schools with high minority and low-income populations

Because I believe these seven statements to be true, I think it is a terrible mistake for the Board of Education to remove the consideration of diversity from student assignment decisions. If the Board does not consider diversity when making assignments of students to schools, parents will still consider diversity as they make their decisions about where to live and the kind of educational options they want to pursue for their children. I believe it will lead to an increase in the number of schools that are overwhelmed by the social challenges I mentioned earlier and lead to a decrease in student achievement across the district with the most negative impacts falling upon the children of low-income and minority families.