Wake County Public School System
North Carolina

**Superintendent:** Bill McNeal

**Primary contacts:** David Holdzkom, assistant superintendent of evaluation and research, and Chuck Dulaney, senior director of school accountability*

**Schools studied:**
- Brentwood Elementary School
- Lynn Road Elementary School
- Fuquay-Varina Elementary School
- Hodge Road Elementary School

114,068 students (2004-05), K-12, urban/suburban

**District and School Descriptions**

Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) in North Carolina serves the entire county of Wake, which includes the towns and cities of Apex, Cary, Fuquay-Varina, Garner, Holly Springs, Knightdale, Morrisville, Raleigh, Rolesville, Wake Forest, Wendell, and Zebulon. The district is growing rapidly. It serves about 6,500 more students this year than last year. Superintendent Bill McNeal was named the 2004 national Superintendent of the Year by the American Association of School Administrators.

Brentwood Elementary School serves 532 students in grades preK-5. Despite a district policy that caps the percentage of low-income students in a school at 40%, almost three-quarters (72%) of Brentwood’s students are economically disadvantaged. The school has made adequate yearly progress three years in a row and has been identified by the state as a School of Distinction, but the principal is concerned that the school could fail to make AYP if its student population changes even slightly.

Lynn Road Elementary School serves 520 students in grades preK-5, including two self-contained classes for students with severe disabilities. The school achieved AYP in 2004-05 after not demonstrating AYP in 2002-03 and 2003-04.

At Fuquay-Varina Elementary School, student enrollment has grown by about 25% over three years, and the school now serves 760 students in grades K-5. It made AYP in 2004-05 and became a North Carolina Honor School of Excellence, even though it did not demonstrate AYP in 2003-04 due to the reading achievement of students with disabilities.

Hodge Road Elementary School serves 620 students, 60% of whom receive free or reduced-price lunch, in grades K-5. It has not made AYP for three straight years and is therefore in its second year of improvement, despite being a North Carolina School of Distinction for four straight years.

*Other contacts include Willi Web, director of Title I; Joe Peel, director, Leadership Academy; Sylvia Faulk, principal, Lynn Road Elementary School; Courtney Radford and Becky Byrd, Title I teachers, Lynn Road Elementary; Cheryl Wilson, special education teacher, Lynn Road Elementary; Myrna Pagan, principal, Brentwood Elementary School; Frank Creech, principal, Fuquay-Varina Elementary School; Ray Newland, assistant principal, Fuquay-Varina Elementary; Lori Rutherdord, instructional resource teacher, Fuquay-Varina Elementary; and Jamie Lynch, principal, Hodge Road Elementary.
Key Findings

- WCPSS recently adopted a goal that 95% of all students be proficient by 2008 and that all subgroups achieve “high growth.” This goal is more ambitious than the goals required by No Child Left Behind. Student achievement in WCPSS is high—approximately 91% of students are proficient—but it has remained flat for the past few years.

- The state’s accountability system is based on student achievement growth over time and thus differs significantly from NCLB’s requirement to demonstrate adequate yearly progress. As a result, some schools that do not demonstrate AYP have been rewarded as outstanding schools under the state system. WCPSS and its schools focus more on the state system than NCLB, believing it to be a fairer, more accurate, and more informative method for determining school quality.

- The district’s theory of school improvement and student growth is to provide high-quality data and analysis and training in educational best practices to principals and teachers, who shape instruction to meet the needs of all students.

- Most administrators and teachers focus on the state accountability system rather than NCLB and find NCLB’s sanctions ineffective and distracting. Nonetheless, administrators and teachers say that NCLB has pushed educators to individualize instruction, especially in reading, and improve educational services for struggling students before referring them to special education.

- A corollary of NCLB’s impact on individualizing instruction in WCPSS is the change in the ways students with disabilities are served by district schools. In general, NCLB and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have pushed the district to carefully consider the way in which students are referred to special education. Schools and teachers are now required to demonstrate that students received research-based reading instruction before assigning them to special education. In addition, the district has created a literacy program intended to lower the rates of special education referrals by combining elements from the reading programs in general education, Title I, and special education.

- Many Title I schools in WCPSS are operating targeted assistance programs, rather than schoolwide programs, partly out of fear of losing their paraprofessionals, who would not be deemed “highly qualified” if they worked in a schoolwide program.

