

1 Leadership in Context

We know that educational leaders come in many shapes and sizes and that leadership takes many forms. We also know that different styles of leadership are more suitable at different times or in different situations. While the interaction between an individual's personal style and the context in which the leadership plays out may vary, it is our premise that there are some essential characteristics of leadership that apply to any individual or situation. Two such characteristics that we believe apply to leaders in public education are the individual's value system and the individual's use of business practices. To best appreciate our story of the Wake County Public School System, the values we believe educational leaders should manifest, and the utility of business practices in public education, it is helpful to have an understanding of the thirty-year historical context of the Wake County Public School System.¹

Located in Wake County, North Carolina, with Raleigh, the state capital, its major municipality, the Wake County Public School System was created in 1976 from a merger of the Raleigh City Schools and the Wake County Schools.² At that time, Raleigh City Schools was 38 percent minority and the Wake County Schools was 23 percent minority. The Raleigh City Schools was threatened with loss of federal funds due to a finding by the U.S. Office of Civil Rights (OCR) that the Raleigh City Schools had violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1963.

Following merger, the merged school district was required to submit a plan to OCR to remedy the Title VI violations found by OCR. The board of education of this newly formed, countywide school district made a

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commitment to provide for a desegregated education for all students. The district resolved to establish and maintain a racial balance of 15–45 percent minority enrollment in each school. This ratio reflected a 15 percent variance from what was at that time the average of 30 percent minority population across all schools.

The plan accomplished desegregation of the Wake County Public School System by redrawing boundaries of the schools, taking into account a number of factors, including the racial composition of the communities, where schools were located, and transportation patterns. As a result of the successful implementation of the desegregation plan, the county was able to resolve the student assignment issues with OCR, and in 1979, the district was declared a unitary school district by the United States District Court.

During the period of the merger, the business community was a strong advocate in favor of merger. While OCR may have provided the impetus for merger, once the notion was entertained, the business community appreciated the economics of merger, including stemming white flight from the inner city schools, keeping all schools fully enrolled, and providing an equitable and quality education for all students. Now, with the perspective of thirty years' history, it is apparent how important this courageous decision to merge has been to Wake County's thriving economy. Throughout the thirty-year history, there have been many decisions of similar import that have contributed to sustaining and enhancing this vitality.

In 1982, the district's mandatory student assignment plan was supplemented by a voluntary "Schools of Choice" magnet school plan. Prior to 1982, the school district had established a couple of magnet schools, but this number was dramatically increased in the Schools of Choice plan. In the 1982–83 school year, the Schools of Choice plan designated twenty-eight of the district's schools magnet schools, with these elementary, middle, and high schools implementing a variety of magnet themes. Each magnet school was assigned a base neighborhood population and also recruited students from other areas of the county. Students not in the base population applied to enroll at a magnet school and a lottery was used to select students; at that time, race of the student was one consideration used in the lottery selection process.

With enrollment growing year after year, in the 1987–88 year, the chairperson of the county commissioners and the county manager suggested to school district leaders that they investigate year-round schooling with the notion being that a multitrack, year-round school could enroll more students than one operating on a traditional calendar. Following a couple years of study, a year-round school was opened as a newly built

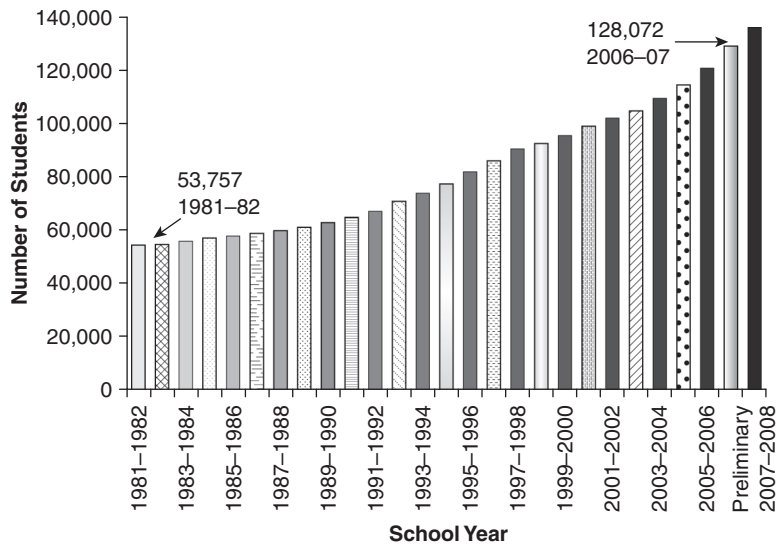
school in the 1989–90 school year—the first in North Carolina and first magnet year-round in the nation. In subsequent years, more year-round schools have been established, typically schools that are newly built and opened as year-rounds. However, with enrollment growth continuing and school seats becoming increasingly difficult to find, the building of new schools was unable to keep up with the growth; the school board then voted to convert twenty-two existing elementary and middle schools to a multitrack year-round calendar starting with the 2007–08 year. Following these conversions, in 2007–08, the school district operated forty-six year-round schools (thirty-eight elementary schools with Grades K–5, and eight middle schools with Grades 6–8). At the time this book went to press, there was a court ruling that parents must give their consent for children to attend a year-round school.³

