SUSPENDING DISBELIEF

WORLD-CLASS PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOR ALL
No school system has incorporated a full range of world-class traits. Wake County is uniquely positioned to show how that goal can be achieved.
Preface

It was early in 2008 when Wake Education Partnership gathered 150 business leaders, educators and elected officials to discuss what it would take to build a world-class school district in Wake County. The keynote address was titled “Think Globally, Learn Locally.”

The world was in a different place at that moment. People were wondering out loud if an African-American candidate named Barack Obama could actually win the U.S. presidency. There was little talk of global recessions and market meltdowns. Iraq dominated international headlines. Local chatter included talk of the next big school bond referendum.

Events of the next 14 months dramatically changed many people’s view of the world. But the events also reinforced the beliefs of those who gathered in Raleigh to talk about world-class schools. From local bond markets to international conflicts, our ability to understand daily issues is vastly improved by global awareness.

And global awareness begins in our schools.

The phrase “21st century skills” has been used so often in the past decade it is sometimes meaningless. But in months of discussion following that first forum of early 2008, about 40 community leaders continued working on a detailed list of characteristics that would define a world-class school system in Wake County. You will find them in the report that follows.

In hours of conversation among the educators, business leaders and elected officials who gathered to talk about a world-class district, a picture emerged of a school system that is much different from the public schools Wake County has today.

They envisioned a district from which all students would graduate with a keen awareness of the world they are entering – regardless of whether they are enrolling in college or headed directly into the workforce. There would be no distinctions among basic skills, thinking skills, hard skills or soft skills. There would just be needed skills.

It isn’t possible to know what will happen throughout the world in the next few years. It isn’t even possible to predict events of the next few months. But with the right preparation, it is possible for students to understand, appreciate and remain globally competitive regardless of what the 21st century brings.
Introduction

To understand what a world-class, globally competitive school system would look like in Wake County, it is best to put aside the district you think you know today. This is not to say the realities of operating North Carolina’s largest school district can be ignored. Some of the challenges are addressed in the following pages.

But as the group that worked on this project quickly realized, it is not possible to graft a world-class system onto the existing structure of any district. In a high-performing district such as Wake County, many elements of the current system would likely be retained. Other practices would just as surely be abandoned.

In 2025, 15% of the U.S. population will be foreign born.

The details of how Wake County can make that transition will be the focus of a second study scheduled for the coming year. In the meantime, this report simply describes the traits of a district committed to graduating globally-competitive students. The recommendations are those of Wake Education Partnership in concert with the other education groups listed in this report. We wish to offer our thanks to them as well as all members of the World Class Education Initiative who offered their time, input, recommendations and guidance.

To see the world as this group saw it during the past six months, it is best to widen your perspectives and think broadly. When today’s first-graders graduate in 2021, this is the world they are likely to find:1

- Of the five largest cities in the world, none will be located in the United States.

- India and Mexico – two countries whose economies are not even in the top 10 today – are expected to be among the five largest in the world. China will boast the world’s largest economy.
In 2015, the 4 largest cities in the world will be:

- Tokyo, Japan
- Mumbai, India
- Lagos, Nigeria
- Dhaka, Bangladesh

By 2050 – when today’s first-grader is roughly mid-career – only one-tenth of the world’s population will live in Europe and North America. In 1950, that figure was one-third.

Urban growth will dramatically shift to Africa and Asia.

In the United States, where nearly half of those surveyed between the ages of 18 and 24 cannot locate India on a map of Asia, it is apparent today’s first-graders will need a greater geographic and cultural awareness when they leave high school in the spring of 2021.

The changes will likely mean a different approach to curriculum, assessment, testing and use of time. Many of these changes are not only achievable, they are already being done in individual schools and even entire states such as Minnesota and Massachusetts.

No community, however, has tried to incorporate a full range of world-class traits throughout an entire district. Wake County is uniquely positioned to demonstrate how that goal can be achieved.

The world is waiting.

It took **25 years** for the computer to get to the first billion consumers.