Overall Impact of NCLB

Since the signing of NCLB in 2002, student achievement in the Wake County Public School System has remained flat at a high level (approximately 91% of WCPSS students are proficient as measured by state tests), and the narrowing of the achievement gap has ceased, according to Chuck Dulaney, senior director of school accountability. WCPSS started making significant gains in student achievement during the 1997-98 school year, said Dulaney, when the district adopted the goal that 95% of students would be on grade level by 2005. The challenge, he added, is maintaining growth in achievement when such a high percentage of students are already proficient.

Dulaney emphasized that the timing of the district’s plateau in student achievement—the first year of NCLB implementation—is a coincidence. NCLB, he insisted, did not contribute to the district’s stalled progress. However, Dulaney and David Holdzkom, the district’s assistant superintendent for evaluation and research, did contend that NCLB can take time, energy, and resources away from district efforts to meet its Goal 2008—95% of all students proficient by 2008, with “high growth” for all student subgroups.
This district goal is more ambitious than NCLB’s proficiency goals in at least three ways. First, Goal 2008 calls for overall proficiency rates to increase at a faster rate than NCLB demands. Second, Goal 2008 requires “high growth,” not just proficiency, for subgroups, whereas NCLB only requires that increasing percentages of students meet a proficiency standard. Consequently, under Goal 2008 it is not enough for a school to have all of its students achieving at proficient levels as defined by the state. The school also has to ensure that all subgroups, including students who are already proficient, are meeting a standard of growth beyond proficiency. This goal is made possible by the state and district use of a “value-added” analysis of student achievement data, which uses sophisticated statistical analyses to predict and measure students’ growth in achievement.

Dulaney, Holdzkom, and all four principals interviewed for this report argued that NCLB’s absolute achievement standard for students with disabilities and English language learners, in particular, often frustrates and lowers the morale of educators rather than motivating them to work harder and more effectively, as intended. Almost all educators and administrators interviewed expressed relief that the state and district accountability system, despite setting a higher bar for schools, focuses on growth in achievement, an emphasis viewed as fairer and more productive than NCLB’s absolute and relatively low-level standard.

The third way in which the district goal and the state accountability system are more rigorous than those of NCLB is that the district and state hold schools accountable for more subgroups. For example, like NCLB, the district’s Goal 2008 requires the district and schools to disaggregate achievement data for racial subgroups, students with disabilities, English language learners, and low-income students. Unlike NCLB, however, Goal 2008 also requires the district and schools to disaggregate data by the achievement level from which they started.

North Carolina reports students’ achievement on the state assessment in four performance levels: I, II, III, and IV. (Level III is proficient and Level IV is advanced.) Although the decision about how to measure growth under the state accountability system had not been finalized as of October 31, 2005, Dulaney’s understanding was that the district and schools must demonstrate high growth in achievement for students in each performance category, regardless of the percentage of students who are proficient (Level III). Consequently, schools and the district must demonstrate high growth for advanced students (regardless of race, socioeconomic status, primary language, or disability) as well as for very low-performing students (regardless of race, etc.). This requirement counters some critics of NCLB who argue that a single proficiency standard results in teachers focusing too much on students who are either just above or below proficiency to maximize the percentage of students meeting the standard. Such focus, critics contend, is often to the detriment of very high-achieving and very low-achieving students.

NCLB and Student Achievement

The percentage of students in grades 3-8 who scored at Levels III and IV on “end-of-grade” reading and math tests stayed at 91% in 2004-05 for the third year in a row. Average reading scale scores rose slightly in grades 3, 5, 6, and 8 and fell slightly in grade 4. Average math scores rose slightly in grades 6, 7, and 8 while falling slightly in grades 3, 4, and 5.

