Defending diversity: North Carolina churches fight for integrated schools

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Read the sidebar article on NAACP of North Carolina president William Barber.

Years before there was a National Council of Churches or a World Council of Churches, and decades before *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* mandated that public schools be integrated, the North Carolina Council of Churches was formed specifically to fight for integrated schools.

"It was originally formed by a small group of white pastors who wanted to integrate in North Carolina in 1935, which is pretty astounding," says David LaMotte, a consultant on social justice with the North Carolina council. "They were ahead of the curve."

Three-quarters of a century later, the council had to mobilize again for school integration in Raleigh, the state capital, home to nation's 18th-largest school district. In the fall of 2009, four newly elected Republican members on the nine-member

Wake County Board of Education created a five-person majority in favor of dismantling the Raleigh area's busing-for-diversity program, a model renowned not only in North Carolina but across the nation. With support from suburban parents, the board dropped the goal of achieving socioeconomic balance in school assignments in favor of a neighborhood schools policy. Kids could attend in their own (more homogeneous) communities rather than be bused to schools with a mix of rich and poor, whites and minorities.

"The tragedy is [that] our neighborhoods still aren't integrated, so if our schools are neighborhood schools, they're not integrated schools," said LaMotte.

Mennonite pastor Duane Beck agrees. "The school issue really reflects the way our population centers have grown in our county. It's not just a school issue; it's a real systemic, community-wide issue. Neighborhoods that are segregated socio-economically create the problem."

Beck and LaMotte have been working with William Barber, president of the North Carolina office of the NAACP and a Disciples of Christ pastor in nearby Goldsboro. Barber puts the busing issue in historical context. "Busing was the only way to get folk to comply with *Brown,* because they fought the law, and they wouldn't comply." This fall, two years after Barber started a movement to preserve diversity in schools, Democrats won back a majority on the school board—but not before the Republicans had altered the district's policy and replaced its pro-diversity superintendent. The movement still has its work cut out for it with the new superintendent and in crafting another revision to the school-assignment policy.

Though *Brown* required racial integration of schools nearly six decades ago, a series of federal court decisions in the past 20 years has disallowed the use of race as a factor in school assignments. Wake County responded in 2000 by using socioeconomic factors, not race, to balance school enrollments. Wake County's heralded school-assignment policy was based on students' eligibility for a subsidized lunch program. The number of eligible students was limited to 40 percent at any one school. Because of the correlation between minority status and economic status, the policy had the effect of integrating by race. In the last school year, only a handful of Wake County's 140 schools topped 60 percent in African-American population; most were near 25 percent, which is the average for the district as a whole.

By comparison, schools across the nation remain highly segregated. In the 2006-2007 school year, according to an analysis by the Pew Hispanic Center, the typical American white student attended a school that was 77 percent white, while the typical black or Hispanic student attended a school where more than half of the student body matched his or her race or ethnicity. Even more segregated than the average were suburban districts, where typical black and Hispanic students attended schools that were 65 to 70 percent minority, and city districts, where they attended schools that were 80 percent minority. A 2009 report from the Civil Rights Project at UCLA showed that about 40 percent of black and Latino students across the nation attend schools where at least 90 percent of students are nonwhite. The typical black or Latino student attends a school where nearly 60 percent of the students are low income, according to the study's author Gary Orfield.

"Separate is always unequal," said Barber. "When you divide, it is only for the purpose to deprive."

Experts agree that segregation has an impact on learning. According to data from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a standardized test used across the nation, low-income students attending more affluent schools scored almost two years ahead of low-income students in high-poverty schools. (Education scholar Richard Kahlenberg reported this data in *American Prospect* magazine.) In June, the U.S. Department of Education reported that nationwide, for the 2009-2010 school year, inexperienced teachers were twice as likely to work in mostly African-American schools as in mostly white schools.

Although Wake County is an urban area with pockets of poverty, its graduation rates have been above the state average for the past decade. In 2007 *Education Week* magazine studied graduation rates and found that Wake County, with a graduation rate of 64 percent, ranked 17th out of the nation's 50 largest school districts. African-American students in Wake County schools have consistently scored higher than their state peers on end-of-grade tests, according to the N.C. School Report Cards.

After successfully narrowing the racial achievement gap in the 1990s, however, Wake County since 2001 has seen the gap between African-American and white students widen. The percentage of students passing end-of-grade reading and math tests has declined for both groups and for the overall student population across the state. Yet Wake County's scores for black students remain above the state average

for African Americans.

Part of the success in Wake County, says LaMotte, is that "there were no schools dominated by [students] who were failing. Study after study indicates that integration is key to excellence in education."

Barber points out that an amendment to the state constitution during Reconstruction and the court ruling in *Brown* both promised integrated schools, but "it wasn't until August 30, 1971, that Wake County began modest desegregation. That was only after the moral efforts of the church and the legal efforts of the civil rights community [came] together."

The term *neighborhood schools* has been part of the segregationist rhetoric in each era of the struggle, Barber contends. "That's a code word, and they know it's a code word. It has a deep psychic impact on the American consciousness," he said. "The reason we fight so hard is because we know the history, and we know how hard we had to fight. In Wake County, we're trying to hold on to success."

Under Barber's leadership, the movement to save Wake County's school diversity policy gained momentum. Early in February 2010 Superintendent Del Burns resigned in protest of the board's plan, and later that month the NAACP in North Carolina made Wake County schools the key issue in its annual Historic Thousands on Jones Street (HK on J) rally, which brings together faith communities and progressive activists to address social justice issues ranging from universal health care to collective bargaining rights.