It will take only **7 years** to get to the next billion.
Competencies

It’s easy to imagine a huge list of skills students must master in their quest to conquer the world. This is not the approach we recommend for any world-class school district. In a world-class school district, skills are built upon a foundation of basic competencies. The competencies can be viewed as both the goals and the guideposts of the district.

It is important to note the distinction between competencies and skills. While the terms are often used interchangeably in the business world, educators typically consider skills to be a subset of broader competencies.

That means, for example, the current national debate about the need to improve science, technology, engineering and math skills – often called STEM skills – is a logical part of any discussion about curriculum. Corresponding competencies would include a student’s ability to access and analyze information while working in a group to solve problems.5

Against that backdrop, a world-class school district is one that moves beyond traditional definitions of basic literacy when defining competencies. A globally-competitive student is better described as one who understands how to reason and create knowledge from facts provided or gathered during research.

Competencies in a world-class district are not just “the basics plus a bit more.” They are a new standard for what graduates should be able to accomplish at a time when rapid increases in the world’s knowledge means any finite list of skills is quickly dated.

Those competencies include the ability to: 6

**Use all forms of information, especially current media and technology.**

Given the volume of information available to anyone who can effectively use technology, students should demonstrate the functional skills to access information
Regardless of what students do after graduation, they must have the ability to continue learning.

and the critical thinking skills to use it appropriately. Digital literacy will demand an evolving set of skills as different media evolve. At a higher level, students should also understand how the medium used affects the message.

Be culturally aware.
A student who is culturally aware understands how connections between world geography and culture affect their lives and those around them. They understand cultural differences without judging them. They appreciate how events “in their own backyard” might be interpreted by others of different backgrounds.

Effectively communicate across cultures.
Second language instruction is a key part of a world-class school district. It not only improves a student’s ability to communicate, it also provides natural insights into a region’s culture. In the time it takes to competently speak a second language, students also come to understand its history and origins. It’s a degree of proficiency that requires second language instruction every year.

Be aware of world events and global dynamics.
A student who is aware of world events and global dynamics appreciates how global issues are interrelated. This understanding enables them to evaluate events from different cultural perspectives. It allows them to put historic, political, economic and ecological issues in context. It is also a competency that applies to current events and classroom lessons regardless of discipline.

Work together in multicultural teams.
Students should demonstrate the flexibility and adaptability to work well with others of different cultures and backgrounds. A student competent in this area can help find solutions by effectively contributing to a larger effort. Those contributions would be shaped in part by the cultures and backgrounds of other students on the team. The competency would be used throughout various disciplines.

Learn how to learn.
Regardless of what students do after graduation, they must have the ability to continue learning. This is perhaps the most important of all the competencies listed. It means students should be able to analyze multiple sources of information, suggest solutions to real problems that have more than one “right answer” and explain their rationale. Students who master this competency would be expert problem solvers who understand how information is used to create new knowledge.
Curriculum Standards

In December 2008, the Wake County School Board committed itself to graduating all students on time and prepared to compete globally by 2014. While some people immediately questioned whether the goal was practical, a national trend is well underway to simultaneously decrease dropout rates and establish more rigorous curriculum standards.

As part of that push, the National Governors Association endorsed a process in February 2009 to develop common academic standards tied to international tests. The Council of the Great City Schools, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the American Federation of Teachers and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan also weighed in with similar calls.

Of course, vowing to make the change and actually making it are two different things, but in both cases the first step is committing to improvement. In countries where student performance routinely ranks higher than the United States, the underpinnings of the curriculum are inevitably fewer topics covered in greater depth.

Singapore’s math curriculum is the most commonly cited example. Its students have topped international rankings for 15 years on the highly-regarded *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.* But its textbooks and curriculum are much thinner than those found in the United States. According to a delegation of North Carolina educators and policy makers who traveled to Singapore in 2006, the reason behind
It follows that any serious effort to create a local world-class school district would bring similar changes. It would mean more rigorous study at every level. It would mean focusing on a relatively narrow range of topics, but in a way that is designed to reveal concepts applicable across many disciplines. It would require students take the time to think and reflect. It would be a curriculum that emphasizes the “big idea” as the most essential.

