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In N.C., a new battle on school integration

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IN RALEIGH, N.C. The sprawling Wake County School District has long been a rarity. Some of its best, most diverse schools are in the poorest sections of this capital city. And its suburban schools, rather than being exclusive enclaves, include children whose parents cannot afford a house in the neighborhood.

But over the past year, a new majority-Republican school board backed by national tea party conservatives has set the district on a strikingly different course. Pledging to "say no to the social engineers!" it has abolished the policy behind one of the nation's most celebrated integration efforts.

And as the board moves toward a system in which students attend neighborhood schools, some members are embracing the provocative idea that concentrating poor children, who are usually minorities, in a few schools could have merits - logic that [critics](#) are blasting as a 21st-century case for segregation.

The situation unfolding here in some ways represents a first foray of tea party conservatives into the business of shaping a public school system, and it has made Wake County the center of a fierce debate over the principle first enshrined in the Supreme Court's [1954 decision](#) in *Brown v. Board of Education*: that diversity and quality education go hand in hand.

The new school board has won applause from parents who blame the old policy - which sought to avoid high-poverty, racially isolated schools - for an array of problems in the district and who say that promoting diversity is no longer a proper or necessary goal for public schools.

"This is Raleigh in 2010, not Selma, Alabama, in the 1960s - my life is integrated," said John Tedesco, a new board member. "We need new paradigms."

But critics accuse the new board of pursuing an ideological agenda aimed at nothing less than sounding the official death knell of government-sponsored integration in one of the last places to promote it. Without a diversity policy in place, they say, the county will inevitably slip into the pattern that defines most districts across the country, where schools in well-off neighborhoods are decent and those in poor, usually minority neighborhoods struggle.

The NAACP has filed a civil rights complaint arguing that 700 initial student transfers the new board approved have already increased racial segregation, violating laws that prohibit the use of federal funding for discriminatory purposes. In recent weeks, federal education officials visited the county, the first step

toward a possible investigation.

"So far, all the chatter we heard from tea partiers has not manifested in actually putting in place retrograde policies. But this is one place where they have literally attempted to turn back the clock," said Benjamin Todd Jealous, president of the NAACP.

School Board Chairman Ron Margiotta referred questions on the matter to the district's attorney, who declined to comment. Tedesco, who has emerged as the most vocal among the new majority on the nine-member board, said he and his colleagues are only seeking a simpler system in which children attend the schools closest to them. If the result is a handful of high-poverty schools, he said, perhaps that will better serve the most challenged students.

"If we had a school that was, like, 80 percent high-poverty, the public would see the challenges, the need to make it successful," he said. "Right now, we have diluted the problem, so we can ignore it."

So far, the board shows few signs of shifting course. Last month, it announced that Anthony J. Tata, former chief operating officer of the D.C. schools, will replace a superintendent who resigned to protest the new board's intentions. Tata, a retired general, names conservative commentator Glenn Beck and the Tea Party Patriots among his "likes" on his Facebook page.

Tata did not return calls seeking comment, but he said in a recent news conference in Raleigh that he supports the direction the new board is taking, and cited the District as an example of a place where neighborhood schools are "working."

Beyond 'your little world'

The story unfolding here is striking because of the school district's unusual history. It sprawls 800 square miles and includes public housing in Raleigh, wealthy enclaves near town, and the booming suburbs beyond, home to newcomers that include many new school board members. The county is about 72 percent white, 20 percent black and 9 percent Latino. About 10 percent live in poverty.

Usually, such large territory is divided into smaller districts with students assigned to the nearest schools. And because neighborhoods are still mostly defined by race and socioeconomic status, poor and minority kids wind up in high-poverty schools that struggle with problems such as retaining the best teachers.

Officials in Raleigh tried to head off that scenario. As white flight hit in the 1970s, civic leaders merged the city and county into a single district. And in 2000, they shifted from racial to economic integration, adopting a goal that no school should have more than 40 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, the proxy for poverty.

