Wilmington Education Task Force

Final Report

April 2008

Report of the
Wilmington Education Task Force

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The Wilmington Education Task Force Appointed Members
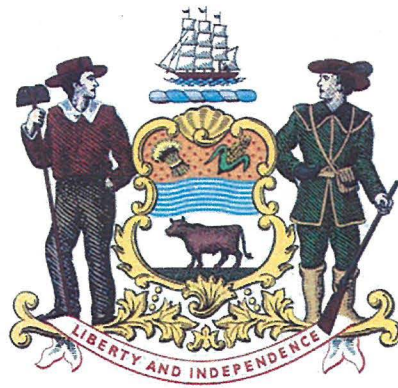
Senate Joint Resolution 3 established that the Wilmington Education Task Force Study Committee was to be comprised of 34 appointed members.

The Honorable Margaret Rose Henry
Delaware State Senate, Chair

The Honorable Harris McDowell
Delaware State Senate

The Honorable J.J. Johnson
Delaware House of Representatives

The Honorable Joseph Miro
Delaware House of Representatives

The Honorable David Sokola
Delaware State Senate
Senate Education Committee -Chair

The Honorable Vince Lofink
Delaware House of Representatives
House Education Committee-Chair

The Honorable Valerie Woodruff
Secretary of Education

Will Robinson
Delaware Charter School Network

Dr. James Scanlon
Superintendent
Brandywine School District

Dr. Lillian Lowery
Superintendent
Christina School District

Dr. Steven Godowsky
Superintendent
NCC Vo-Tech School District

Dr. Robert Andrzejewski
Superintendent
Red Clay Consolidated School District

Dr. George Meney
Superintendent
Colonial School District

Gary Linarducci
Member, Red Clay School Board

Kathleen Wilbur
President, Colonial School Board

Joseph Brumskill
President, Brandywine School Board

James Durr
President, Christina School Board

John F. Lynch Jr.
President, NCC Vo-Tech School Board

Howard Weinberg
DSEA

The Wilmington Education Task Force Appointed Members

Emily Falcon
Office of Management and Budget

The Honorable Jea Street
Community Representative
Mayor of Wilmington Appointee

Tanya Washington
City of Wilmington Administration
Mayor of Wilmington Appointee

Arthur Boswell
Business Leader
Mayor of Wilmington Appointee

Bebe Coker
City Council President Appointee

The Honorable Theodore Blunt
Wilmington City Council President

Jeff Bullock
New Castle County Executive Appointee

Deborah T. Wilson
Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League

Paul Herdman
Rodel Foundation

The Honorable Chandlee Kuhn Johnson
Hope Commission Appointment

Margaret Crosby
Public School Parent

Merrie Pritchett
Public School Parent

Kenneth Watcon
Charter School Parent

Raye Jones-Avery
Chair of Wilmington Neighborhood
Schools Committee (2000)

Marlon Brown
Wilmington Education Task Force Staff

Andria Viola
Wilmington Education Task Force Staff

Ex-Officio members of the Wilmington Education Task Force:

Jack Polidori
DSEA

Kim Hoffman
Department of Education

Emily Knearl
Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League

Edie Corbin
Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League

John Taylor
Vision 2015

David Blowman
Brandywine School District

Gretchen Gilchrist
Wilmington City Council Staff

John Carwell
Rodel Foundation

Jerry Gallagher
Department of Education

Michael Morton
Office of the Controller General

Joe Melloy
Technology Planning Group, Inc.

Joan Spiegelman
Wilmington Neighborhood Schools Committee (2000)

Rmanda Chapman
Girls, Inc.

Julie Palmer
Rodel Foundation

Yvette Santiago
Nemours Health

Michael Rasmussen
Rodel Foundation

Debra Jackson Spence
Hope Commission

Jeff Raffel
University of Delaware

Helen Foss
Wilmington Neighborhood Schools Committee (2000)

BACKGROUND

In June 2007, Senator Margaret Rose Henry sponsored a joint resolution to establish a Wilmington Education Task Force to examine the current status of public education in the City of Wilmington. In partnership with the State Senate Education Committee Chair, Senator David Sokola, and State House Education Committee Chair, Rep. Vince Lofink, the Task Force was created in response to seven years of school closings, declining enrollments in the traditional public schools, and concerns about the quality of educational opportunities for urban students.