In high school, end-of-course (EOC) test scores showed mixed results when compared to previous years. Average scale scores rose slightly in four of eight subject areas, fell slightly in three subjects, and were unchanged in one subject. The percentage of students scoring in the proficient range rose slightly in two subjects, fell slightly in five subjects, and was unchanged in one subject. The composite percentage of all EOC test scores at Level III or IV was unchanged from 2003-04.
Based on these test results, WCPSS schools fared well under North Carolina’s School-Based Management and Accountability Program (commonly referred to as the “ABCs”):

- 54 schools were designated “Honor School of Excellence”
- 7 schools were designated “School of Excellence”
- 43 schools were designated “School of Distinction”
- 6 schools were designated “School of Progress”
- 57 schools exceeded “High Growth” targets
- 55 schools exceeded “Expected Growth” targets

No schools were identified as “Low Performing” by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

In order to be a School of Excellence, 90% of students’ test scores must reach Level III or IV on all North Carolina tests taken at that school during the year, and the average gains from pre-tests to post-tests must meet or exceed Expected Growth standards set by the state. In addition to these standards, an Honor School of Excellence must also meet the requirements of AYP as measured by NCLB. WCPSS had 61 schools designated either as Schools of Excellence or Honor Schools of Excellence for the 2004-05 school year, down slightly from 64 in 2003-04.

The School of Distinction designation requires that at least 80% of test scores reach Level III or Level IV, and the school must meet or exceed the Expected Growth standards. WCPSS had 43 schools designated as Schools of Distinction for the 2004-05 school year, up from 35 in 2003-04.

The percentage of WCPSS schools meeting either High Growth or Expected Growth standards rose from 84% in 2003-04 to 86% in 2004-05. High schools had the strongest growth scores, with 10 schools achieving High Growth, 7 schools achieving Expected Growth, and no school achieving less than Expected Growth. Table 1 shows the percentage of WCPSS schools achieving the state’s expected growth and high growth standards since 2001.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Schools Achieving High Growth</th>
<th>Schools Achieving Expected Growth</th>
<th>Schools Not Meeting Expected Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table reads: In 2005, 44% of all schools in WCPSS achieved high growth as determined by the state’s ABCs system.

Source: Dulaney, C. (no date), ABC outcomes for WCPSS for 2004-05: A preliminary summary of results, WCPSS.
Adequate Yearly Progress and School Improvement

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL AYP STATUS

Based on 2004-05 state testing, WCPSS met 66 out of 73 (90.4%) district targets, failing to demonstrate AYP for the first time. The district had to meet targets for every possible subgroup under NCLB except American Indian, which composed less than 1% of the student population. WCPSS missed reading and math targets in all three grade spans (elementary 3-5, middle 6-8, and high school 10). In reading, the English language learners and students with disabilities subgroups did not make AYP in any of the three grade spans. In math, the students with disabilities subgroup did not make AYP in any of the three spans, and the ELL subgroup did not make AYP at the middle school level.

As for schools, 83 out of 132 (63%) made AYP based on 2004-05 testing. Twenty-seven schools missed only one or two targets. Students with disabilities and recipients of free or reduced-price lunch were the two subgroups that failed to meet AYP targets most frequently. After increasing significantly the percentage of schools making AYP in 2003-04, WCPSS experienced a slight dip in 2004-05, from 73% of schools making AYP in 2003-04 to 63% in 2004-05 (see table 2). This trend can be seen across all major subgroups for both reading and math, as the number of subgroups missing AYP declined dramatically in 2003-04 and then increased slightly in 2004-05 (see tables 3 and 4).

Table 2. Percentage of Schools Making AYP, 2003-05

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>All Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table reads: In 2004-05, 80% of elementary schools in WCPSS demonstrated AYP.


Table 3. Number of Schools with Subgroups Missing AYP Targets in Reading, 2003-05

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Free or Reduced-Price Lunch</th>
<th>English Language Learners</th>
<th>Students with Disabilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table reads: In six schools of the WCPSS, the black student subgroup did not demonstrate AYP in reading in 2004-05.

A major cause of the relatively lackluster results appears to be that in 2004-05, the state raised the targets for the percentage of students who must score at proficient levels to demonstrate AYP from 68.9% to 76.7% proficient in grade 3-8 reading and from 74.6% to 81.0% proficient in grade 3-8 math. In the 10th grade, the state set new starting points for percentage proficient for the English I, writing, and Algebra I end-of-course tests. These tests were approved this year as the main high school tests for NCLB accountability. All targets will be raised again in 2007-08 and 2010-11, until they become 100% in 2013-14.