This call for more rigorous curriculum standards focused on fewer topics should not be confused with a move away from content. Understanding the public might be wary to embrace the idea that “less is more” when it comes to a rigorous curriculum, those involved

State curriculum requires only a shallow understanding of life beyond the U.S.

Ninth grade world history – from ancient to contemporary times – is covered in 2 semesters.

For North Carolina history, the curriculum mandates 4 semesters.
in this project were drawn to a 2007 report by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills.

The report, titled simply 21st Century Skills Standards points out that “knowing facts without knowing what to do with them is pointless.” But it also highlights some well-known education research by Lauren Resnick and Megan Williams Hall published a decade ago. Those authors agreed that facts alone are pointless, but they also made it clear that thinking “cannot proceed without something to think about.”

It is debatable whether large numbers of students should be studying German or French when China is on its way to becoming a dominant economy.

French, spoken by 80 million, is studied by 1 million Americans.

Mandarin Chinese, spoken by 1.6 billion, is studied by 40,000 Americans.

CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOCUS

Those who are already part of the global economy might say it this way: If you want to succeed, learn what you need to know and go put it to use. Against that backdrop, the curriculum standards of a world-class district would focus on the following:

Student skills

Beyond the obvious need to master reading and math, basic skills would be thought of in terms of the ability to communicate ideas, understand context, solve problems in more than one way, and offer creative solutions. Students would be able to demonstrate what it means to think critically.

Flexible pathways

Curriculum standards would recognize that a four-year college degree is not necessary for every high school graduate. At the same time, pathways that lead directly to jobs or two-year degrees would be far more rigorous, providing skills that exceed today’s community college programs. While this approach is not common in U.S. schools, it is fairly typical in Europe and Asia. The key to making it work here is keeping pathways flexible at least through the end of middle school. For all its value, the current U.S. approach – created more than a century ago – was not designed to prepare a huge range of talent for a college education. A world-class district would recognize that reality by better preparing students who aren’t likely to attend college.

It would also recognize that some students are clearly going to exceed the district’s curriculum standards no matter how high one sets the bar. Meeting the needs of those students is also imperative, in part because school enrollment trends no longer work in favor of North American countries. School enrollments in India and China, for example, are now so large that the number of top-performing students in those countries likely exceeds the total student enrollment of U.S. schools. Global competition pays little attention to such boundaries in the hunt for skilled workers.

Digital literacy

While the ability to gather and use all forms of information is critical, the skill of digital literacy deserves special mention. It is past time for schools to close the gap...
between the classroom and the outside world when it comes to using digital media. The gap in this area grows each year between the schools, many of its students and an increasing number of younger teachers.

The potential of one-to-one computing, already being done in districts such as Edgecombe County, is promising. But a much broader use of mobile technology inside the classroom is also needed. Issues of security have hamstrung past efforts to improve digital literacy. Those concerns must be overcome in a world-class district.

Global perspectives
Creating global awareness does not require a global perspective be infused into every lesson every day. But lessons about culture and geography also cannot be limited to a few semesters of world history and social studies.

The current state curriculum requires only a shallow understanding about life beyond the United States and North America. World history, which is taught in ninth grade, covers “ancient to contemporary times”\(^1\) in two semesters. In contrast, the curriculum mandates two full years of North Carolina history.

Second language
It is debatable whether large numbers of students should be studying German or French when China is on its way to becoming a dominant economy and 60 percent of the people who live in the Middle East are under the age of 25. But regardless of what language students study, a requirement of two years in high school is simply inadequate. At that level of instruction, second-language requirements are mostly just a filter used to decide who is qualified to apply for college.

In contrast, other countries begin second-language classes early, measure success against clear standards, are provided with well-trained teachers and are encouraged to integrate technology. Learning new languages is considered both a skill and a window on different parts of the world. The point of requiring instruction from kindergarten through high school is not to impress people or create future international deal makers. A full understanding of a second language takes time — and during that time students begin to appreciate how language and culture are intertwined. In a world-class district, second language instruction would be as much a part of the curriculum as math and reading.

STEM skills
In a region of the state that has successfully moved away from industries such as textiles and agriculture to an economy driven by science and technology, a rigorous curriculum with more emphasis on science, technology, engineering and math skills would seem to be a logical fit.