As previously indicated, the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) had used race of the student as one of the factors considered in student assignment. However, by 1999, there were concerns among school district leaders that the use of race in this manner was being interpreted as illegal by the federal courts. WCPSS had never been under a court-ordered desegregation plan; however, leery of how the courts were now viewing race-based assignment plans, WCPSS school board members voted to remove race as a factor in the district's magnet schools' lottery. In subsequent discussions, the school board developed and implemented in the 1999–2000 year a student assignment plan they believed to be more instructionally sound, based on the variables of family income and student achievement. Under this plan, the school board sought to maintain diversity across all its schools with targets of no school having more than 40 percent of its students receiving free or reduced-price lunch or more than 25 percent performing below grade level. For a more detailed discussion of the school district's efforts to maintain diverse and healthy schools, an article by Todd Silberman, a reporter with the *News and Observer*, is suggested reading.⁴

For most of the school district's history, there has been ceaseless growth in student enrollment. For example, in 1981–82, the year prior to the Schools of Choice plan, the student enrollment in the district was 52,000. Now, in the 2007–08 school year, the student enrollment is more than 134,000. There are administrators and teachers who have taught in the school district this entire time and have seen it grow from a relatively bucolic school district to one that is now the nineteenth largest in the nation. And, the district's growth continues without letup in the twenty-first century. In the next three years, it is projected that the district will open another fifteen schools. Since the merger, every WCPSS superintendent has had to contend with growth as indicated in Figure 1.1.

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Figure 1.1 WCPSS Enrollment Growth⁵



Unquestionably, this growth has impacted administrative and instructional processes in the district, and we believe a case can be made that the growth has made us stronger. Just to keep up with growth, we have had to become better at what we do—how we build buildings, how we instruct students, and how we develop leaders. We have had to become better at the business of education.

While many school districts in the nation will not be facing issues associated with growth, the business principles and practices that we describe in this book remain relevant for all leaders. Even in static situations or school districts experiencing declining enrollment, there is no substitute for challenging all school leaders to be the best at what they do, and this includes the superintendent.

Having the advantage of working in the school district since 1974, Bill has worked for all of the previous five superintendents and he has had the opportunity to see the office of the superintendency from a relatively close perspective. Until his retirement June 30, 2006, Bill was a Wake County school district employee for every day of the school district's existence. From Bill's perspective, each of his predecessors made significant contributions to the school district's success.

Following a national search conducted by the school board of the newly merged school district, the era of Dr. John Murphy's tenure (1976-1981) as the first superintendent of the school district was marked chiefly with an

emphasis on implementing the unified administration of the school district. The transition from two school districts—one chiefly urban and one chiefly rural—to a single district was not without bumps and bruises and heartaches, but it was accomplished with relative efficiency. By 1980, new employees being hired into the unified district saw few if any vestiges of the old city and county school districts.

Again conducting a national search, the board of education next hired Dr. Walter Marks (1981–1984), whose leadership was instrumental in implementing the district's Schools of Choice plan establishing magnet schools to promote diversity in school enrollment. With many downtown schools under-enrolled, in disrepair, and in jeopardy of closure, the district was able to reinvent these schools as magnets, renovate them, and fill them to capacity. Since implementing the Schools of Choice plan, no downtown school has been closed and the district has conducted many school renovations to maintain the adequacy of facilities at all schools. Although the magnet program became a bright star for the school system, there were questions that developed over whether the cost of the magnet program was being correctly reported, and Dr. Marks resigned in 1984.