Although almost all administrators and teachers interviewed said they preferred North Carolina’s ABCs accountability system over NCLB and AYP, district administrators did say that the reporting of subgroup performance under NCLB has helped schools and the district uncover student needs that were previously hidden within the majority subgroups of each school. Dulaney insisted, however, that the changing rules and options used to implement NCLB make comparisons between years in a school, between schools in a system, between districts, and between states impossible. For example, one elementary school in Wake County made AYP under the law’s safe harbor provision when the students with disabilities subgroup reached a proficiency percentage of 68.2% in math. But another elementary school missed AYP when its students with disabilities subgroup reached a proficiency percentage of 71.4% in math.

Lynn Road Elementary, a school that met AYP this year but did not the previous two years and thus must offer school choice, has been a School of Distinction three years in a row and has achieved high growth. Similarly, Hodge Road Elementary has not made AYP for three straight years but has been a School of Distinction for four straight years. Willi Webb, the district’s Title I director, expressed concern that Hodge—which serves a large and growing ELL population—will face corrective action next year. The school has developed a comprehensive improvement plan focused on improving students’ language skills. It has also implemented a Title I schoolwide program and Project Achieve (described below), and used its Title I funds to differentiate its professional development for beginner and expert teachers, pay for two literacy coaches, and involve parents who do not speak English.

This year, Lynn Road is going for Honor School status, according to Sylvia Faulk, the school’s principal. Faulk noted that the school might have failed to demonstrate AYP this year for the third year in a row, but the school’s special education population, which has been the subgroup failing to make AYP, decreased below 40 students, the minimum subgroup size that can be held accountable under NCLB. Nonetheless, the school struggles with low teacher morale and negative public perception because NCLB has labeled it a school in need of improvement—even as the state ABCs program has honored it as a School of Distinction.

**Table 4. Number of Schools with Subgroups Missing AYP Targets in Math, 2004-05**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Free or Reduced-Price Lunch</th>
<th>English Language Learners</th>
<th>Students with Disabilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table reads: In 12 schools of the WCPSS, the black student subgroup did not demonstrate AYP in math in 2004-05.

As a result, Faulk believes NCLB is deeply flawed. “If one Senator came to spend one day in my school,” she explained, “I could prove that their legislation is flawed,” by holding special education students to an absolute, and not a growth, standard. Despite this strongly held belief, Faulk credited NCLB with forcing the school to track and address the needs of every student in the school, which resulted in a jump in reading proficiency among low-income students from 69% to 80% between 2003 and 2004.

Despite the misalignment between NCLB and the ABCs, most WCPSS educators welcome accountability, and some would like to see it expanded. Myrna Pagan, principal at Brentwood Elementary, said that AYP is just a numbers game, noting that schools often demonstrate or fail to demonstrate AYP based on the size of their special education and ELL subgroups. Nonetheless, Pagan would like to see accountability extended to grades K-2 because it would improve the quality of data the school receives about younger children.

**DISTRICT IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES**

WCPSS received national attention this year* for its policy of capping at 40% the percentage of low-income students in any school. The theory behind this cap is to prevent any one school from serving an overwhelmingly needy student population—keeping all schools “healthy,” in Dulaney’s terms—and to ensure student diversity.

The district seeks to achieve this balance in at least two ways. First, the district periodically redraws school boundaries to maintain diversity. Second, the district places innovative magnet schools in low-income neighborhoods. These schools are tasked with creating and maintaining creative, high-quality programs that draw relatively affluent students from surrounding neighborhoods. If magnet schools begin to lose their drawing power, they are required to change their theme after conducting “market research” about student needs and interests. A positive result from this integration, according to Dulaney, is that unlike other large districts, there are virtually no schools considered “undesirable” by teachers, making it easier to ensure that highly qualified teachers are equitably distributed.

Despite the district’s economic integration policy, many schools exceed the district cap for low-income students. For example, of the 532 students who attend Brentwood Elementary, 72% are economically disadvantaged. When asked about the district policy of capping the percentage of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch, Myrna Pagan, the school’s principal, smiled and asked, “Where are they going to put them?” Nonetheless, Pagan actually credited her school’s accomplishment of meeting AYP for three consecutive years to the large enrollment of low-income children, insisting that the teachers and administrators can focus on whole-school improvement rather than targeting services to relatively few students.

