



**Resegregation Will Not Happen on Our Watch:  
The Political and Social Context Surrounding Voluntary  
Integration in Wake County Public School System**

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**Abstract:** As resegregation occurs across the country, some school districts are pursuing voluntary integration. This qualitative case study uses critical policy analysis to explore the political and social contexts surrounding the early stages of developing a voluntary integration plan in Wake County Public School System, North Carolina. Through analysis of interviews with school board and community members as well as a range of documents, findings indicate that population growth and residential development, the proliferation of unregulated school choice, varied perspectives of community stakeholders, inequitable distribution of power and resources,

and school board politics largely shape the process of developing a voluntary integration plan. Recommendations are provided for school district policies, cross-sector collaboration, and state-level policies that could strengthen the potential success of voluntary integration plans.

**Keywords:** educational policy; school integration; politics of education; school board; critical policy analysis

### **La resegregación no ocurrirá bajo nuestra supervisión: El contexto político y social que rodea la integración voluntaria en el sistema de escuelas públicas del Wake County**

**Resumen:** A medida que ocurre la segregación en todo el país, algunos distritos escolares buscan la integración voluntaria. Este estudio de caso cualitativo utiliza un análisis crítico de políticas para explorar los contextos políticos y sociales que rodean las primeras etapas del desarrollo de un plan de integración voluntaria en el Sistema de Escuelas Públicas del Wake County, North Carolina. A través del análisis de entrevistas con la junta escolar y miembros de la comunidad, así como una variedad de documentos, los hallazgos indican que el crecimiento de la población y el desarrollo residencial, la proliferación de opciones escolares no reguladas, las perspectivas variadas de las partes interesadas de la comunidad, la distribución desigual del poder y los recursos y la junta escolar la política moldea en gran medida el proceso de desarrollo de un plan de integración voluntario. Se proporcionan recomendaciones para las políticas del distrito escolar, la colaboración intersectorial y las políticas a nivel estatal que podrían fortalecer el éxito potencial de los planes de integración voluntaria.

**Palabras-clave:** política educativa; integración escolar; política de la educación; consejo escolar; análisis crítico de políticas

### **A nova segregação não acontecerá sob nossa vigilância: O contexto político e social em torno da integração voluntária no Sistema de Escolas Públicas do Wake County**

**Resumo:** Como a resseguração ocorre em todo o país, alguns distritos escolares estão buscando a integração voluntária. Este estudo de caso qualitativo usa análise política crítica para explorar os contextos políticos e sociais que cercam os estágios iniciais de desenvolvimento de um plano de integração voluntária no Sistema de Escolas Públicas do Wake County, North Carolina. Por meio da análise de entrevistas com o conselho escolar e membros da comunidade, bem como uma série de documentos, os resultados indicam que o crescimento populacional e o desenvolvimento residencial, a proliferação de escolhas escolares não regulamentadas, perspectivas variadas de partes interessadas da comunidade, distribuição desigual de poder e recursos e o conselho escolar a política molda em grande parte o processo de desenvolvimento de um plano de integração voluntária. São fornecidas recomendações para políticas do distrito escolar, colaboração intersectorial e políticas estaduais que podem fortalecer o sucesso potencial dos planos de integração voluntária.

**Palavras-chave:** política educacional; integração escolar; política da educação; conselho escolar; análise política crítica

## **Resegregation Will Not Happen on Our Watch: The Political and Social Context Surrounding Voluntary Integration in Wake County Public School System**

Since the peak of desegregation in 1988, schools across the United States have been resegregating (Frankenberg et al., 2019). Segregation is systematically linked to unequal educational opportunities and outcomes for students of color; conversely, socioeconomic and racial integration can be beneficial for all students (Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012). As the Supreme Court has retrenched on school integration efforts, hundreds of school districts have been released from court-ordered integration plans (Reardon et al., 2012). Thus, school districts striving to promote integration often do so voluntarily (Anderson & Frankenberg, 2019; Potter & Burris, 2020). Districts designing and implementing voluntary plans often face a context of diverging opinions and a complex set of social, economic, and political factors.

