

TEXT of Dr. Del Burns's MIDTERM REPORT: January 23, 2007

I'd like to introduce you to Molly Harnden. She's a first year teacher, and she's a new Wake County resident. She's a strong teacher. She could have gone to any school system -- and she chose us. We're proud to have her.

Several weeks ago I spent some time in her fifth grade classroom. I told you a while back that it was my pleasure to ask Ms. Harnden to take a break while I took over her classroom for the better part of an hour. I think that terrified Ms. Harnden and her assistant principal. But the fact is, her class and I had a *great* time.

I asked Ms. Harnden to join us for a couple of reasons. First, I wanted her presence here today to show that I didn't do any lasting damage to her class—I can still engage a class of fifth graders after lunch—and I do enjoy teaching as much today as I did 30 years ago. But more importantly, I wanted this Midterm Report to reflect, *right from the start*, the reason we are here. Our work requires us to make tough choices about funding, construction, handling Wake County's growth, responding to state and federal mandates, and many other matters. But we are here for Ms. Harnden's students, and another 128,000 students just like them.

Our students are not cogs in the machine. We are not just "playing school." We take our core business seriously. Our students are *individuals*, representing our collective future, whom we *serve*, by teaching them to succeed and instilling a love of learning.

It's our duty. It's our moral responsibility. It's a *constitutional* responsibility -- right there in Article IX, section 2 of the North Carolina Constitution. Equal educational opportunities shall be provided for all students. *All* students shall have access to a sound,

basic education.

Ms. Harnden, the people of the Wake County Public School System, and if I may be so bold the Wake County Board of Education as well, are united in acknowledging that responsibility, and that means that we are united in support of you and more than 8,500 other teachers, veteran and newcomer alike. This report is about you, and it's about your students, and I thank you for being here to share it.

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Today's midterm report card is directly tied to the vision that -- working as a community of educators and stakeholders, with support from our broader community, we will ensure that *every child* educated in our school system graduates on time, prepared for the future. We have taken meaningful steps toward fulfilling that vision in the last six months, and we have charted a course for the coming months. Today, I will share both with you.

I have talked before about the "7 Cs." As a school system, we face a number of challenges -- academic, organizational, and financial -- as the result of changes in our society, changes in our community, and changes resulting from globalization. Based on these changes, we, as the leaders of the Wake County Public School System, must make choices, many of them very hard choices, in order to respond effectively to those changes. These choices will also require us to make commitments to ensure the results we demand. And we must also demonstrate courage. Courage to meet the challenges, courage to embrace changes, courage to make difficult choices. We must do these things in order to fulfill our responsibilities to children and our community.

In February, when you selected me to serve as the seventh superintendent of the Wake County Public School System, I shared with you the four strategic directives I

established to guide our work toward my vision, and presented them as a frame for the picture that will be painted within them in the months and years ahead. I'll now share the beginnings of those pictures since July 1, using those frames as a guide and addressing results, processes and relationships, with a focus on results. And I will end with our core business.

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Expanding Fiscal Accountability

Early in August, I hired the first ever Chief Business Officer for the Wake County Public School System. David Neter stood out among more than a hundred very strong candidates as the person to help us continue to improve our business practices. As you know, Mr. Neter has more than 24 years of for-profit business experience, has an MBA from the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University, and is a Certified Public Accountant. Since his arrival, he has begun assessing our business practices with the fresh eye of an experienced businessman, looking for improvements in efficiency and effectiveness in running the business of the Wake County Public School System.

In a recent column in the *N&O*, he outlined many opportunities for improvement, and you'll hear more from him in the coming months. An internal risk assessment is underway, as recommended by both the Summerford fraud vulnerability audit and our external auditors. The certification requirements for budget managers are under review and will reflect changes in our business practices. Mr. Neter, the finance officer, and the senior director for budgeting are leading quarterly meetings with our senior leadership to assess current spending and look for savings as well as efficiencies.

Our efforts dovetail with the school board's leadership in promoting fiscal

accountability. As a board you took a giant step forward in becoming the first school district in our state to put in place an independent Audit Committee to review the findings of our external audits. There's no legal requirement to do that, but you have once again gone the extra mile in working to be good stewards of taxpayers dollars and further increase our school system's financial transparency.

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Develop and Implement Systems and Structures to Support Schools, Ensure Accountability, and to Engage the Community

On July 1 I realigned our organizational structure to better support our vision and strategic directives. First, the role of former area assistant superintendents was redefined. They now serve as area superintendents, each with a special assistant -- not a new position, but one repurposed from existing resources -- to assist and be accountable for school improvement planning in each of our 147 schools. A chief of staff and five other chief officers were identified: a chief academic officer, a chief business officer, a chief communications officer, a chief facilities and operations officer, and a chief technology officer.

