

Part I: Introduction

The Case for Redistricting

Strengthening Wilmington education requires more coherent and responsive governance of Wilmington public schools. Improved governance will not solve all the problems facing public education in Wilmington, but it should be the starting point. Without changing the governance of Wilmington public education, all other improvements will be made more difficult or simply not possible. This has been the conclusion of every working group focused on Wilmington education since 2001. All have proposed the need to create a system of governance that is streamlined, more responsive to the needs of Wilmington's children and their families, and more deeply connected with the community that it serves. A range of proposals has been offered—from district consolidation to the creation of a Wilmington charter district—but none has been implemented. Indeed, the fragmentation of Wilmington public education governance has become more acute. (Wilmington Education Advisory Committee (WEAC), 2015, p.19)

Today, twenty-three separate governing units—including seventeen governing units located in the City of Wilmington and six outside the city—are responsible for delivering public education to approximately 11,500 Wilmington children with no unified plan, few efforts at collaboration, and virtually no requirements to function as a coordinated public education system. The five districts operating in the City of Wilmington (Brandywine, Christina, Colonial, Red Clay Consolidated and New Castle County Vocational-technical) have been joined by eighteen charter schools, each of which is a separate policymaking entity. Each district or charter is responsible for the education of its own segment of the City of Wilmington student population, but no district or charter is responsible for improving the education of all City of Wilmington students.

The fragmentation of governance responsibilities is no accident. It emerged over four decades as the result of separate and sometimes conflicting efforts to improve the learning of City of Wilmington students.

- A federal district judge mandated busing students to achieve integration to ensure equality of educational opportunity. Eleven New Castle County districts became one, and then one district became four.
- Several governors and legislators spanning multiple general assemblies expanded the number of charter schools to encourage innovation and expand family choice. However, the increase of charter schools had unintended consequences of further fragmenting public education responsibilities and negating much of the rationale for the court-ordered district structure.

- Governor Minner and the General Assembly passed the Neighborhood Schools Act believing that attending neighborhood schools would enhance students' educational experience, which further negated the rationale for the district structure ordered by the federal court.

The results of these and related decisions and actions have been consistent and disappointing: incoherent and fragmented governance, disjointed and uncoordinated educational programs and efforts, and, most importantly, poor education outcomes for low-income City of Wilmington students who are predominantly black or Latino. The current fragmentation encourages competition and displacement among district, vocational-technical (vo-tech), and charter schools. Cooperation, collaboration, and shared learning across the sub-systems are the exception rather than the norm. Efforts to improve student learning seldom follow a unified or coordinated strategy across districts and charters and even when such strategies are proposed, coordinated implementation is rare—and often resisted. Increasingly, public resources are dispersed among competing units at growing public expense. Most disconcerting, when a district or charter does succeed in improving educational outcomes, it is virtually impossible to scale-up that success to the public education system as a whole. Indeed, the operation of this system has become increasingly contentious; there is rarely any vision projected of how the complex and often competing arrangement of districts and charters will result in stronger public education for all students.

The educational result of all these actions, despite the efforts of many dedicated educators, administrators, advocates, and reformers, is clearly stated in the final report of the Wilmington Education Advisory Committee (2015):

Today thousands of Wilmington children, most of them poor, black, or Latino, still do not have access to high-quality public education. Judged on most outcomes—test scores, truancy, graduation rates, college attendance, socio-emotional well-being, drug use, homelessness, arrests, and unemployment—these children have become data points for a system of failure. (p.13)

The evidence is overwhelming: The arrangement of districts imposed by court order for the express purpose of improving the conditions of black students who had been systematically disadvantaged by segregation and unequal resources has failed to achieve its purposes and has no justification other than inertia.

- The arrangement has failed to achieve and maintain the racial integration that was its principal rationale. City of Wilmington schools in the four traditional school districts are among the most racially segregated schools in Delaware and their concentration of low-income students is among the state's highest.
- The arrangement has failed to ameliorate the resource inequity that was a major motivating factor in the court-ordered district plan. The needs of students in many

schools in the City of Wilmington and northern New Castle County often far exceed what can be addressed through a standard allocation of state and local funds. In essence, the resource inequity that typified segregated schools in Delaware is manifested in new ways with equally debilitating consequences for student learning and student lives.

- The arrangement has failed to overcome the barriers to student learning and achievement. After forty years of experience with the current district arrangement and after four decades of educational reform efforts, City of Wilmington children, most of them poor, black or Latino, still have educational outcomes far below those of students across the county and across the state. Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System (DCAS) results for the past two years confirm that the majority, and in some cases the overwhelming majority, of low-income students living in the City of Wilmington are not proficient in English Language Arts and Math (see Tables 1-4). Indeed, for all districts and for all but two charters, the performance of low-income students is below the performance of students for the district or charter as a whole. Moreover, in all districts and most charters, the performance for low-income students living in the City of Wilmington is significantly worse than the performance of low-income students across the district or charter.

Since 2001, four separate commissions and citizen committees have been formed to address the problems of education in the city. All have recommended a version of the same proposal: reduce the number of school districts serving the City of Wilmington and find ways to coordinate the work of those units remaining—both districts and charters—to produce positive outcomes for all students. See Appendix G for an overview of past report recommendations.

Redistricting alone will not turn around City of Wilmington education, but consolidating authority is a necessary step before the other changes recommended in this plan can be made to improve educational outcomes. The combined actions in this plan, specifically assembling financial, institutional, and community resources and mobilizing all sectors, will create a capacity to effectively support learning for City of Wilmington students in ways that have never been attempted or accomplished in the past.

This positive change must start with the State Board of Education's approval of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission's plan as an integrated whole.