

# All That Noise in Wake and Nary a Peep in Moore

*-Chris Smithson, Southern Pines native, resident, and Councilmember*

If you pay any attention at all to statewide news, you have certainly heard about the controversial new Wake County Board of Education majority and their actions to end the school system's diversity policy. The policy in part based attendance districts based on socioeconomic factors of the students. The intent was to ensure that no school would be a "high-poverty" school as indicated by having no more than 40 percent of its students receiving free or reduced lunch.

Why is it important to avoid having high-poverty schools? Study after study has shown that high poverty schools make it more difficult for teachers to teach and students to learn. It is not clear exactly where the tipping point is, but evidence of a disparity in performance between schools can be seen right here in Moore County.

Let's take a look at the North Carolina School Report Cards for two middle schools here in Moore County that are just a few miles apart. As defined by the State, "economically disadvantaged" (E.D.) students are those who receive free or reduced lunch.

West Pine Middle:

- 24% of the students at West Pine Middle are considered economically disadvantaged
- Of the E.D. students, 61% pass both of the reading and math end-of-grade tests
- Of the non- E.D . students, 92% pass both tests

Southern Middle:

- 52% of the students at Southern Middle are considered economically disadvantaged
- Of the E.D. students, 39% pass both of the reading and math end-of-grade tests
- Of the non- E.D. students, 77% pass both tests

What we see here are two Moore County schools just a few miles apart but with greatly differing performance on state tests. What's the biggest difference between the two schools? Clearly, it is the fact that the MAJORITY of the students at Southern Middle are considered economically disadvantaged. It is not the purpose of this blog to get into the reasons why economically disadvantaged students typically perform lower than non-disadvantaged students, but I want to be clear that the research points to many factors such as nutrition, home environment, parental involvement, preschool education, etc. and NOT because of intelligence.

Let's get back to the comparison. Notice how ALL students, regardless of income, perform better at West Pine than they do at Southern Middle. Unless you just want to assume that the students at West Pine are smarter than the students at Southern Middle, you have to look for other reasons. Ask the experts, including those in our own school system, and they'll tell you the difference in performance between the schools is due to the differing student bodies.

So, if high-poverty schools make for lower performance across the board, what can we do (or what should we have done) to ensure we avoid creating them?

As in Wake County, the buck stops with the Board of Education. This elected body chooses school locations and attendance district lines. Thus, they have created our current situation. They also have the power to fix things.

How can they address this situation? They can do it by making good decisions on how attendance districts are set and where new schools go. Because we in the Southern Pines, Pinehurst, Aberdeen, Whispering Pines area are in a relatively compact ten-mile by ten-mile area, we don't need to have some convoluted system of busing kids all over the place. All we need to do is to have schools that are reflective of our overall community.

Current district lines ensure that the primary, elementary, middle schools in our area are segregated. A Board of Education with an ounce of guts and a willingness to do the right thing could redraw attendance district lines that could go a long way towards making ALL our schools high-performing and ALL our schools reflective of the overall community we live in. They could also do so while not making rides to school any longer than they already are. In fact, a number of homes could be closer to their assigned schools if lines were redrawn to show some equality and common sense.

We would need to rid ourselves of the notion that if one lives in a certain municipality, they should expect to go to "their" schools. While that was the expectation back in the 1960's before the County forcibly annexed the city schools of Southern Pines and Pinehurst, we now have a COUNTY school system, which renders municipal borders moot. Besides, the Board of Education already has students in Southern Pines going in all directions to three different elementary/middle school districts and two different high schools. This silly justification mainly comes up when someone tries to explain why many Pinehurst children are mysteriously assigned to "Pinehurst" schools even when they live closer to "Southern Pines" schools.

This is not an issue of "bad" schools or "hiding" underperforming students by averaging their test results with those of higher-performing students. It is about ensuring the best outcome for ALL students by avoiding the creation or perpetuation of high-poverty schools in our area.

Our elected Board of Education knows about these issues and has known for years. Unfortunately, they have failed to act and have even done some things, such as choosing poor locations for new schools, which just make things worse. They haven't done the right thing because they have not heard from voters and taxpayers. They know that if they start messing with districts, they'll hear from some angry

parents but probably won't hear from many others. Without a big public demand for equitable school performance, they know doing the right thing might be risky to their political futures.

Whether or not you have children in our public school system, you are paying your share of the \$90 million Moore County Schools budget. Shouldn't we all demand that the \$8,000 or so we spend educating each student every year be used as effectively as possible to provide the best possible outcomes for ALL students?

If we don't speak up and demand that our Board of Education members do their jobs and provide the best outcomes for ALL students, we get what we deserve.

Chris Smithson

Southern Pines native, resident, and Councilmember