



WAKE COUNTY
PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

Superintendent Taylor's **COMMUNITY REPORT**



January 25, 2024

SUCCESS LISTENING,
LEARNING &
THROUGH CONNECTING

Dr. Robert P. Taylor's
First 100 Days



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Introduction





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To the community we serve,

A little more than 100 days ago, I received the honor of a lifetime when I was sworn in as superintendent of the Wake County Public School System.

As promised, I have spent much of my time since then traveling all over Wake County to meet with thousands of students, families, staff, business partners, and community leaders - to listen, to learn, and to connect.

In October, I hosted 14 roundtables with approximately 1,600 attendees from various parts of our community and every geographic region of the county. More than 2,000 ideas emerged from these groups that we divided into two categories: celebrations and next-level opportunities.

I also have spent time visiting schools, our central services departments, and many other community events to gain a first-hand perspective on the everyday work that drives everything we do and stand for.

My purpose was both personal and strategic.

It was essential that I begin by getting to know the people of our district and letting them get to know me. It was even more essential for me to get a deeper understanding of this school district in all its complexities and to hear from the people who know best what's working and what needs to improve.

The problems we face and how best to address them are indeed complicated. But I was reminded time and again that our families' most fundamental desires are straightforward, universal, and timeless:

- They want their children to be happy, safe, and well.
- They want their children to gain the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in higher education, the workplace, and life.

Here is what I knew before accepting this position and what was confirmed at every stop along my 100-day journey: to a remarkable extent, the Wake County Public School System delivers on all those fronts.

By virtually every measure, our students outperform their counterparts in other school districts, and thousands graduate every year well-prepared for college, career, military service, and productive citizenship.

So, I hope the first thing people will take away from this report is that our school district is exceptional.

This report outlines what our community celebrates about WCPSS, including:

- Prioritizing student learning and well-being;
- Working to establish equitable practices in all facets of school and district operations;
- Providing a wide variety of school programs to support the varied needs, talents, and interests of our diverse student population;
- Hiring and retaining highly trained, qualified, and dedicated staff; and
- Building and nurturing strong community partnerships.

The most critical feedback we received addressed how we can get better. This report summarizes the recommendations provided by our community.

The most important finding comes down to this: We strive to serve all students exceptionally well, and we usually succeed. However, the reality is that we do not always meet the personalized needs of every student.

Our community generally agrees this isn't good enough. We have a duty to meet the needs of every child, each day.

The challenge, of course, is figuring out how we get there. Feedback from staff, students, and essential community partners is critical in identifying the work we need to do to reach our goals.

Among our areas for improvement, a few key themes emerged, including:

- Designing instruction to empower students where they are academically, emotionally, and culturally;
- Increasing access to mental health services;
- Ensuring our highest needs students have adequate resources and staff support;
- Recruiting and retaining high-quality staff to serve in all job roles;
- Continuing to focus on being good stewards of public resources; and
- Improving communication and working relationships between district leadership and school-based staff.

The challenges we face are not new or unique to WCPSS. My hope is that this report will be a guide for all of us - Board members, staff, students, families, and the community - as we work toward lasting improvements.

After meeting with so many of you, I'm even more optimistic that we can achieve real progress in reaching students who have been historically marginalized while continuing to meet the needs of all students regardless of background or ability.

And I was heartened to realize how closely the desired outcomes identified by this community aligned with those of our Strategic Plan.

When we succeed in better serving all students, we will continue to be the first and best educational choice for all Wake County families. This is my charge for all of us. By working together, we can and will achieve our goals.

But we must be clear-eyed in acknowledging that progress will not always be linear or without dissent.

Everyone has a vested interest in our school district and deserves to be heard. Ultimately, some tough decisions will be made.

My commitment to you is this: When it is time to listen, I will listen intently and with an open mind. When it is time to deliberate, I will do so transparently and in pursuit of consensus. And when it is time to act, we will act prudently but decisively.

I hope everyone will spend some time reading and reflecting on this report. It will inform the critical work that lies ahead.

Together, we will take the Wake County Public School System to the next level of national excellence.

Respectfully,

Dr. Robert P. Taylor,
Superintendent



Celebrations



Student Feedback

From approximately 215 students representing all WCPSS middle and high schools, grades 6-12.



We have lots of academic variety and classes offer extra academic help/resources.

Teachers facilitate spaces for open-minded discussions, thoughts, and understanding.

Staff care about students' well-being academically, physically, and emotionally.

We appreciate the diversity of the students, teachers, and schools.

Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment in which students feel free to speak up.

