

A Community United:
*Celebrating 30 Years
of Courageous Leadership*



Wake
Education
PARTNERSHIP

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.

- *Vernon Malone*
1976 Board of Education Chair
Member, Wake County Board of Commissioners



Wake
Education
PARTNERSHIP

www.WakeEdPartnership.org

As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of courageous leadership, bold vision and excellence in public education in Wake County, we must acknowledge both the controversy and the innovations of 1976. In that year, the Raleigh City Schools and the Wake County Schools merged to form a system that would eventually be a national leader in academic achievement and play in a key role in the area's phenomenal growth.

Formed in the years just after court-ordered integration, the merger was not without foes and would take the political courage of a host of elected officials as well as business and community leaders. Today we are privileged to live in a vibrant community known for the high quality of its public school system—the outstanding legacy of local and state leaders who worked against opposition and prejudice to create a school system that would serve all children equally well.

During the late 60s and early 70s, the battle lines of this struggle were quite literally drawn in black and white. The Wake County system, which sprawled over a wide area surrounding the city of Raleigh at its center, was overwhelmingly white except for a few sparsely-scattered all-black schools. But as a largely rural system, Wake County never had the resources to keep pace with the Raleigh system and, as a result, suffered from inferior facilities and programming. Meanwhile, Raleigh had seen an exodus of whites from the older, more urban sections of the city, causing the Raleigh City Schools to become predominantly African-American.

In 1969, following the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* to use “all known ways of desegregating, including busing,” school leaders in Raleigh began developing a plan to integrate the city schools. Throughout the summer of 1971, an intense debate over school integration waged through backyard conversations and public hearings, newspaper articles and editorials. On the morning of Aug. 30, 1971, nearly 12,000 Raleigh City School students

boarded school buses, ending what *The News & Observer* called a “desegregation venture that began before many of them were born.”

Although the integration within the Raleigh City Schools passed without incident, it soon became clear that the Raleigh City and Wake County schools could not achieve the racial balance required by law if they continued as separate entities. Yet desegregation efforts caused distress in both the white and black communities; both feared losing a deep and cherished sense of community and identity should their children be assigned to schools beyond their neighborhoods.

Many white residents, especially in rural Wake County, vehemently opposed merger. Some cited losing the identity of their schools and communities as the reason for their opposition; many feared that the county system would be swallowed up into a large urban system whose resources would be dominated by Raleigh. They summarized these fears—and sometimes thinly veiled racism—with the refrain that it was the suburban promise of a “quality education” that had drawn them to the rural parts of the county in the first place.

African-Americans, on the other hand, were skeptical about the motives of the white power structure in working to create a merged system. For example, many black families were concerned about plans for the formerly all-black Ligon High School, which was slated for conversion to an integrated junior high school, fearing it would shatter an important source of local black identity.

Simple economics, along with the reality that change was inevitable, helped drive the process of system merger, bringing powerful allies to the table who provided valuable political support and encouragement, even when many citizens were less than enthusiastic. Elected officials had powerful allies within the Raleigh business community.

Henry Knight, a Raleigh businessman who served on the Wake County Board of Education from 1980 through 1990 and later as Chairman of the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce, recalls that the business community was a driving force behind the merger. Concerned that the trend of a rapidly emptying downtown and a corresponding increase in the suburban population would cause the inner city to collapse, “powerful people like News & Observer owner Frank Daniels put pressure on the school boards of both Raleigh and Wake County to merge.”

The business community’s aspiration for a renewed economic vitality was shared by others who could foresee the practical economic gain that merger would bring to the community. Many involved with the merger effort credit J.T. Knott, a Wake County Commissioner during the road to merger, as a key supporter. Knott was an Apex-area conservative who looked at the Raleigh City district’s under-capacity schools and the Wake County district’s overflowing schools and saw an opportunity to save taxpayers money by combining the systems. His vision was critical in engaging the support of philosophically conservative voters and politicians.

Even as members of the Raleigh City and Wake County school boards agreed with other elected officials that the only practical and rational method of solving their growing list of challenges was merger, such a conclusion was certainly not as evident to the majority of residents. According to many active in education issues at the time, there was disapproval of a merger from a sizable majority of Wake County and Raleigh residents. The pervasive fear that merging the city and county systems would destroy a sense of community was evident when voters rejected a non-binding merger referendum by a resounding 3-1 margin in 1973.

However, the referendum’s discouraging defeat, while certainly a searing indication of just how much opposition the merger faced, was not legally binding. School officials from both districts turned to a clause in North Carolina law allowing merger without a

public vote. If the two school boards and the County Commissioners voted in favor of merger and the State Board of Education approved their plan, legislation could establish the merger into law. So, despite the stinging merger referendum outcome, officials from both school systems, the County Commissioners and the Wake County Legislative Delegation began work on a groundbreaking—if not politically popular—plan to merge the two systems.

Once public, the plan was subject to a firestorm of opposition. Ray Massey, former WCPSS Associate Superintendent of Auxiliary Services, remembers the debate well. As the Wake County system's only facilities staff member in 1974, Massey attended most School Board meetings. "Meetings would go until 1:00, 1:30 or sometimes 2:00 in the morning," Massey said. "Some were so well attended by the public that they couldn't get everyone into the board room [then at a site on Noble Road], so they would set up television monitors in the hallways, and people would stand in the halls and watch the board deliberate on TV. There was a lot of debate and lots of issues. It was a hard time for board members. To merge the systems just two years after the public voted against the referendum took real leadership."