In June Barber and historian and author Tim Tyson, along with two other activists, were arrested at a sit-in at a school board meeting. Months later, the board hired Anthony Tata to replace Burns as superintendent. Meanwhile, the protests began to attract national attention.

The North Carolina Council of Churches, the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina and the North Carolina Methodist Conference all passed resolutions in favor of mandating school diversity. A month after Barber and Tyson were arrested at the June school board meeting, clergy helped to rally a thousand people for a march through Raleigh that ended with 19 arrested for disrupting another school board meeting. In addition, church members came out in force for the HK on J rallies in 2010 and 2011. National NAACP president Ben Jealous appeared at the HK on J rally in February 2011 and compared the plan for neighborhood schools to the old

"separate but equal" doctrine struck down in *Brown.*

The accrediting agency for Wake County schools, AdvancED, had put the Republican-led school board on accreditation-warned status, giving them until March 2012 to correct the climate of mistrust brought on by the board's "premeditated" act which had destabilized the school system. The district remains under investigation by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times,* Orfield called the threat to Wake County's school diversity "a shame," joining many other educators who regard Wake County schools as one of the nation's most successful efforts at achieving racial and economic diversity.

Tata created a compromise policy to provide some choice and limit the length of daily bus rides. In October, the board approved Tata's plan to offer families a choice from a list of nearby schools while maintaining busing for students who want to remain in their current schools.

It remains to be seen whether this plan will be implemented. In October, Republican school board chairman Ron Margiotta was replaced by Democratic challenger Susan Evans for a two-year term. In November, incumbent Democrat Kevin Hill held off Republican challenger Heather Losurdo in a hotly contested run-off that attracted more than $500,000 in campaign spending, most of it not by the candidates themselves but by partisan groups interested in the national impact of the outcome in Raleigh.

The pro-diversity movement led to Tata's compromise policy, Margiotta's ousting and the Democrats' regaining power. Although socioeconomics has been at least temporarily taken out of school-assignment decisions, Tata's plan could still preserve a level of diversity. "It certainly relieved a lot of anxiety and pressure to have the superintendent move in and take a pretty even-handed leadership role," said Beck. "I thought he . . . was making a good effort to bring more people to the table."

Barber hopes the recent election results will yield a recovery of the diversity policy. "You won't find any urban district more successful with diversity and achievement," Barber said. "We believe Wake was attacked because of its success. How is any plan going to be better than the plan that has already been nationally recognized?"

Many suburban parents don't want their kids taking long bus rides to schools far from their homes. Other parents think exposure to different races and classes of people is worth the longer commute. The divide cuts across many churches and

communities. Mainline pastors find their congregations divided on the issue. Beck noted that some members of the Raleigh clergy group, Congregations for Social Justice, couldn't back the diversity cause.

"Leaders of congregations were saying, 'People in our churches are divided, and so we really can't, as leaders of the church, step out to say we are representing our church here for this issue,'" said Beck. "Members of churches were caught in the crossfire, so to speak, or maybe they were shooting."

The 10,000-member St. Francis of Assisi Roman Catholic Church helped turn that crossfire into a conversation. Director of pastoral ministries Trevor Thompson organized a series of dialogues among citizens' groups, school leaders, activists and journalists.

"This was the first time many parishioners were able to hear both sides without yelling at each other," said Thompson. "It's hard not to think [backing away from busing] is a bad move for the school board if you think about how this is affecting the voiceless among us." But he recognized that giving parents choice "could be supported by Catholic social teaching as well."

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, a Christian author and one of the leaders of the New Monasticism movement, has supported the busing program, but he found himself having to explain why following the release of his book *The Wisdom of Stability,* in the spring of 2010, just as the fight over school busing was heating up. In his book, Wilson-Hartgrove calls on Christians to stay rooted in their neighborhoods. So it seemed odd to some that he would support busing.

"It seems like a very community-minded idea that schools would be more neighborhood based," he said. But he asserts that the issue gets more complicated when you look closely at neighborhoods.

Wilson-Hartgrove, who is white, made a conscious decision to live in the historically black Walltown neighborhood of Durham, North Carolina, after he graduated from Duke Divinity School eight years ago. Neighborhoods, he said, suffer from long-term impacts of segregation: poverty, crime and institutional racism. The Republican school board majority in Wake County was trying to do "exactly the same thing white folks tried to do 50 years ago," he said. "You certainly can't legislate love, but you can legislate against the caste system, which isn't going to make everybody the same but is going to create a different set of possibilities." Wilson-Hartgrove notes

that suburbanites who have relocated from other parts of the country and who backed the new school board don't understand the racial history of the area.

At St. Francis, however, Thompson sees some relocated and upper-middle-class parishioners supporting the busing program because they believe integration is in line with Catholic social teaching. LaMotte, of the North Carolina Council of Churches, said the biggest issue among white Christians isn't disagreement over the issue but complacency. More Christians should have been paying attention when the Republican bloc was elected to the school board.

"In order to be faithful to what we're commanded to do in the New Testament, we need to show up a bit more," LaMotte said. "Some churches have really shown up and been incredibly present and involved in this struggle. Others have been less so, and some not at all."

"The church has to be fundamentally in the front on this," said Barber. "It's every generation's responsibility to hold the line."