Once a leader in school diversity, NC retrenches

By MIKE BAKER, Associated Press Writer
Tue Mar 2, 8:47 pm ET

RALEIGH, N.C. – When North Carolina's Wake County decided to do away with race-based busing to desegregate schools, local officials came up with a novel solution to maintain balance.

The new method of assigning students by their socio-economic background rather than race helped to keep campuses integrated. Adopted in 2000, it quickly became a blueprint for other school systems.

That policy, however, has never sat well with many suburban parents — often white and middle class — who argue that the student assignment plan sends their kids too far from home. And a new school board, swept into office by those vocal parents, took the first step toward scrapping the plan Tuesday night.

The board that governs schools in Raleigh voted 5-to-4 to stop busing students to schools outside their neighborhoods. The change requires final approval at a meeting later this month.

Dozens of parents and students lined up to speak as discussion began late in the afternoon. Curtis Gatewood, a black man, urged the board not to dump the diversity plan and decried "white racists." His comments were interrupted by jeers.

"If you want to go to hell, don't expect to take our children with you," he said to the board as authorities approached to calm him down.

The issue has revived the term "segregation" and the brought the weight of history into recent school board meetings. Some parents and students around the state capital have implored the newly elected leaders to back away from their plan to drastically alter the diversity policy.

"Please preserve the New South. Don't take us back to the Old South," parent Robert Siegel told the school board.

Reversing the diversity rules would follow a cascade of similar shifts around the South, and particularly in North Carolina, which once was a model of desegregation. Now the state is increasingly starting to mirror an era many thought had past: On one side of the state, in the coastal town of Wilmington, an elementary school of several hundred students has just one who is black. On the other, in the banking hub of Charlotte, a primary school of similar size has just one student who is white.

In the military town of Goldsboro, starkly divided schools have led civil rights leaders to accuse local school officials of creating "an apartheid district."

Ron Margiotta, the new board chairman in Wake County, vowed that the change there was in the interest...
of students because it would allow parents more options and refocus families on the schools in their neighborhood. He bristled at any suggestion that the move had something to do with race.

"It's something that offends me," Margiotta said in an interview before the vote. "Nobody's going to go back to Jim Crow days."

The diversity policy in Wake County became a popular model in 2007, when the Supreme Court limited the use of race in how districts assign students. Its current policy sends students to schools to achieve socioeconomic diversity, which also improved racial diversity by frequently sending lower income black children from the city's center to predominantly white schools in the suburbs. Some schools also created magnet programs to attract students from other neighborhoods with advanced courses in foreign language, science and other topics.

Margiotta said the busing program has not helped minority students and has distracted from focusing on stronger education policy.

"What we're doing isn't working," Margiotta said.

But Ebere Collins, a black mother of two students in the district, said her son travels one hour by bus to get from his home in Raleigh to a middle school in the suburb of Wake Forest. While the trip is long, she feels it helps her son mingle with people outside of the neighborhood and ensures that all students have access to the same resources.

"Mix them up, let them experience each other," she said. "By scattering them around, they will enjoy the benefits other people are enjoying."

Gary Orfield, a UCLA professor who studies busing and civil rights, said the entire South has been resegregating for the past 20 years — which he deemed "a gigantic historic tragedy." He praised Wake County's current policy and warned that a renewed focus on neighborhood school assignment will be most damaging to children who come from poor or uneducated families because those students benefit most from integration.

"What it does when you go to 'neighborhood' schools is it means that you put the kids who are most affected by school opportunity in the schools with the weakest opportunity," Orfield said. "That's a tragedy."

If the diversity policy is pulled back, Orfield said, Raleigh can expect to see some of the same impoverished, troubled schools as Detroit, Philadelphia, New York and Chicago.

In Charlotte, the site of a groundbreaking Supreme Court case that led to three decades of busing to ensure racial balance, schools have spent much of the past several years resegregating after getting federal court approval to allow parents more choice of where to send their kids.

At Beverly Woods Elementary, just north of the Quail Hollow Country Club that hosts a namesake PGA Tour event, 79 percent of the students are white. A few miles up the road, at Montclaire Elementary, only 4 percent of the students — just 19 out of 450 — are white.
There are no plans in Charlotte to revisit busing. Pamela Grundy, a parent in Charlotte who has decried the divisions within the school district, said leaders in Raleigh should take notice.

"The lesson of Charlotte is that desegregation will go away so quickly. Once you lose it, you can't get it back," she said.
Leading Change  
Why Transformation Efforts Fail

Further Reading

ARTICLES
Building Your Company’s Vision
by James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras  
Harvard Business Review  
September–October 1996  
Product no. 410X

Collins and Porras describe the glue that holds a change effort together. Great companies have a clear sense of why they exist—their core ideology—and where they want to go—their envisioned future. The mechanism for getting there is a BHAG (Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal), which typically takes 10 to 30 years to accomplish. The company’s business, strategies, and even its culture may change, but its core ideology remains unchanged. At every step in this long process, the leader’s key task is to create alignment with the vision of the company’s future, so that regardless of the twists and turns in the journey, the organizational commitment to the goal remains strong.

Successful Change Programs Begin with Results
by Robert H. Schaffer and Harvey A. Thomason  
Harvard Business Review  
January–February 1992  
Product no. 92108

Although a change initiative is a process that doesn’t mean process issues should be the primary concern. Most corporate change programs have a negligible impact on operational and financial performance because management focuses on the activities, not the results. By contrast, results-driven improvement programs seek to achieve specific, measurable improvements within a few months.

BOOKS
The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations
by John P. Kotter and Dan S. Cohen  
Harvard Business School Press  
2002  
Product no. 2549

This book is organized around Kotter’s eight-stage change process, and reveals the results of his research in over 100 organizations in the midst of large-scale change. Although most organizations believe that change happens by making people think differently, the authors say that the key lies more in making them feel differently. They introduce a new dynamic—“see–feel–change”—that sparks and fuels action by showing people potent reasons for change that charge their emotions. The book offers tips and tools to you apply to your own organization.

Leading Change
by John P. Kotter  
Harvard Business School Press  
1996  
Product no. 7471

This book expands upon the article about why transformation efforts fail. Kotter addresses each of eight major stages of a change initiative in sequence, highlighting the key activities in each, and providing object lessons about where companies often go astray.