According to North Carolina Employment Security Commission data, science and technology have dominated the Triangle’s employment growth during the past 15 years. North Carolina exports grew steadily during that time. Thanks to a thoughtful strategy and good fortune, Wake County has already staked its claim in an emerging global economy.

A world-class public school district with an increased emphasis on STEM skills offers an excellent opportunity for the region to build on that success.

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<tr>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Japan</th>
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<td>17%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>64%</td>
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U.S. students receive 5 times more instruction in basic skills than reasoning and application.
Nearly 1/2 of U.S. students ages 18-24 cannot locate India on a map of Asia.

Thinking beyond our boundaries
Assessment is an ongoing process between the teacher and student. It emphasizes the use of knowledge, not recitation.
Assessment

In a school district where memorizing facts and formulas no longer matches the goal of a more rigorous curriculum, student assessment would need to change. But first, it is important to understand the difference between assessment and testing. Assessment is more than just giving and taking tests. It is an ongoing process between the teacher and student. It is intertwined with the daily lessons of the classroom — and in this case a curriculum that emphasizes the use of knowledge instead of its recitation. Classroom assessment is individually tailored by default.

Testing, which is addressed later in this report, is a snapshot. It tells you what a large group of students knows on a given day. If the test is a good one, it is tailored to measure how well a group of students has mastered a given section of the curriculum.

There is a natural overlap between assessment and testing. And it’s important to point out that even though testing gets more attention, there is plenty of assessment that happens every day in public school classrooms. But in a world-class district, the emphasis and nature of assessments would shift.

A 2007 study conducted by Robert Pianta at the University of Virginia’s Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning found that fifth graders typically received five times as much instruction in basic skills as they did on reasoning and application. The results, compiled from hours of observations in 400 school districts, were similar at first and third grades.16 That ratio wouldn’t be possible in a district that emphasizes ongoing assessment. Many multiple-choice exams would be replaced by projects that produce tangible products. Open-ended questions would have more than one correct answer. Students would need to defend their work. Innovation would be rewarded.

Putting more emphasis on assessment and less on testing would require greater respect for teachers’ professional judgment. Teachers, in turn, would be held more responsible for the degree to which they share successful learning strategies with their colleagues. By design, teachers would be life-long learners in the same classrooms as their students. Teacher leadership would become a critical part of staff development as faculty members worked together to assess student skills and adjust classroom lessons as needed.

Researchers and educators generally agree that an over-emphasis on rote learning contributes heavily to the poor international ranking of U.S. students. Of 30 countries ranked on the 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment, for example, the U.S. placed 25th in math and 21st in science.17 The exam, given to 15-year-olds from industrialized countries, emphasizes the use and application of knowledge.

A 2007 report issued in part by the Singapore Ministry of Education approached the topic this way:

“To thrive in the world in 2015, Singaporeans need strong analytical, communication, and interpersonal skills. They have to be more risk-taking, entrepreneurial, and able to tolerate greater ambiguity. Most importantly, they need to continuously learn, unlearn, and relearn to remain relevant in a dynamic environment.”18

Educators from Asian countries often envy the creativity of American students. But creativity and the ability to analyze are two different qualities. Globally-competitive graduates will need both.

North Carolina’s accountability programs are built upon multiple-choice exams designed to determine how many students score at or above “grade level.” The approach is widely credited for boosting basic skills, especially when it was first introduced in the 1990s. It is also widely blamed for promoting a bubble-sheet definition of success. During discussions of what a world-class district would look like, those involved in this project kept returning to the need to redefine success. Continuous and formal student assessment is a critical step in that process.

Ultimately, local assessments measured against rigorous curriculum standards would replace multiple-choice exams. Successful students would be defined as those who can assess their own strengths and their own weaknesses. They could then assess where they stand in the world when they are handed a diploma.