There are club opportunities for specific interests and career exploration.

Schools care about our safety.

This report outlines the celebrations mentioned most often by roundtable participants, as well as students, staff, families, and community partners in site visits and informal conversations. These themes identify what we do well and what we need to continue to expand upon.

Students First

The strongest point of feedback from participant groups is that the Wake County Public School System does an excellent job of focusing on the needs of most students most of the time. Student success is the first consideration in all decisions - as it should be.

Our community noted these themes as strengths:

- Our students possess a wide array of talents, capabilities, and skills that are demonstrated inside and outside of the classroom;
- Our schools' first priority is equipping students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college and career;
- Individual and collective student successes are celebrated at the district, school, and classroom level;
- Staff focus on both academic performance and student well-being, creating an environment that promotes the growth of the whole child;
- Teachers provide rigorous curricula with innovative instruction that promotes student achievement and helps students see how what they are learning applies to the real world; and
- Technology is used effectively as a teaching tool.

Dedicated, High-Quality Staff

Students credit our teachers, school administrators, and staff as the most important factor in their success. This celebration was echoed by families, community partners, and district staff. WCPSS leads the nation in Nationally-Board Certified Teachers, and 34% of our teachers have advanced degrees.

Put simply: we cannot achieve our objectives without high-quality, well-supported staff members.

Our community noted the importance of:

- Recruiting, developing, supporting, and retaining high-quality administrators, teachers, and staff for all job roles;
- Hiring with intentionality to ensure staff in all roles reflect students' diversity;
- Strong leadership at school and district levels;
- Supporting employees through professional learning, training, and competitive pay and benefits;
- The adaptability and innovation demonstrated by WCPSS teachers, staff, and leaders; and
- Effective communication among the district, schools, and communities.



Intentional Focus on Equity

Our community expressed appreciation for various strategies used to address disparities and to uplift cultural diversity in schools. The input revealed a feeling of pride that our Board and district leaders actively value equity and include an equity component in every Strategic Plan goal.

Our community praised the district for:

- Establishing a school board policy that commits to equitable actions and outcomes;
- Committing to diversity, equity, and inclusion within the Strategic Plan and the WCPSS equity framework;
- Using data to identify disparities along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status;
- Identifying, critically reflecting, redesigning, and transforming systems in the pursuit of equitable outcomes; and
- Utilizing intentional hiring practices as we work toward ensuring staff in all types of roles reflect the diversity of our students.

Committed Community

The people of Wake County value strong public schools, and students and staff recognize that commitment. Our community appreciates that the district encourages collaboration with business alliances and external organizations to support students and families. Families and staff are partners with one another in educational decision-making processes. Schools diligently foster positive relationships and collaboration between schools and their communities.

Our community shared that:

- Focus on family and community engagement is a longstanding district priority;
- Non-profit, government, and faith-based partners believe that healthy public schools are essential for a thriving community and demonstrate that belief by sharing their time, talent, and resources with our students and staff;
- International business leaders choose our community in part because of our excellent public schools and give back in many ways to WCPSS; and
- Wake County frequently tops lists of the best places to live in the United States, with the high quality of our school district noted as one of the contributing factors.



Variety of Student Program Opportunities

Another key finding related to student achievement and growth is the wide variety of programming and enrichment opportunities offered across the district. Community members noted the range of options, extracurricular activities, and multiple pathways and choice opportunities for students.

In particular, they valued:

- The wide variety of award-winning magnet programs that offer innovative educational programming while exposing students to diverse people and new experiences;
- Career and college preparation opportunities offered through our Career and Technical Education (CTE) program;
- Clubs, sports teams, and co-curricular activities that help students pursue their passions, gain new skills, build confidence, network, and develop friendships; and
- Award-winning arts, CTE, and athletic programs.



Next-Level Opportunities



Throughout the roundtables and in other less formal settings, we asked students, staff, families, and essential partners, “What would take WCPSS to the next level?” These are the suggestions that were given most often. These are the commitments that we need to make collectively to respond to the feedback given by our community.



Equitable Instruction and Curriculum

Our community acknowledged and applauded efforts made to implement equitable practices in schools.

These efforts have resulted in progress among historically disadvantaged groups, notably in graduation rates.

However, our community made clear that much more needs to be done to close persistent gaps in student outcomes. In this, our community once again demonstrated that their priorities align with those in our Strategic Plan.