North Carolina's Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) has a long-standing history of voluntary school desegregation (Grant, 2011). However, in 2010, a newly elected school board voted to end the district's socioeconomic status (SES)-based student assignment plan (Parcel & Taylor, 2015). Since that time, racial and economic resegregation has occurred. Recognizing the harms caused by segregation, in June 2019, the board recommitted to voluntarily integrating the district's schools (Hui, 2019a). The purpose of this case study is to explore the question: What are the political and social contexts surrounding the early stages of developing a voluntary integration plan in WCPSS? This study provides insight into the latest iteration of voluntary integration in a district that was once a national model for desegregation, then retrenched on its efforts, and is now recommitting to integration. The case of WCPSS sheds light on how a diversifying, countywide school district develops a voluntary integration plan in a period of unregulated choice. In doing so, this case develops our understanding of the current politics of voluntary integration.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For this qualitative case study, we use critical policy analysis (CPA) to explore the political and social contexts surrounding the development of a voluntary integration plan. CPA recognizes the political and social influences on education policymaking and guides us to examine five key elements throughout design, data collection, and analysis, including the difference between the language of policy and the reality, the roots and development of the student assignment policy, the distribution of power and resources, the impact of student assignment policy, and the involvement or exclusion of marginalized groups in the policymaking process (Young & Diem, 2018). These guidelines influenced the development of our interview protocol and document analysis, the identification of advocacy groups and local stakeholder whose participation we sought, our approach to coding during data analysis, and ultimately the way we report our findings.

CPA is appropriate for this study because, unlike traditional policy analysis, "the study of educational policy through a critical frame allows for a more nuanced, holistic understanding of the complexities associated with education from policy creation to implementation to evaluation" (Young & Diem, 2018, p. 79). CPA has been utilized to analyze early childhood education funding (Hollett & Frankenberg, 2022), higher education transfer policy (Chase, 2014), school district responses to gentrification (Diem et al., 2019), state-level policies (Sampson, 2019), and federal education policy (Kos, 2018). CPA has also been helpful in previous studies of school integration plans (Diem et al. 2019; Diem et al., 2022), making it attractive for the current study. In this study, we focus on the early stages of policy creation and on student assignment as the central policy in the

voluntary integration plan. CPA assumes that crafting policy for a voluntary integration plan will be influenced by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status and encourages us to examine these factors. The CPA approach allowed us to take a broad historical and sociopolitical view of desegregation and integration in WCPSS, offered a rationale for gently pushing our participants on issues of racial and socioeconomic equity during interviews, and provided a lens during analysis to better understand what our participants were telling us.

## Literature Review

Over the last several decades, the responsibility for designing and implementing integration plans has largely shifted from the federal government to local school districts, and from enforcing mandatory plans to designing voluntary plans. Therefore, we begin by describing the legal context and shift toward voluntary integration plans across the nation. We then examine various factors that shape the way in which a district may develop a voluntary plan, including the growth of unregulated school choice, residential segregation, and attitudes of key stakeholders.

Throughout this article, we use the terms *desegregation* and *integration*. Desegregation is the process of ending the separation and isolation of different racial and ethnic groups by bringing students together in the same learning environment. Integration refers to students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds experiencing fair and equitable treatment within a desegregated environment (Ayscue & Frankenberg, 2016).

### Legal Context and Shift Toward Voluntary Integration Plans

From the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which declared segregated schools to be inherently unequal, through the early 1970s, Supreme Court decisions supported integration. However, President Nixon appointed four conservative justices and beginning in the early 1970s, the Court reversed course. Most recently, in 2007, the Supreme Court struck down the use of an individual student's race in voluntary integration plans in Jefferson County, Kentucky, and Seattle, Washington (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District*, 2007). As the Supreme Court retrenched on integration, school districts across the nation were released from mandatory integration orders and thus had the opportunity to decide whether or not to continue pursuing integration voluntarily. Between 1991 and 2009, more than 200 school districts were released from mandatory orders and many of them resegregated (Reardon et al., 2012). As of 2019, approximately 59 school districts from 25 states were voluntarily implementing student assignment plans to increase racial or socioeconomic diversity (Taylor et al., 2019). A larger number—185 districts and charter schools—had active integration policies, including both court ordered and voluntary (Potter & Burris, 2020).

### Influence of School Choice

The expansion of school choice across the United States, including in North Carolina, impacts the ways in which districts pursue voluntary integration. Regulated choice options, including controlled choice and magnet schools, tend to facilitate desegregation while unregulated choice options, including charter and private schools, tend to exacerbate segregation (Cobb & Glass, 2009; Riel et al., 2018).

Magnet schools were introduced in the 1970s as a tool to facilitate integration, offering specialized programs intended to benefit all students, regardless of race. Some magnets receive federal funding through the Magnet Schools Assistance Program, provided that they prioritize desegregation efforts (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Although they are designed to be mutually beneficial, magnets often attract wealthier White students to lower socioeconomic areas

with large shares of students of color (Goldring & Smrekar, 2000). Magnets have historically included intentional goals for fostering desegregation and often provide transportation (Ayscue et al., 2017). Thus, magnet schools tend to be more desegregated than traditional public schools and charter schools (Ayscue et al., 2016; Riel et al., 2018).