There is no deputy superintendent in this realignment, and in the process 10 percent of the senior leadership positions were eliminated. This flattened our organization in order for me to be in direct contact with both those who support schools, represented by the chief officers, and those who lead schools, represented by the area superintendents.

We are communicating more frequently and *purposefully* with our principals and central services administrators to focus on providing information needed to do their jobs better and for professional growth.

I've also expanded engagement and discussion at the advisory level. In the past, a superintendent's teacher advisory council existed, as did a superintendent's parent advisory council. Each operated in isolation -- in silos, if you will. I have brought them together, along with a superintendent's support staff advisory council, and a superintendent's principals' advisory council. When we meet, all views are at the table at the same time. We have held two summits, one addressing professional learning communities and how we best support them in our system, and the other reviewing Goal 2008 and asking the question: what's next?

We're expanding our long range planning for growth as well. On the twentieth day of traditional calendar school we counted 128,070 students -- almost 7,600 more than the prior year. That increase alone is about the size of most school districts in our state. In the current growth management plan, you find a long range planning component for each school in our system. We are already engaged in a higher level of planning in the use of data and the methodology presented by Or-ED labs from NCSU as we work to site schools. These efforts will be expanded.

The 22 schools transitioning to multi-track year-round calendars next year are being supported by all departments and divisions in our system going forward and also are receiving support from existing year-round schools in order to make certain that we provide the structure to ensure the smooth opening of these schools next July.

And while I'm on the subject of systems and structures, I want to again highlight this accomplishment: since July 1, five new year-round elementary schools opened for students and staff two months ahead of schedule. This was no small feat. It occurred as a result of the hard work and dedication of the facilities construction management team and

five highly knowledgeable and skilled principals.

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Retaining, recruiting, and training high quality employees

Finding new teachers like Ms. Molly Harnden is hard work. It's a task that we'll always have, but every high quality teacher we retain is one less we have to recruit. Our teacher retention rate for last year at 9.4% is better than the prior year's 10.24% and better than the state average of 12.95%, but there is still a cost to replacing the ones who leave. Not just a financial cost for locating, hiring, orienting, inducting, and mentoring new teachers -- roughly \$14,000 -- but a cost that cannot be calculated in lost experience and disruptions of continuity for students and schools.

And we are expanding our retention efforts to support staff—not just focusing on teachers. 95% of our employees are based in schools. We need high quality employees across the board—teachers and those who support teaching and learning every day

Area superintendents are working closely with principals and schools to review the ratios of initially licensed teachers to mentors and developing plans to improve them. Every school improvement plan will address teacher retention as a significant component.

Focusing on climate and working conditions in each of our schools, we will also analyze and use data from the Teacher Working Conditions survey completed last spring in school improvement planning.

Chief officers are analyzing data related to employee turnover in central services to determine how to provide more effective induction programs to support new employees. And we are sharing best practices in employee retention in our schools *and* Central Services.

Our retention efforts are being strengthened, however, our recruitment needs continue as we face the prospect of 8,000 more students in the next year. We hired 1,000 teachers new to Wake County Public Schools for this school year. A fall job fair has been held, attended by over 800 candidates seeking 50 jobs. We've also held a lateral entry job fair with over 400 candidates attending.

As we focus on retention, and recruitment, we must also make sure that Ms. Harnden and all her colleagues in our schools and central services have the support they need to be successful. We are ramping up leadership training to build capacity at all levels. We now have two cohorts of teacher leaders participating in a 24-month program. The first assistant principal leadership academy, also a 24-month program, began in the fall. Training and discussions to improve the manner in which we work as collaborative teams, also termed professional learning communities, is ongoing and expanding from our high schools to our middle and elementary schools.

We have very good people serving the children of Wake County. It's important to me that everyone in this room recognize that fact, and understand my commitment to improving their capacity to support both our students and the vision of the Wake County Public School System. It's a commitment I make to you -- and to them.

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Rededicating our focus on teaching and learning

Usually, this strategic directive is the first one I talk about. Today, it is the last. Under the leadership of Dr. Donna Hargens, Chief Academic Officer, the Instructional Services Division has been realigned and flattened to sharpen the focus on our core business: that of teaching and learning for all students.

