

Journal 12

August 28, 2009

I'm Del Burns, superintendent of the Wake County Public School System. And today I want to share my gratitude to the teachers, principals and staff of our schools.

This past Tuesday, our school year finally began for our students attending traditional-calendar schools, and it was my pleasure to spend the morning visiting six of them. To say I was impressed would be an understatement. This was an amazingly smooth opening day for our students and schools this year. Everyone has worked together to ensure the smoothest opening I have witnessed in my time with our school system.

While I know there were isolated glitches, we were working to solve them quickly. What gratified me the most was that from the beginning, there was learning and teaching happening in classrooms. As I walked through one school at 9:00 a.m., classes were in full session. Teachers and students weren't simply doing "getting to know you" exercises but were fully engaged in the Standard Course of Study. I can't tell you how proud I am of all of our educators -- and to them I say, "Thank you." All of us in Wake County are proud of you.

This week we also received information about our SAT results, and here the news was very positive.

For the school year ending last June, our students had an average SAT score of 1585 -- a 20 point increase from last year when you look at the math, verbal and written portions of the test. That average is 76 points higher than the national average, and 99 points higher than the state average.

To track our SAT performance over a long period of time, you have to take out the writing portion of the exam which was added four years ago. Focusing on math and critical reading, we have a 15-point increase for our students compared to a one-point decline in the state and national averages.

We're showing a five-year positive trend for Hispanic and Latino students' performance, a 21-point increase in African-American students' performance, and a strong narrowing of the gap between male and female students -- possibly because we have more female students taking challenging courses such as Advanced Placement statistics and calculus. For our college-bound students, this is a further indication that we are successfully preparing them for the future.

At the same time, I see a couple of cautionary notes. First of all, a performance increase like this is truly exceptional -- it's not common to see such a high jump and sustaining this performance will be a challenge. Second, there was a decrease in the percentage of students who took the SAT this year, from 73 percent to 64 percent. We are still significantly higher than the national average, but our graduate intention surveys indicated that more of our students are considering alternatives to directly entering a four-year college -- and those students may have decided not to take the SAT.

In this economy, more students may be seeking to enter the job market or military, or begin their further education in community or technical colleges. All of us -- educators, families and business volunteers alike -- have a responsibility to make sure that whatever choices our students make, they leave our schools on graduation day prepared for this global economy. Lifelong learning may not NECESSARILY mean further formal education, but the diploma our students will carry at the end of the senior year must position them to make an immediate impact in the world.

Every student educated in the Wake County Public School System must become a responsible and productive citizen who can effectively manage future challenges. That's our school board's mission for us. A strong start to the school year, and strong SAT results building upon our recent success with End of Grade and End of Course tests, are just some of the indicators that we are succeeding in that mission -- but there is more work to do. Now that all of our schools have begun the school year, we are all engaged in taking that success and extending it to every child.

Thanks, and I will talk to you again soon.