The district tried to strike this balance through student assignments and choice, establishing magnet programs in poor areas to draw middle-class kids. Although most students here ride buses to school, officials said fewer than 10 percent are bused to a school to maintain diversity, and most bus rides are less than five miles.

"We knew that over time, high-poverty schools tend to lose high-quality teachers, leadership, key students - you see an erosion," said Bill McNeal, a former superintendent who instituted the goal as part of a broad academic plan. "But we never expected economic diversity to solve all our problems."

Over the years, both Republican and Democratic school boards supported the system. A study of 2007 graduation rates by EdWeek magazine ranked Wake County 17th among the nation's 50 largest districts, with a rate of 64 percent, just below Virginia's Prince William County. While most students posted gains in state reading and math tests last year - more than three-quarters passed - the stubborn achievement gap that separates minority students from their white peers has persisted, though it has narrowed by some measures. And many parents see benefits beyond test scores.

"I want these kids to be culturally diverse," said Clarence McClain, who is African American and the guardian of a niece and nephew who are doing well in county schools. "If they're with kids who are all the same way, to break out of that is impossible. You've got to step outside your little world."

'Constant shuffling'

But as the county has boomed in recent years - adding as many as 6,000 students a year - poverty levels at some schools have exceeded 70 percent. And many suburban parents have complained that their children are being reassigned from one school to the next. Officials blame this on the unprecedented growth, but parents blame the diversity goal.

"Basically, all the problems have roots in the diversity policy," said Kathleen Brennan, who formed a [parent group](#) to challenge the system. "There was just this constant shuffling every year." She added: "These people are patting themselves on the back and only 54 percent of [poor] kids are graduating. And I'm being painted a racist. But isn't it racist to have low expectations?"

As she and others have delved deeper, they've found that qualified minority students are underenrolled in advanced math classes, for instance, a problem that school officials said they've known about for years, but that strikes many parents as revelatory. Some have even come to see the diversity policy as a kind of profiling that assumes poor kids are more likely to struggle.

"I don't want us to go back to racially isolated schools," said Shila Nordone, who is biracial and has two children in county schools. "But right now, it's as if the best we can do is dilute these kids out so they don't cause problems. It sickens me."

In their quest to end the diversity policy, the frustrated parents have found some influential partners, among them retail magnate and Republican operative Art Pope.

Following his guidance, the GOP fielded the victorious bloc of school board candidates who railed against "forced busing." The nation's largest tea party organizers, Americans for Prosperity - on whose national board Pope sits - cast the old school board members as arrogant "leftists." Two libertarian think tanks, which Pope funds almost exclusively, have deployed experts on TV and radio.

"We are losing sight of the educational mission of schools to make them into some socially acceptable melting pot," said Terry Stoops, a researcher at the libertarian John Locke Foundation. "Those who support these policies are imposing their vision on everyone else."

'Disastrous' results

Things have not gone smoothly as the new school board has attempted to define its vision for raising student achievement. A preliminary map of new school assignments did not please some of the new

majority's own constituents. And critics expressed alarm that the plan would create a handful of high-poverty, racially isolated schools, a scenario that the new majority has begun embracing.

Pope, who is a former state legislator, said he would back extra funding for such schools.

"If we end up with a concentration of students underperforming academically, it may be easier to reach out to them," he said. "Hypothetically, we should consider that as well."

The NAACP and others have criticized that as separate-but-equal logic.

"It's not as if this is a new idea, 'Let's experiment and see what happens when poor kids are put together in one school,' " said Richard Kahlenberg, senior fellow at the [Century Foundation](#), a think tank that advocates for economic integration. "We know. The results are almost always disastrous."

Many local leaders see another irony in the possible balkanization of the county's schools at a time when society is becoming more interconnected than ever.

"People want schools that mirror their neighborhood, but the bigger picture is my kid in the suburbs is connected to kids in Raleigh," said the Rev. Earl Johnson, pastor of Martin Street Baptist Church in downtown Raleigh. "We're trying to connect to the world but we're separating locally? There is something wrong."

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