During the last six months, academic results from the 2005-2006 school year were announced. Our SAT scores at 1066 are still well ahead of the state and our nation. And the participation rate is among the highest. Re-normed math end of grade scores indicate that while we are clearly ahead of other districts in our state, we have much more work ahead. More students than ever -- 3,621 -- took Advanced Placement tests as we continue to encourage students to pursue higher level courses in high school. And speaking of high school, the on-time graduation rate for our school system -- 82 percent -- was the second highest of large urban districts in our nation, second only to Fairfax County, VA. Compared to a 66 percent on-time graduation rate for our state and 69 percent for our nation, we are doing better than most districts in our country.

But now it is time to talk about what I see beyond the horizon, not what is in the rear view mirror.

I want to talk now about expectations and standards. We talk a great deal about the globalization of our economy and the flattening of our region, the flattening of our world. The world today is very different from the world we imagined we'd be living in 30 years ago. And the world that our children will be living in 30 years from now will no doubt be very different from what we imagine for them. The rate of change is constantly increasing. Students of today are knowledge workers of tomorrow. Preparing children for a future about which we cannot imagine -- students who graduate ready for the 21st century -- is not an option. It is a necessity.

Our parents and our business community have called upon us to excel. Our State Board of Education has deeply considered this matter and has called upon our state to educate all students to ensure they are competitive and ready for life in the 21st century,

not the 20th.

With us today is the Chairman of the State Board of Education, Howard Lee. Chairman Lee and the State Board of Education recognize that we all have much work to do on behalf of every child in North Carolina. To this end, the State Board has developed new goals, goals intended to prepare our children for the future. They are based on high standards and high expectations for every child. We would expect nothing less. Through his personal and sustained determination working with the State Board to ensure that every school system in North Carolina aligns their efforts, Chairman Lee has called for every school system to make the most of what they have and focus on the future, *preparing our children for the century they are growing up in, not the last one.*

It is time to respond to the call of Chairman Lee and the state board, our business community, our parents, our teachers, our principals, and our students themselves.

Today, I am calling for a comprehensive, independent curriculum management audit of the Wake County Public School System.

The audit investigates two fundamental instructional management questions:

1. Does the Wake County Public School System have a properly managed instructional program or curriculum that is planned, executed, and assessed in accordance with generally accepted principles and standards?
2. Does the Wake County Public School System conform to the standards of quality in instructional organization which includes the following:
 - Adequacy, specificity, and scope of board policies and planning?
 - Sufficient quality in direction for teaching and learning?
 - Consistency and equity in schools and program implementation?

- Effectiveness of program and process monitoring and assessment?
- Use and allocations of budget and resources for productivity and quality improvement?

Conducted by the International Curriculum Management Audit Center of Phi Delta Kappa International, this audit is based on a business model, following generally accepted auditing principles. This business model developed in the past by the accounting firm Peat, Marwick, and Mitchell has been used by scores of districts across our nation to improve and advance quality in their instructional program. It is my expectation that this audit will identify weaknesses and areas for improvement in the Wake County Public School System, not just the things we are doing well.

Why a curriculum audit? Because we have *never* independently audited our core business, that of teaching and learning. We are doing a very good job of preparing our students against today's standards. *What about tomorrow's standards?*

Each year we engage external auditors to examine our financial position and internal control. We have also undergone a thorough independent fraud vulnerability assessment to review our internal controls. We have had many external reviews and audits of our building programs and finances. Such oversight of our *support* functions is welcomed, and certainly necessary.

But it is time for more. The critical question before us is: *in light of significantly higher standards and expectations for all students, in light of the need to prepare children to not just live, but to thrive in a global economy in a global society: are we doing enough?*

I think that we, as a community, should be *at least* as vigilant in monitoring, reviewing, and auditing our core business as we are our support systems. Our support systems maintain our schools. But *what we teach* and *how we teach it* are our reason for being.

It's time to put that to the test.

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During the last six months we have worked hard to become well aligned as a system. We will *keep* working on it, because with improved alignment comes improved efficiency. But it's now time for us to focus on attunement. We have to listen to our children. We have to see clearly the changes in our world. We have to anticipate the challenges our children will face tomorrow, and we have to recognize and address the challenges we face today -- such as growth, poverty, and a great diversity of need among our student population, high-achieving and struggling alike.

Here is our vision again: that every child educated in our school system graduates on time, prepared for the future. Our community demands it. Our educators, like Ms. Harnden, are committed to the task. And our children deserve it. Mrs. Head, members of the Wake County Board of Education: I believe it's time to chart our course, set sail, and head for the horizon.