21st Century assessments:
• Are based on performance
• Reward innovation
• Are incorporated into regular classroom instruction
• Reveal a student’s problem-solving strategies
• Align with international standards
• Encourage self-assessment
• Are both formal and informal
A globally-competitive student understands how to reason and create knowledge from the facts provided.
Testing

How would you know if your child attended a world-class, globally-competitive school district? The truth is, you can’t know for sure. No matter how many times your school principal or next door neighbor assures you “this is a really good school district,” there are very few ways to measure world-class status. There are only a few reliable measures of national ranking.

When researchers and reformers lament the relatively poor performance of U.S. students, they are typically referring to international rankings on two exams.

One is called Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). It measures the performance of fourth and eighth graders. The other is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is given to 15-year olds every three years in reading, math and science.

TIMSS focuses more on discrete skills while PISA measures what students can do with the math and science they have learned. Both use a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

U.S. scores have improved on these exams during the past decade, but they are still a long way from being near the top. And the scores are based on a sampling of students, which makes it impossible to know how an individual school district scored – let alone a single school.

It is possible, however, to test enough students in a district to generate a statistically valid comparison to other countries. That is what Minnesota and Massachusetts did when the 2007 TIMSS exam was given to see if students in those states were benefitting from extensive changes to the curriculum. (The results were encouraging, with students in Massachusetts posting scores comparable to leading Asian nations in some subjects.19)

But testing enough students to get a valid sample of students – or oversampling as the practice is called – can be expensive. It cost about $600,000 to administer TIMSS statewide when Minnesota chose to use the test. And the idea of yet another exam conflicts with the need to reduce standardized testing in a world-class district.

A better approach would strike a balance between the public’s right to know where the district stands and the educational benefits of reducing standardized tests. Oversampling once could provide invaluable baseline data about where students stand internationally. But in subsequent years, it would make more sense to embed a limited number of specific questions into mandated tests.

This approach offers several benefits. It is already possible to estimate the proficiency of North Carolina students in comparison to other states using the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The NAEP – sometimes called “the Nation’s Report Card” – is administered by the U.S. Department of Education.

It is also possible to measure the performance of Wake County students against those of the state using state-mandated exams. By oversampling students once on the TIMSS exam, a snapshot could be assembled showing how students in Wake County public schools compare academically to state, national and international standards of achievement.

In future years, questions meant to mimic the types found on TIMSS and PISA could be embedded into mandated exams. By isolating and then analyzing the answers to those embedded questions, it would be possible to predict how Wake’s students compare against international standards. While the process would add costs to the district’s testing program, it would greatly reduce the guesswork about how students would stack up against international standards. Given Wake County’s current achievement levels and its position as the largest district in the state, the state Department of Public Instruction should consider waivers needed to embed such questions into state-mandated exams.

In the end, the information gathered could help to guide and improve instruction not only locally but also well beyond Wake County’s borders.
What matters is the time spent engaged in learning... and engaged learning amounts to only a fraction of the day for most U.S. students.

**Time**

By the time students in India, Japan and Germany graduate from the equivalent of our high school programs, they have managed to carve out two to three extra years of education compared to North Carolina. It’s not difficult to understand how. They simply go to school more often. A longer school year will probably be needed in any local district that wants to make sure its students compete globally. But it doesn’t make much sense to take on the disruptions and additional costs of a longer year until the current day is redesigned.
Those involved in this project don’t feel it is necessary to suggest a specific school schedule such as year-round calendars or particular bell schedules. But a community committed to a world-class district will need to remain open to the idea of such changes.

Despite protests often triggered by changing school schedules, there is nothing sacred or even all that historically significant about the current calendar. The idea of awarding diplomas based on “seat time” goes back more than a century. The relatively uniform use of a 180-day school year in the United States is rooted in the 1960s.23 It was common in the 1800s for school years to run much longer in the city than the countryside. Some school years ran more than 250 days. The two extremes were brought closer together in the first half of the 20th century only to be changed again during and after World War II to accommodate changes in family life. Noticeably absent from the timeline are calendar changes that reflect differences in today’s economy and today’s families. It seems almost inevitable that such changes will occur.

An obvious place to focus would be after-school programs that already consume two to three hours a day in some students’ schedules. This is time that some schools have captured very effectively for academic gain, but it is more often pushed aside as someone else’s responsibility in most schools. It is much too large a block of time to ignore.