Due to the compressed timeframe, the Task Force decided to concentrate on what it saw as the opportunities for improvement, while also recognizing the valuable concentration where public education is making a positive difference in children's lives. There are outstanding principals, well-run buildings, superb teachers and committed staff in Wilmington city schools – in both school district and charter school alike.

Over a six-month period, the Task Force met for a series of meetings and conducted the bulk of its work in four subcommittees. There were discussions on school funding, school quality, enrollment trends, school district lines, professional development, student achievement, learning environments, parental empowerment, and the history of the Wilmington public schools.

Overall a majority of the Task Force felt that the design for city schools created in the early 1980s --- to divide up the City of Wilmington into four school districts[1] --- had outlived its purpose, particularly in light of the subsequent passage of the Neighborhood Schools Act (2000) and the popularity of charter schools (1995 and thereafter). These recent major policy changes have resulted in profound consequences, both intended and unintended. One glaring reality remains however, that urban students still lag behind their suburban counterparts in many key academic indicators, and that Delawareans --- particularly Wilmingtonians --- are again seriously discussing the future of public education in our state's largest city.

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[1] The City of Wilmington is also served by the New Castle County Vo-Tech District. However, because the Vo-Tech District serves all of New Castle County (including the entire City of Wilmington), the District is not part of the division of lines.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is constructed with the purpose of examining public education in Wilmington, Delaware, and providing innovative approaches to addressing the challenges of urban education. In response to declining enrollments, the widening student achievement gap, and proposals to close schools, this Task Force sought to offer thoughtful solutions that would ultimately benefit students and enable them to succeed in life. Providing public education in the City of Wilmington should be conducted in a manner that adequately identifies and addresses the needs of students, parents, and the community at large. By looking at public education from a variety of viewpoints, the task force aims to provide city and state officials with a roadmap that can strengthen future generations of Wilmingtonians.

The work of the Task Force was directed toward four key areas that are critical to enhancing public education in Wilmington. As a matter of organization, four subcommittees were created to allow members to focus on a particular subject of interest or contribute their expertise. The first subcommittee examined the existing quality educational opportunities that are available to students. Their recommendations include adopting quality education indicators and education characteristics, and reporting this information in a more comprehensive nature

The second subcommittee conducted an analysis of district feeder patterns and school assignments in an effort to ascertain the impact on student achievement. Their primary recommendation was to change the existing school district configurations to create two school districts (as opposed to four) that serve the City of Wilmington. In addition to this, the subcommittee recommended revamping the funding formula, removing barriers to equal access in education, restructuring annual assessments, and increasing citizen representation on local school boards.

The third subcommittee explored the potential need and feasibility of a traditional middle school and high school located in the City of Wilmington. Their primary recommendation was to provide students with the option of attending a school in their community. In light of this recommendation, the group stressed the consideration of one or more middle schools, and a high school to be built in the City of Wilmington. The subcommittee also recommended providing state funding for the purpose of transporting students who wish to attend a high school in a surrounding district.

The fourth and final subcommittee was tasked with researching best practices in urban education and analyzing how these practices might be applied to Wilmington schools. Through careful study and consultation with local and national experts, the subcommittee provided various models and strategies that may be successfully applied in Wilmington.

The recommendations contained in this report are based upon a thorough review of these four themes. They were developed to guide city and state officials with a strategy for improving public education in the City of Wilmington. With the input of academics, professionals, community members, and government officials, this Task Force has endeavored to provide the best possible means to enhance the education and quality of life of Wilmington's children. Building from these resources, we offer the following recommendations, and the accompanying report, in the hope of charting a new course for public education in Wilmington, Delaware.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With this background, the Task Force met to discuss, develop, and recommend a wide-ranging set of recommendations to address the education challenges faced by the students who reside in the City of Wilmington. While all of the recommendations have the same value, it is vital to highlight the very first recommendation on school funding. School funding is essential to educate children and without proper funding more students will fall through the cracks of the system. The Task Force wanted to make a clear statement that funding must consider the individual needs of the child ("weighted-student funding"), and that more flexibility is needed to allow districts and schools to make investments at the school building and classroom level.