In addition, although many administrators believe the cap is helpful, they are quick to point out that it is only one element of the district’s comprehensive strategy for increasing student achievement. The district’s overall theory of school improvement, which it has used for the last eight to ten years, is to use and analyze high-quality data to make decisions and drive instruction, said Holdzkom and Dulaney. The state defines expected growth and high growth of achievement for all schools* and provides data for all schools; the district disaggregates the data for subgroups and classrooms and academic standards or benchmarks.

The district’s plan for school improvement relies to a great extent on very successful principals who can translate the data for teachers and use it to lead the instructional improvement process. Consequently, seven years ago, the district created the Leadership Academy, which trains and supports some of the district’s principals and assistant principals. According to Joe Peel,

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* The state definition of growth and high growth may change next year, according to Dulaney, because some results have recently been “skewed.” The state has revised its curricula and tests since the formulas were put into place in the 1990s.
director of the Academy, WCPSS started the program with the help of a local foundation because it had a “principal crisis.” The Academy seeks to expand the pipeline for high-quality principals, especially since the district places so much responsibility on them. “Even good principals can struggle in this district,” said Peel.

The Academy partners with North Carolina State University, which agreed to change its administrator training program to meet the needs of the district more effectively. Administrators graduating from the program—18, as of October 2005—agree to spend at least two years in WCPSS, beginning as assistant principals, if they are able to land a job. Currently, 15 of the 18 are serving as assistant principals in WCPSS.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES
North Carolina has a standard course of study, which all districts and schools are expected to follow. In general, WCPSS builds on this course of study by providing tools and guidance. In theory, schools can determine the degree to which they take advantage of the resources. Schools in WCPSS have a significant amount of authority and autonomy, although they are expected to use a district-developed diagnostic assessment system in reading, math, and writing. The district does an exemplary job of providing “best practices,” said several principals, who noted the district’s use of balanced literacy, Writer’s Workshop, science kits, and standards-based grading. The problem, Pagan added, is that the programs are rolled out too quickly.

Schools at risk of being identified for improvement are encouraged by the district, or can volunteer, to become “Project Achieve” schools. These 20 schools give up some of their autonomy in return for additional district support. Project Achieve schools make more extensive use of formative assessments every four to six days to diagnose and address student needs. Pagan said that Project Achieve’s greatest selling points to teachers are the “focused lessons” that the district developed. These highly prescribed lesson plans for 15-minute lessons in reading and math, added Pagan, are especially helpful for new teachers who need detailed guidance for teaching specific curricular objectives and to veteran teachers looking for new ideas.

Project Achieve schools also receive additional resources, including instructional materials, additional professional development, and greater access to an instructional resource teacher (IRT). All schools in WCPSS have a half-time IRT who serves as an instructional leader and professional development provider. Project Achieve schools—and schools that decide to use resources in this way—receive a full-time IRT. IRTs typically observe teachers using the focused lessons and delivering their own lessons, help teachers and administrators with school improvement planning, track the achievement of students, conduct model lessons, and help teachers make adjustments in the way they teach classes.

The district’s area assistant superintendents also play an important role in supporting schools in general and schools identified as at risk in particular. WCPSS is divided into six regions, each headed by an area assistant superintendent whose role is to evaluate and support principals and serve as a liaison between the superintendent and principals. The assistant superintendents spend the most time with schools identified by the district’s “healthy school” task force. This task force initially identified approximately 100 indicators of school quality.

The district now annually collects data on all the indicators for each school. Using these data, the task force determines whether a school is headed in the wrong direction (level 3, or “review” schools), is stable but at risk (level 2, or “watch list” schools), or is stable or excelling (level 1). This year 12 schools were identified in level 3; none of these was identified for improvement under NCLB. An additional 12 schools were identified in level 2; one of these (Hodge Road) was identified for improvement under NCLB.

Although the district doesn’t emphasize AYP determinations, schools identified as in need of improvement under NCLB receive a “ton” of support from the district, according to Sylvia Faulk, Lynn Road Elementary School’s principal. The district has provided a great deal of professional development to teachers in their classrooms and help in developing a school improve-
ment plan. Since the school made AYP this year, the district now provides services on an as-needed basis, but “they come anytime I call,” said Faulk.

Similarly, Hodge Road receives additional resources—about $150,000 over two years—because of its status as a school in need of improvement. The school uses these funds to purchase reading materials and pay part of the salary for a literacy coach. (The school uses Title II and district funds to pick up the rest of the literacy coach’s time and to pay for a second full-time literacy coach.)

