

Journal 32

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Winter Graduation

Hello. I'm Del Burns, superintendent of the Wake County Public School System.

Last week, I told you about the students who will be graduating from our Boosters program this month and entering high school. This week I want to mention another graduation event that's happening this month, and this one is more traditional in every respect except the timing. As we come to the end of the first term, some of our high school seniors will have accumulated enough credits to graduate in January.

Winter graduation from the Wake County Public School System has increased as a by-product of our adoption of block scheduling in our high schools. Before block scheduling, there were very few winter graduates. This type of schedule allows some of our students to complete the credits they need for graduation early, and for other students to make up credits they lack without having to be enrolled for a full year. Last year, we had 521 midyear graduates included in more than 8,000 students in the class of 2009.

As with the Boosters program, this is another example of the Wake County Public School System becoming more flexible and focused in serving the needs of students with unique circumstances. We have the opportunity to support students who have the interest -- and that all-important motivation -- to carve a different, faster path to success. Indeed, many of these winter graduates are immediately continuing to higher education. According to Eric Sparks, our director of counseling and student services, they're entering community colleges and also four-year colleges in greater numbers than before.

We are just as proud of these students for earning a Wake County diploma as we are of our summer graduates. In fact, that level of initiative these students show is especially praiseworthy. But this trend also gives us an indication of the sorts of changes that are coming to our high schools in coming years. We offer our students a strong, rigorous and well-defined curriculum through the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. We also know that each student learns differently and is motivated differently, and therefore we must offer our students more opportunities to customize their educational experiences to better suit their needs. Online learning opportunities, career academies, early college and small high school models are all parts of our school system's portfolio.

In a rapidly changing world, both technologically and economically, we must be nimble in responding to the changing needs of our students. As the winter graduates of the Wake County Public School System are showing us, our students don't want us to wait. They want us to keep up with them and prepare them for the future.

Next time, I'll talk about some more interesting changes for all of our schools, as we discuss our state's application for the federal Race to the Top grants and what that means for learning and teaching in Wake County. Thanks, and I'll talk to you again soon.