School Funding: Funding formulas must reflect the needs of the student *and* the classroom.

- Implement a weighted-student funding formula statewide to reflect the diverse needs of students and to ensure that schools have adequate and equitable funding needed to provide quality schools and academic offerings.

- Provide greater flexibility in funding formulas in order to direct funding to the school building and classroom level in response to student needs and where learning takes place.

Data: Data capture must be richer and more detailed to measure the needs each student.

- Establish system of continuous tracking of education data specific to students residing in the City of Wilmington and that attend public schools, including local districts, and Vo-Tech and charter schools alike.

- Ensure that a variety of data is used to enable improved student learning and achievement and to determine quality learning opportunities; including, but not limited to, student growth overtime.

School District Alignment: Wilmington should be served by two school districts.

- **Reduce the number of regular school districts serving Wilmington to two districts instead of four.** One possible model for re-districting the city is that the children living to

the east of Market Street be considered part of the Brandywine School District and the children living to the west of Market Street be considered part of the Red Clay School District, thus eliminating the Christina School District and Colonial School District from the geographic confines of the City of Wilmington.

- Consideration should be given in the long term to the creation of one northern New Castle County School District comprised of the City of Wilmington and all suburbs north of the city.

- **Ensure representation on the local school board is maintained; thus, any seated school board members must retain their seats until the next election and the City of Wilmington must have proportional representation on the resulting school district school boards.** Those areas in the City that are shifted from one district to another should retain their school board seat/member on the new school district board until the next election. In addition, if any re-districting occurs, Wilmington Residents must continue to be represented adequately.

- **Time must be given to implement the changes to the district lines.** Wilmington has lived with the division into four school districts for 30 years. New changes must be implemented carefully and thoughtfully with a wide variety of stakeholders included in the planning.

- **Changes to districts lines should be as revenue neutral as possible.** It is not the intent of this recommendation to create a system where there are "winners" and "losers" in resulting revenue flows associated with property taxes — any reorganization must balance implementation effects so that the impact is as revenue neutral as possible.

School Configuration: Students should be given the opportunity to stay close to home for their entire education.

- City of Wilmington students should be given the opportunity to attend public schools in their communities for grades Pre-K to 8.

- **One or more middle schools should be created in the City of Wilmington.** Christina School District and Brandywine School District are currently committed to placing middle schools in Wilmington.

- **A comprehensive public high school should be created in the city.** Currently, all of the four school district high schools are in the suburbs. Given the lack of land available for new construction, it may be preferable to rehabilitate an empty or underutilized public building. Regarding feeder patterns, special arrangements could be make so the high school could accept students from all city school districts and, therefore, costs could be shared.

- **Consider state funding to provide transportation to high school students who want to "choice" to high schools in surrounding districts.** The state's current public school choice law does not provide transportation to families. Many families in the City of Wilmington do not have a means to transport their child to a high school outside of their feeder pattern.

<u>Professional Staff: More training and unconventional recruitment methods are needed to attract and retain urban educators.</u>

- Recruit and train effective school building leadership and teachers to ensure that leadership, teaching and learning occur with high expectations for all students.

- Equip, empower and expect all teaching staff to build a repertoire of effective instructional strategies to deliver high quality, standards based curriculum.

- Link school leadership, teacher and staff to professional development with high expectation for student learning

- Create an urban professional development center in the City of Wilmington to model best practices in contemporary urban education and to help recruit new school leaders and teachers.

- Target incentives to education personnel in so-called "hard-to-staff" schools and advertise/promote current student loan forgiveness programs for teachers.

- Ensure that recruitment and retention of school leaders and teachers in urban schools helps to identify professionals who recognize the unique challenges of contemporary urban public education and who are equipped to face those challenges. It is especially important to locate teachers who want to teach there because of genuine desire as opposed solely for the incentives.