Such changes will require parents, teachers and administrators reconsider how schools use time. But redesigning the school day is not only possible, it is the kind of change one would expect in a community that demands world-class schools.

Students in Japan are in school 50 days more each year than U.S. students.

Students in Japan

Japan - 230 days

U.S. - 180 days

The kind of time that matters most in a school day is the time students are engaged in actual learning. This shouldn’t surprise anyone who has ever needed to master a new skill inside or outside the classroom. This type of time must be maximized. Engaged learning time can amount to just a fraction of the overall day for students. A large part of the day is spent moving from place to place, shifting from one subject to another or just waiting for other students to finish a lesson.20

A teacher’s time is similarly fractured. Working bus duty, serving as a lunch monitor, collecting homework, sitting through announcements and taking attendance all chip away at a teacher’s day. It is time that could be used in engaged student learning or daily staff development.

Curriculum standards that emphasize the depth of understanding will require more teacher preparation. Ongoing assessments will benefit from focused discussions among teachers. And teamwork in general – the foundation of which already exists in professional learning communities – demands a more coordinated use of time.

Redesigning the school day will likely require changes that many aren’t used to considering in public schools. Administrators who are qualified to teach but spend no time in the classroom might take on teaching duties. Students could be grouped differently during the day.

While smaller classes are politically popular, research suggests learning does not improve significantly until the group size drops below 14 students.21 What matters is the quality of instruction and time spent engaged in learning. Such findings help explain why larger classes and ongoing teacher development are common in other countries.

Less clear is the link between the length of the school year and student achievement. There are countries where students spend more time in school than the United States and still rank lower on the Programme for International Student Assessment. Finland and the Netherlands spend less time in school than Japan and scored higher on the same exam.22

But quality time engaged in learning is a consistent characteristic of all globally-competitive school systems.
Global companies we think of as “ours” also have offices in places where people think of the company as “theirs.”
Conclusion

More than 60 percent of Wake County’s high school students go on to some form of college after graduation. It’s a notable accomplishment considering today’s public education system was designed to send about 20 percent of its students into higher education.24

World-wide competition demands a different design.

It is not a lack of commitment or interest that is holding our schools back. Improving education has consistently ranked near the top of state and national agendas for more than 25 years. Per pupil expenditures during that time, held constant to account for inflation, have steadily increased both locally and throughout the country.25

But at the same time, countries such as Singapore, Ireland and Finland rebuilt public education systems almost from scratch. Other nations were in the midst of rapid expansions. Between 1953 and 2004, India’s college enrollment increased from 230,000 students to 9.8 million.

It’s easy to believe these changes don’t matter. It’s a big world with room for all. We have already seen success in the Triangle. We have global companies such as Cisco, SAS and GlaxoSmithKline in our backyard. Why shouldn’t it continue?

It will, if we make the right choices. But the global companies we think of as “ours” also have offices in Ireland, Austria, India and Egypt. People there think the companies belong to them. And they do, as long as those countries provide the needed talent.

Meeting that need is a tall order. Even companies such as SAS – born from work at N.C. State University and deeply committed to the Triangle – must increasingly hire from other countries to fill U.S. jobs. SAS has offices in more than 100 countries. They want the same kind of workers as most other employers: people who can learn, unlearn, relearn and think.

This is the world our graduates compete in today. It is a world where countries with a higher percentage of immigrants than the United States rank higher on international exams despite perceptions that our open-door policies hold down averages.26

Those who worked on this project are not suggesting we mimic other systems. Rather, we should tap into the creativity and motivation that others envy about the United States.

The limited changes already underway in U.S. schools pose challenging questions: What is the role of our schools outside academics? How should we staff schools? What should we pay teachers and expect in return? Does every student even need a classroom, especially as they get older and technology evolves?

These are not questions for a school district to answer alone. These are questions for a community to debate and discuss. Wake County’s public schools are uniquely positioned to respond. The county’s deep well of talent, academic track record and commitment to progress are unmatched by most urban districts. The need is obvious and the world is waiting.

It won’t wait forever.
references


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