Testing Issues
North Carolina began end-of-grade testing in reading and math in 1992-93. In 2003-04, the state used different high school tests for the ABCs accountability system and NCLB. AYP was based on the High School Comprehensive Tests of Reading and Mathematics for grade 10, while high school ratings under the ABCs system were based on end-of-course tests. Beginning in the 2004-05 school year and fully implemented in 2005-06, the state stopped using the High School Comprehensive Tests of Reading and Mathematics and began using the end-of-course tests for both AYP and the state ABCs system.

Impact of NCLB on Curriculum and Instruction

GENERAL CHANGES IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION
Most district and school administrators interviewed insisted that NCLB has not had a significant impact on the district’s curriculum and instruction, other than pushing schools to systematically and frequently assess the needs of every student in order to address needs more effectively. For example, many elementary schools chart the reading progress of every student throughout the school year. In Brentwood Elementary, the conference room has a wall chart showing the reading levels of every student along with the special needs and resources each child is receiving.

CHANGES IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION FOR SUBGROUPS
A corollary of NCLB’s impact on individualizing instruction in WCPSS is the change in the ways students with disabilities are served by district schools. In general, NCLB and IDEA have pushed the district to carefully consider the way in which students are referred to special education, according to Willi Webb, the Title I director. Schools and teachers are now required to demonstrate that students received “proper” instruction before assigning them to special education. In addition, the district has created a literacy program intended to lower the rates of special education referrals by combining elements from the reading programs in general education, Title I, and special education.

One result, according to Faulk, the principal at Lynn Road Elementary, is that students with disabilities have greater access to the general curriculum as a result of NCLB. Feeling NCLB’s pressure to get students with disabilities to achieve at the proficient level on state assessments, Lynn Road initially attempted to expose students to curriculum at their actual grade level. “But that didn’t work,” said Faulk, so they “dropped the general education curriculum down a grade or two” for students with disabilities, while ensuring that their individualized education programs (IEPs) were being met.

The strategy seems to be working to some degree. Students with disabilities at Lynn Road Elementary are making “massive progress,” according to Cheryl Wilson, a special education teacher at the school, but this progress doesn’t show up on the state assessment. The school uses Reading Mastery by SRA to diagnose and address student needs as well as “Literacy Assessment Cards” and “Math Profile Cards” to target instruction for students at the level at which they are working. By these measures, students are progressing rapidly, Wilson said, adding that she worries what will happen to her students with disabilities once they leave the self-contained classroom at Lynn Road to attend the middle school, which does not have a self-contained classroom.
Similarly, after emphasizing a more structured reading approach, students with disabilities at Fuquay-Varina Elementary School who participate in regular classrooms did “very well” and demonstrated AYP in 2003-04 after not demonstrating it in 2002-03, according to Frank Creech, the school’s principal. However, the self-contained classroom in the school, which serves students who have a variety of disabilities and learning challenges, continues to struggle, Creech said. “I’m not sure what else we can do to get all these students to proficiency,” he said.

**English Language Learners**

In 2005-06, the district adopted for all its schools a new K-8 curriculum for English language learners focused on language acquisition. The district also purchased new curriculum materials—Avenues, by Hampton Brown.

At Brentwood Elementary, three teachers pull students whose first language is Spanish out of class to develop proficiency in English. These teachers also communicate with families in Spanish. In addition, 12 other staff members at the school speak Spanish. As a result, said the school’s Spanish-speaking principal, the school manages to involve parents a great deal.

Jamie Lynch, principal of Hodge Road Elementary—which has not made AYP for three straight years but has been identified as a School of Distinction by the state for four straight years—described as an “overwhelming challenge” the fact that half of her kindergarten class does not speak English and that many children in the upper grades come to school from other countries where they were “underschooled.” Her biggest frustration is that these children must take the state assessment in their second year, even though they are not yet proficient in English.

At the same time, the school’s ELL budget has been cut this year, reducing the number of ELL teachers from 3 to 2.5, even as the ELL population has grown to about 100 students. The fact is, said Lynch, there is not a clear sense of what best practices are for serving students who do not speak English and who came into the system underschooled.