Learning Environment: School learning environments must be safe, orderly, focused on learning, appropriate curricula and value family engagement.

- Schools must be safe, clean, and orderly in order to enable students to acquire the self-esteem and self-confidence to function as productive citizens.

- Public schools must be focused on high academic standards and expectations. Students should experience age- and skill-appropriate curriculum aligned to state standards and the goals of the individual school.

- Small learning environments that consist of student to adult ratios of 15-to-1 or less, core instruction and the same set of teachers, families and students staying together over a period of time.

- Students, parents, and faculty need to share common goals in order to meet student needs. There must be collective responsibility of adults for student outcomes with clear targets for improvement tied to accountability.

Students: All students deserve the same quality education and access to all learning opportunities.

- **Remove barriers to equal access to education** by increasing the number of vocational technical seats available to city students and any admission practices of public schools, including charter schools, which limit the number of students who can attend.

- **Ensure equity and access of the latest technology available in city public schools.** Enhance and use information technology to help students meet the academic standards and develop the skills needed by a world-class work force.

- **Annual assessments should be challenging but flexible.** When the DSTP is revised next year, the new test must measure growth over time. Students should be assessed at multiple times throughout the year to help improve teacher instruction and provide more accurate, customized data on each child's progress.

Additional study is needed on urban education.

The Task Force recognized in its limited time, the impossibility of addressing all issues regarding the educational needs for the City of Wilmington. While the Task Force has highlighted what it considers to be the key issues above, following below are additional recommendations for consideration. Clearly, more study is needed by a successive or different entity on these recommendations:

- **Conduct further research on best practices in community and school partnerships.**

- **Explore the formation of public/private best practice partnerships with the United Way of Delaware Strong Neighborhood Initiative, the Hope Commission, and government and corporate funded initiatives** focused on the revitalization of Wilmington neighborhoods where public schools are situated. Many of these initiatives plan to support economic development (*i.e.*, jobs that pay a 'living wage' with adequate benefits), housing, employment, prison re-entry, and health care services in targeted zip code zones that extend beyond our public school districts' capacity to address the complex needs of urban families.

- **Explore research and implementation of a unified best practice model of holistic community-based education across school districts in Northern New Castle County serving Wilmington students without regard to the geographic location of the public school.** The Comer School Model is one best practice example.

- Explore implementation and funding of effective family/community engagement models that over time result in improved academic performance, decreased suspensions/expulsions, higher graduation rates, and increased college matriculation for Wilmington public school students.

- **Develop a Citywide Implementation Plan.** The plan should be established with key committee members and select external partners with deep national experience in urban school reform. The end product of this analysis might include:

  ### A. Establishing Appropriate Outcomes
  Identify urban public education best practices (including those that may already exist in the city's schools and/or have been proposed in the Wilmington Neighborhood Schools Report), and align them to performance standards. That is, establish the outcomes and systems that must be used to measure quality in Wilmington schools.

  ### B. Conduct a Gap Analysis
  Use existing research as a baseline to identify systemic deficiencies and missing core elements in the schools that service city students. Identify which best practices and models might best support the specific needs of Wilmington as identified in the analysis.

  ### C. Build On What is Working
  Identify current and emerging efforts that could be leveraged for broad scale implementation and benefit across schools (e.g. start of a professional development school by UD in the city). Start with what currently works and develop strategies for coordinating the benefits of these efforts across the districts and charter schools that serve the city.

  ### D. Implementation Strategy
  Develop an implementation strategy (district or charter) that addresses citywide needs regardless of jurisdiction and considers all current education initiatives. The strategy should include, but not necessarily be limited to:

a) Tangible and realistic action items;

b) Associated time lines and estimated costs for implementation (i.e. phasing tied to systemic changes and stakeholder priorities);

c) Stakeholders accountable for implementation;

d) Regulatory/Legislative changes required; and

e) Funding requirements/needs

E. Funding for Plan Design

Early estimates suggest that this Implementation Plan will require approximately $50,000.