Although officials disregarded the voters' original rejection of merger in their decision to move ahead with their plan, they made sure to listen when citizens voiced their concerns in those school board meetings. Former Wake County North Carolina House of Representatives member Al Adams remembers that one of the main worries of county residents was that Raleigh would dominate any new Board of Education. Under the old system, board members were elected at large, so "the county feared Raleigh would take over the school board and have all the control," said Adams. Responding to these concerns, officials included a clause in the merger law to elect new board members by districts, and set up an interim school board made up of all seven members of the former county system board and all eight members of the former city system board.

After years planning, debate and political maneuvering, the North Carolina General Assembly gave final ratification to the merger bill (House Bill 1199) on June 25, 1975. But the need for courageous leadership was still greater than ever, as officials navigated the newly merged system after the formal creation of the Wake County Public School System on July 1, 1976. At the time of the merger, the Raleigh City schools had approximately 21,000 students and the Wake County schools had around 33,000 students.

The Interim School Board included three members from the school board of each former system to create a six-person search committee in charge of the daunting task of finding a leader for the new system. The committee made clear that they would seek a strong leader who could share the vision they had for the fledgling district, making it a reality in the face of continued opposition. The new superintendent would have to be a person of strong character and bold vision, with the powerful personality to withstand the criticism, conflict, and uncertainty that was sure to mark the new district's first years. Vernon Malone, then Vice-Chairman of the Interim School Board and now a state Senator from Wake County, said during the search that the new leader "could not be like a soft ball of clay that reflects the imprint of every pressure group."

Malone, who took the helm as the chair of the Wake County Board of Education on the first day of the merger, recalls that there was little doubt in his mind that Dr. John Murphy, a career school administrator with no prior connection to North Carolina, was the man to lead the new system. A strong believer that board unity—or at least the public appearance of it—was critical success, Malone set out to make sure his tenure was marked by the cohesiveness needed to convince the community that they were on the right track. He began by launching a campaign to establish Dr. Murphy's credibility with several critical constituencies, starting with the black community, whose initial skepticism over a white northerner's ability to understand and appropriately respond to their needs within the newly desegregated system

faded once Chairman Malone demonstrated a growing trust and confidence in Murphy. Malone's bold strategy served to enhance Dr. Murphy's professional credibility and ultimately win support from black leaders and parents alike.

Of the 28 mergers in North Carolina since 1970, all but two (Wake and Durham) have occurred without a public vote—a particularly striking statistic considering that Wake is the state's capital county. Dr. John Gilbert, who helped developed the school board's district election plan and served on the Wake County Board of Education from 1983 until 2000, observed that the political will necessary to successfully pull together merger was nothing short of a miracle.

Today the Wake County Public School System educates more than 128,000 students in 147 schools and enjoys a national reputation for excellence. Ninety-one percent of elementary and middle school students and 83 percent of high school students perform at or above grade level. The average SAT score for Wake seniors in 2001-2002 was 1576 (out of 2400), higher than the state and national averages. The district regularly receives national accolades, including the #1 public education system in a mid-size metro area as rated by Expansion Management magazine and the #2 best public school system in the country as rated by Forbes Magazine. WCPSS is also recognized nationally for its commitment to student assignment on the basis of economic diversity, a bold and courageous research-based policy that is regarded as a model for other communities.

Wake County Economic Development Director Ken Atkins says the region has enjoyed economic growth and success in recent years because the quality school system is such a strong incentive for businesses looking to relocate or expand. "One of the first things [economic development] recruiters ask us is, how are our public schools," Atkins says. "When we tick off the list of achievements of the Wake County system, we often move ahead of regions that can compete for projects with better financial

incentives. Quality education is a critical component to success in economic development.”

More than 7,000 new students now enter the system each year. On Nov. 7, 2006, voters will be asked to approve the school bond referendum to fund our burgeoning population’s needs for classrooms and schools that will prepare our children to be successful in a global economy. These needs cannot be ignored if we are to do justice to the legacy we have inherited from the bold vision and courageous leadership of the past 30 years.

As November approaches, we must remember the political courage of community leaders who came before us—those who pressed for merger despite widespread public opposition and deeply entrenched prejudices, demonstrating not just good economic sense, but also visionary leadership that helped build a better community. We have reaped the benefits of the bold investments made by our community’s leaders a generation ago—now, it is our turn to reinvest those dividends into our community’s schools as our legacy to future generations.

Special thanks to Jeff Merritt, Board member with Wake Education Partnership and Eastern Regional Director of Governmental Affairs for KB Home, for the use of his history paper from the master of arts in liberal studies program at N.C. State University. Thanks also to Jensen Mabe, Wake Education Partnership intern and Peace College student for her help with this publication. Additional information about the history of the Wake County Public School System can be found online at www.wcpss.net.

*Produced and published by
Wake Education Partnership for the
Annual Meeting on Oct. 12, 2006.*



Wake
Education
PARTNERSHIP

706 Hillsborough Street, Suite A
Raleigh, N.C. 27603
919.821.7609
www.WakeEdPartnership.org