**NCLB School Choice**

WCPSS has two schools offering school choice as a result of not making AYP for two or more consecutive years. In these schools, only about 40 students have opted to choose another school, and with few exceptions, these students are not members of the subgroup that has not made AYP (students with disabilities), said Dulaney. Rather, he said, the students taking advantage of the choice option tend to be relatively high-performing students whose families want their children to attend school in a different location (e.g., to be near where they work or grandparents). The ability of relatively high-achieving students to take advantage of NCLB’s choice provision, according to Dulaney, is a weakness of NCLB, as it leaves the school identified as needing improvement “more depleted of human capital needed to create more successful environments.”

Principals affected by school choice agree with Dulaney. Jamie Lynch, principal of Hodge Road Elementary—which must offer choice and supplemental services—finds NCLB’s choice sanctions counterproductive. “How does this help us?” she asked, noting that approximately 90% of the 28 students from her school taking advantage of choice this year are relatively high-achieving white students.

Faulk and Lynch indicated that an even bigger problem than the increased concentration of needy students is that, even in cases in which schools are recognized under the state’s accountability system for achieving high student academic growth, parents and the general public perceive the school as “failing.” Faulk said that the media in Wake County are doing a better job explaining the complexity of AYP ratings and NCLB sanctions and that the district’s superintendent “sings our praises.” Nonetheless, she said that the school must constantly fight public perception that the school is of poor quality.
Supplemental Educational Services

One WCPSS school, Hodge Road Elementary, must offer supplemental educational services as well as school choice. Implementing the supplemental educational services provisions have been difficult, according to Willi Webb, the district’s Title I director. The state gave the district a list of 16 eligible service providers that needed to be contacted. Only 6 of the 16 providers actively engaged with the district, and only 4—Sylvan Learning, Huntington Learning, Master Mind, and University Tutors—attended a mandatory SES fair. The district is in the process of negotiating contracts with these 4 providers. Webb said that the biggest challenge has been managing the providers. Noting, for example, that each provider charges a different fee, she said that she would like more guidance from the state about how much each program should cost per child.

In school year 2005-06, the district received 130 applications out of 340 students who are eligible for supplemental educational services from the school. Title I money will be used to provide transportation home for students; the district and providers agreed to serve the students at the school site, which helps greatly with logistics, according to Webb. SES will be provided after school two days a week. In addition, the school is providing two additional days of after-school tutoring. For administrative and legal purposes, Webb said, the district and school keep the SES and tutoring activities completely separate.

Lynch, the principal at Hodge Road, said that the supplemental services are disconnected from what the school is doing and are “probably not effective.” She added that the school has insufficient funds to provide remediation for all students who need it, especially those in grades K-2 who are not covered by the state assessment.

Teacher Qualifications, Support, and Professional Development

HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS

Approximately 91% of the district’s 8,000 teachers meet NCLB’s definition of “highly qualified,” according to Toni Patterson, WCPSS assistant superintendent for human resources, staffing, and development. The district, Patterson said, is attempting to hire only highly qualified teachers, but “we’re a high-demand district in a state that doesn’t produce enough teachers.” Like many large school systems, WCPSS struggles to staff special education classrooms in all grades, and math, science, and foreign language classrooms in middle and high schools. But as of November 4, 2005, the district had only nine vacancies for special education teachers.

The problem will become more severe next year, said Patterson, when the state will no longer allow districts to hire teachers with provisional licenses. As a result, WCPSS will likely need to staff more classrooms with long-term substitute teachers if there continues to be a dearth of highly qualified teachers in key areas. Exacerbating the problem, said Patterson, is the apparent conflict in the guidance about highly qualified teachers between state and NCLB on the one hand and IDEA on the other. Guidance for IDEA says that special education teachers teaching two or more core academic subjects must demonstrate competence in all subjects being taught, whereas the state has developed draft regulations that would require special education teachers teaching one or more subjects to demonstrate competence. “This is a big difference for us,” said Patterson, who has asked the state to lower its standard to that set by IDEA. In general, Patterson said that WCPSS is doing everything it can to meet NCLB’s highly qualified provisions without “overreacting,” but is unlikely to have all its teachers highly qualified by 2006-07. The district, she said, is taking an “incremental approach” to meeting the provisions “without causing teachers to panic.” Patterson added that the district has an outstanding teacher workforce that achieves high levels of student performance and that the district wants to ensure first and foremost that they are well supported.