Subsequently, Dr. Robert Bridges was hired to be the district's third superintendent (1984–1988). Dr. Bridges was an internal candidate for the position and had worked his whole career in Wake County. Before being hired as superintendent, Bridges had been the deputy superintendent for the school district. Following the controversy over the magnet schools program on the heels of Dr. Marks's resignation, Dr. Bridges was seen as a steady hand and calming influence. Dr. Bridges worked to raise the productivity level of all employees through business practices, including empowering employees to take more ownership and to be more accountable to the community.

Following the leadership of Murphy, Marks, and Bridges, the school district was now well established with its feet solidly on the ground. We knew who we were, what we valued, and where we wanted to go. Dr. Bridges then retired and the district again conducted a national search for a superintendent, hiring Dr. Robert Wentz in July 1989. While the district had been growing in enrollment for the entire decade, this growth was beginning to accelerate and the board's search had led them to Dr. Wentz, who came from Clark County, Nevada, where the school district had been experiencing significant growth. Wentz's tenure (1989–1993) with WCPSS was marked with efforts to manage this growth, for instance, through the expansion of year-round schools along with the continuing development of magnet schools.

It is interesting to point out that this period of time, the 1990s, is when information technologies and the Internet first began to make significant

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inroads into the public's consciousness. In a short time, school districts everywhere would be challenged to keep abreast of the latest developments, chief of which is communicating with stakeholders—staff, students, parents, and the broader community. From this point forward, superintendents and school leaders in general would realize how necessary it is to become better at the business of communication—to get the school district's message out before the public by all means possible—if only to stay ahead of everyone else who will be talking about you on the Internet!

Upon Dr. Wentz's departure, Bill McNeal briefly served as an interim superintendent for the school district from December 1995 to June 1996, after which Dr. Jim Surratt, formally superintendent of Plano, Texas, was hired following a national search. The board recruited Dr. Surratt because of his record of creativity, forward-thinking nature, and focus on technology. During Dr. Surratt's tenure, the school district formulated a districtwide technology plan that standardized computer use across the district, another standard of business practice. Interestingly, during Surratt's tenure, the one bond issue to not be supported by the public was said to have failed in part due to the amount of money that was in the bond request for new technology. Dr. Surratt resigned soon thereafter and Bill McNeal was named the school district's sixth superintendent beginning July 2000; he retired in June 2006.

As authors of this book, we leave the legacy of our tenure for others to judge; however, we both agree that whatever we were able to accomplish was because of the leadership and accomplishments of our predecessors, superintendents and board members, and that of all the WCPSS employees, administrators, faculty, staff, parents, and wonderful students.

We will close this history with a recent quote from North Carolina State Senator Vernon Malone who was Chairperson of the Wake County Board of Education at the time of the merger in 1976:

Merging the Raleigh and Wake County school systems was not an easy thing to do, but it was the right thing to do. We worked to create a school system that would serve as a foundation for a proud unified community, and we succeeded. The community should be extremely proud that we were able to integrate and merge the school system in an uncomfortable climate and we never lost a single day of school because of violence. Many have devoted their careers and their lives to helping this system succeed. Much has been accomplished and there is more yet to do. My hope is that the efforts of the past will light the path for those who are building the next 30 years of Wake County Public School System's legacy now and into the future.⁶

This is our hope as well.

NOTES

1. Much of history is storytelling from the perspective of those who have lived the history. At the Wake County Public School System's Web site, there is a collection of these stories and other information that provide insights into the personalities and events since 1976; please visit <http://www.wcpss.net/history/index.html>.
2. The story of this merger and the courage required of school officials, elected officials, businesses, and community leaders to see the merger through is told in *A Community United: Celebrating 30 Years of Courageous Leadership*, published by the Wake Education Partnership, Raleigh, NC, and retrieved October 27, 2007, from <http://wakeedpartnership.org/publications/d/WCPSS-30th.pdf>.
3. At the time of publication, the school district is appealing the court ruling, and Judge Howard Manning's ruling on this issue can be found at http://ads.news14charlotte.com/Wake_Schools_Ruling.pdf, retrieved October 27, 2007.
4. Silberman, T. (n.d.). *Wake County Schools: A question of balance*. Retrieved October 27, 2007, from <http://www.tcf.org/Publications/Education/silberman.pdf>.
5. Wake County Public School System. (2007). *Demographics*. Retrieved October 20, 2007, from www.wcpss.net/demographics/.
6. Wake Education Partnership. (2006). *A Community United: Celebrating 30 Years of Courageous Leadership*. Raleigh, NC: Author. Retrieved October 27, 2007, from www.wakeedpartnership.org/publications/d/WCPSS-30th.pdf.