We are committed to strengthening and expanding our efforts in the following areas:

- Upgrading instructional resources to better support tiered instruction and behavior;
- Providing culturally responsive teaching and inclusive curriculum resources;
- Focusing on students' mastery of skills over completion of coursework;
- Promoting more consistent high-quality instructional practices and effective schedules;
- Addressing the persistent achievement and opportunity gaps
- Eliminating disproportionality in discipline referrals, suspensions, absences, and special education referrals;
- Creating excellent academic experiences for every student; and
- Ensuring all students have effective time management, goal setting, self-efficacy, attention to detail, organization, conflict resolution, problem-solving, and other skills for lifelong success.

Student Feedback

From approximately 215 students representing all WCPSS middle and high schools, grades 6-12.

“ ”

More effort should be made to reduce students' stress - breaks within the school day, additional academic supports, asynchronous days, tutoring time, extended lunches.

There should be more student voice in school decisions.

Classroom environments should be more welcoming - decorations, supplies, heat and air conditioning, upgrades to old buildings, cleaner bathrooms.

We need more inclusiveness in the school community and diverse representation in higher-level courses - including students with disabilities and students whose second language is English.

Teaching approaches should be more energetic and lessons should be interactive - less teaching from PowerPoints

We need to offer more to help with skills for outside of school - trade skills, business, taxes, etc.



Safety and Well-Being

Our community indicated that we must address school safety and security to effectively engage students academically and increase achievement.

We will provide a safe, inclusive learning environment that is responsive to all students and staff behavioral health needs and promotes a sense of belonging.

We are committed to strengthening and expanding our efforts in the following areas:

- Strengthening security through district and site-based safety planning;
- Consistently seeking feedback from a diverse group of students, administrators, teachers, staff, and families to inform key decisions;
- Increasing access to inclusive programming and support services to address the mental health and behavioral health needs of students;
- Promoting staff well-being and work/life balance;
- Upgrading facilities to promote physical security; and
- Increasing the ratio of specialized support staff to students across schools, including school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses.

Employee Recruitment and Retention

Our community celebrates the skill and dedication of our workforce. They identified the need to strengthen and expand our efforts to retain current employees and recruit the best and the brightest to join our district.

We are committed to strengthening and expanding our efforts in the following areas:

- Collecting feedback from all staff and using that data to improve employee satisfaction, engagement, and wellness;
- Strengthening hiring and onboarding processes;
- Expanding professional learning pathways;
- Conducting market analyses to assess salary competitiveness;
- Targeting efforts to ensure our schools with the highest needs are staffed with high-quality teachers, leaders, and support staff;
- Marketing the benefits of working in our district and the resources available to support employees; and
- Protecting instructional time and providing distinct planning days to ensure teachers have time to design lesson plans and analyze data within professional learning communities.

Organization for Excellence & Equity

To achieve excellence and equity across our district, our community advised that we re-examine many facets of our organizational structure.

Specifically, our community shared that schools with higher needs must be given additional resources, including more support from central services personnel and community partners.

Staff noted that our rapid growth as a district has resulted in inefficient structures that do not align with our present needs.

We are committed to strengthening and expanding our efforts in the following areas:

- Restructuring our resources to promote organizational efficiency, equity, and collaboration;
- Increasing support and coaching for schools designated as low-performing;
- Clearly and transparently monitoring instructional and non-instructional metrics for improvement;
- Improving internal and external accountability through the use of targeted data metrics;
- Providing timely and efficient operational services for every student, such as reliable transportation and well-maintained facilities;
- Evaluating and improving communications between schools and families as well as between central services departments and schools;
- Promoting family and community engagement and partnering with community supports to provide services for our marginalized communities specifically; and
- Expanding meaningful collaboration with students, families, and community partners to elevate the voices of those we serve.





Conclusion







Conclusion

I am inspired by this dynamic community of learners, teachers, leaders, families, and engaged citizens. What we do is important, and how we do it makes all the difference.

This in-depth, community-wide review of our school system has made clear the district's commitment to placing students first. It also highlighted that this is indeed an exceptional place, brimming with multi-talented and caring students, families, and staff.

We will strengthen our work to ensure that each and every student enters a safe, welcoming, supportive, inclusive, and engaging school environment each day. Our dedicated staff, intentional focus on equity, and supportive community position us to be a national model of excellence. The improvements necessary to reach this goal are grounded in the commitments outlined above.

The collective dedication of our community, families, students, and staff is evident. I am confident that we possess the knowledge, talent, skills, and resources necessary to pursue meaningful change. I am humbled and honored to join you on this transformative journey toward greater excellence and equity.





FROM HERE,
ANYTHING
IS POSSIBLE.