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Quality Matters 2005

A Wake Community Review of the Public's Schools

The 2004-05 Quality Matters Committee

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This executive summary of *Quality Matters 2005* highlights the results of a year-long study of issues related to the financial and academic performance of Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) conducted by the Quality Matters Committee. This committee of local business and civic leaders identified key areas to review and then collected information to assist in understanding the facts and implications of the issues the school system is confronting.

The full report, *Quality Matters 2005*, can be accessed at www.WakeEdPartnership.org

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Quality Matters 2005—A Wake Community Review of the Public’s Schools

Our community is growing, and, as is typical in any high-growth urban area, our public infrastructure is struggling to keep up. From roads to schools, the needs of our county are obvious; the revenues to pay for these needs are harder to find. Growth brings both opportunities and challenges, and our community is facing decisions that will affect our lives for years to come.

As we look to our neighbors across the state and the country, we are fortunate to have the well-run school system we have in Wake County. We continue to receive statewide and national recognition for our achievements, while other systems struggle to emulate our success. But we cannot let our success prevent us from continuing to move forward. And we cannot let the distraction of our growth cause us to lose ground.

First, what is working? Fortunately, there is a long list of achievements. Here are just a few:

- In five short years we moved the percent of students in grades 3 through 8 who were at or above grade level from 81.9 percent in 1998 to 91.3 percent in 2003.
- Last year WCPSS had 61 Schools of Excellence—the most of any system in the state.
- From 1998 to 2005 we added 28,600 students to our rosters, and we were named the third best urban school system in the country.
- Despite an ongoing national shortage of teachers, we continue to fill our classrooms with high quality teachers, including over 800 National Board Certified Teachers, *the second highest number of any district in the country.*
- WCPSS developed a long-term capital spending plan, Vision 2020, and a three-year budget—a first for our community—titled The Board of Education’s Plan for Student Success.

While it is important to celebrate our success, we must also recognize the challenges we still face. These challenges include:

- The achievement of Goal 2008 is in question. The percent of students in grades 3 through 8 at or above grade level has dipped for the past two years and now stands at 90.84; our grade 9–12 students have hit a plateau with 83.2 percent at or above grade level on End-of-Course tests.
- Nearly 20 schools did not meet their expected growth targets on state End-of-Grade tests in 2004–05.
- For three years running our actual student enrollment has significantly exceeded projections, and it is estimated we will need to build well over 80 new schools by 2020.
- The annual turnover rate for teachers has grown from 9.2 percent in 2001 to 11.3 percent in 2004. A conservative estimate for the cost of this teacher turnover in Wake County in 2004 is \$9,172,800.
- Current conditions indicate that our teacher turnover rate is likely to continue rising due to the high percentage of teachers and administrators who are eligible to retire and the large percentage of teachers with fewer than five years of experience in our system—the population that historically has a greater than 50 percent turnover rate.
- For the 2005–06 school year WCPSS hired approximately 1,000 teachers, with 300 of those positions due to growth. The school system had to go to greater distances to fill these positions with qualified candidates, and, as a result, more than 50 percent of those teachers are from out of state.
- Recommendations for reducing teacher turnover were made in the Wake Task Force on Teaching Excellence, but funding for most of these recommendations has not been obtained.
- \$17.5 million of the budget request to implement the Plan for Student Success was not funded.
- In 2004 the school system uncovered fraud involving nearly \$2 million worth of funds that had been stolen through a conspiracy among several employees of the school system and an outside contractor.

As a community with a history of a shared vision for excellence in our public schools, how do we overcome these challenges and turn barriers into opportunities? *Quality Matters 2005* (QM2005) delves into the above issues, provides useful information, dispels myths, and suggests solutions for how we can continue to raise the bar for excellence in our public schools. It is our hope that with this information our community will mobilize to provide the needed support for ensuring a quality education for all students.

Running a fast-growing school system for our community is a huge and complicated challenge. The Quality Matters Committee found that with every answer uncovered, a new question was revealed, and these issues are being considered for further research in the coming year.

The following recommendations are presented based on the authority and responsibilities assigned to the two governing bodies, the Wake County Board of Education and the Wake Board of County Commissioners. (Information on the roles and responsibilities of each of these boards is provided in the full QM 2005 report.)

For the WCPSS and the Board of Education, we ask that they:

- Implement the recommendations of the Wake Task Force on Teaching Excellence
- Provide concrete and clear information about the action steps we must take to achieve Goal 2008
- Improve their communication of financial results and budget needs
- Continue to keep all stakeholders informed of audit findings related to the financial status of our schools
- Work with all community stakeholders to formulate and execute a long-range capital building plan that provides quality facilities for all students and includes alternative approaches to building and funding new schools

For Wake County and the Board of County Commissioners, we ask that they:

- Improve their methodology for projecting student populations
- Give the financial support that is necessary to ensure that we have excellent teachers in all of our classrooms
- Fund the budget requests from WCPSS when they are backed by sound data and clearly linked to achieving community goals
- Work with WCPSS publicly, as well as behind the scenes, to present a cohesive message to the community pertaining to steps needed to build schools that will accommodate the growth of our student population

For our community, we ask that individuals and organizations take the time to understand the facts about our schools and the challenges they face, then based on those facts, advocate for policies that will result in progress for our schools by investing in the long-term health of our community.

As our conversations continue about the issues the committee explored, we must also look beyond our current goals. As we strive to provide all students—from our most struggling to our most high achieving—with a world-class education, we must work as a community to ensure that every student in Wake County is prepared to compete in the global economy. This vision for success for all students must be shared by the members of our community and supported in both word and action. And the time for action is now.

The Quality Matters Committee