The district’s incremental approach can be summed up as follows. First, attempt to hire only highly qualified teachers. Second, help veteran teachers who are not highly qualified meet the
HOUSSSE (high objective uniform state standard of evaluation) requirements or pass the Praxis test. In helping the veteran teachers, the district focused on middle school teachers last year and high school teachers this year. In both cases, district administrators presented the requirements in person to all teachers, identified teachers who were not highly qualified, sent these teachers a letter outlining the options they had, and then supported their efforts to meet the HOUSSSE requirements or to pass the Praxis test (which the district pays for). Due to insufficient resources, the district is not, according to Patterson, paying teachers to take college courses that would help them meet the highly qualified provisions.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The district provides a great deal of professional development. Teachers select from free courses based on their needs and then typically train teachers at their school who did not attend. The focus of the district’s professional development is on implementing the recommended programs for reading, writing, and math, according to Frank Creech, principal at Fuquay-Varina. Last year, for example, the district emphasized implementation of Math Trailblazers. This year, the district is focusing on improving students’ writing across the curriculum, and next year the district will emphasize reading because it will be adopting new materials, according to Creech.

District administrators and principals interviewed agreed that the district-provided professional development was of very high quality, but that the most effective professional development for teachers occurs in their schools. As discussed, all schools have IRTs who model lessons, help teachers set up classrooms and implement their guided reading programs, and generally improve the instructional and assessment strategies of teachers. Principals indicated that the IRTs in their schools were critical to supporting and training teachers and improving student achievement in the schools.

Paraprofessional Qualifications and Support

Virtually all Title I paraprofessionals in WCPSS are highly qualified under NCLB. But the NCLB legislative requirements have a broader reach for paraprofessionals in Title I schoolwide programs (those that provide educational services to benefit all children in high-poverty schools) than for paraprofessionals in targeted assistance programs (those that restrict Title I instructional services only to students who are eligible because of low achievement). In a schoolwide program, all instructional paraprofessionals must be highly qualified, but in a targeted assistance program, only paraprofessionals whose salaries are supported by Title I funds must be highly qualified. As a result it appears that many Title I schools in WCPSS are implementing targeted assistance programs rather than schoolwide programs. Currently, only 3 of 48 Title I schools operate schoolwide programs, according to Title I director Willi Webb. Webb said that she would like to see more schools operate schoolwide programs because she believes them to be more effective in serving the needs of students, but schools have been resisting out of fear of losing their paraprofessionals.

The district is training paraprofessionals for free to pass the Work Keys Assessment, which will enable them to demonstrate they are highly qualified. Nonetheless, Webb said that there are still enough paraprofessionals who are not highly qualified that schools have decided that the transition to a schoolwide program is not worthwhile.

Funding and Costs

The district’s Title I budget went up in 2005-06 to $13 million. Approximately 83% of these funds are used to pay teacher salaries.
Capacity Issues
The district’s capacity to collect, analyze, and report data is as high as any in the country, district and school administrators claimed. The district’s greatest challenge in implementing NCLB, according to Holdzkom, is that it has purposely kept its central office “lean and mean,” preventing it from providing a significant amount of assistance to schools, especially those struggling to meet AYP proficiency standards. The district, which has been experiencing significant growth in student enrollment for several years, also struggles to hire and retain sufficient numbers of highly qualified teachers.

Reading First
No school in the district receives Reading First funding.

Data File—Wake County Public School System

Location: North Carolina
Type: Urban/suburban

Number of Schools
Total: 137
Elementary: 88
Middle/junior high: 28
High schools: 17
Other: 4 alternative schools

Number of Title I schools: 48

Student Enrollment and Demographics
Total enrollment: 114,068

White: 57%
African American: 27%
Latino: 8%
Asian: 4%
American Indian: 0.3%

Low-income students: 27%
Students with disabilities: 15%
English language learners: 4%

Teachers
Total number of teachers: About 8,000
Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 91%

Paraprofessionals
Total number of Title I instructional paraprofessionals: About 2,000
Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: About 95%

Total Number That Did Not Make AYP Based on 2004-05 Testing
Title I and non-Title I schools that did not make AYP, including those in improvement, restructuring, or corrective action: 49
### Number of Title I Schools in Improvement, Restructuring, or Corrective Action

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### Number of Schools Offering Choice and/or SES

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