Charter schools, unlike magnets, are unregulated, and thus, charter schools around the nation tend to be more segregated than traditional public schools (Frankenberg et al., 2011; Rotberg, 2014). Charters also contribute to intensifying segregation of traditional public schools in two ways: (a) directly, by making it more mechanically difficult to desegregate the students who remain in the traditional public schools; and (b) indirectly, by undermining the political will of policymakers who fear White flight of families dissatisfied with desegregated traditional public schools (Ayscue et al., 2018). When charters first began in North Carolina in 1997, they enrolled a large share of students of color. However, North Carolina charters currently tend to be either predominantly students of color or predominantly White, and they are increasingly serving White students in racially imbalanced schools (Ladd et al., 2015). Although the charter sector is generally segregated, some individual charter schools are intentionally designed to be racially diverse (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014; Potter & Quick, 2018).

Private schools are also part of the choice landscape across the United States and in North Carolina. Nationwide, private schools enroll a disproportionately large share of White students (69% in private schools versus 49% in public schools) and a disproportionately small share of low-income students (9% versus 50%; Ee et al., 2018). With roots in the Jim Crow Era when White families could receive vouchers for their children to attend segregated private schools, modern-day voucher policies have been growing in popularity over the last 15 years such that now half of the states in the United States, including North Carolina, have a program that subsidizes private schooling (Welner & Green, 2018). Most civil rights protections that students are entitled to in public schools are not relevant in private schools, and some state voucher laws include very minimal, if any, protections or services for groups such as LGBTQ students, English learners, or students with disabilities (Welner & Green, 2018). Moreover, private schools are not required to provide free and reduced-price meals or transportation, thus limiting their accessibility to low-income students.

### **Role of Residential Segregation**

The push for “neighborhood schools” creates a complicated context in which school districts may try to design voluntary integration plans. Basing student assignment on proximity creates a challenge for desegregation because of the relationship between residential and school segregation. A history of racist government policies, institutional practices, and individual actions have repercussions into the present day when many neighborhoods continue to be concentrated by race and class (Logan & Stults, 2011; Massey & Denton, 1993; Owens, 2020; Rothstein, 2017). Racist policies and practices, such as redlining, loan discrimination, and steering, created segregated communities in which Black residents have been hypersegregated in predominantly urban spaces (Massey & Denton, 1993; Rothstein, 2017). Residential racial segregation shapes access not only to educational opportunities but also to employment and economic opportunities as well as sometimes resulting in higher rates of instability and crime, thereby limiting opportunities for upward mobility (Briggs, 2005).

The relationship between school and neighborhood segregation is bidirectional, with segregated neighborhoods influencing school composition, and segregated schools influencing where families choose to live (Frankenberg, 2013; Owens, 2020). Racial residential segregation declined from the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for Black and White segregation; however, in the same time frame, Latinx and Asian communities became more racially isolated (Logan & Stults, 2011). Meanwhile, a nationwide analysis of school and

neighborhood composition finds that the majority of students remain racially isolated in schools, and more than 75% of White, Black, Latinx, and Asian students live in neighborhoods that are just as racially isolated (Owens, 2020). Alongside racial segregation, economic segregation persists. Almost 70% of Black and Latinx students attend economically disadvantaged schools, as measured by free and reduced-price lunch enrollment, compared to 30% of White and Asian students (Owens, 2020). Attending to the intersection of race and class is important, as many districts rely on SES as a main indicator for desegregating schools.

### **Attitudes toward Desegregation**

Community support has been, and will continue to be, essential for school districts pursuing voluntary integration. In a study of five southern school districts, Mickelson et al. (2021) found a correlation between attitudes toward diversity and levels of desegregation when controlling for race, suggesting that White stakeholders' support is crucial if desegregation is to be successful. A nationwide survey of public attitudes toward public schools in 2020 revealed a lack of consensus regarding support for diversity initiatives such as desegregation. When asked if they would support a special program even if it reduced racial and ethnic diversity, overall 48% of parents supported such a program while 51% opposed it. Support among people of color was lower than among White people: 24% of Black participants and 38% of Latinx respondents voiced their support, but 53% of White respondents did so (PDK International, 2020).

Attitudes toward desegregation are also mixed among adults who experienced early desegregation after *Brown*. A study of 242 graduates from racially diverse high schools in the class of 1980 found that almost all of the graduates from different racial and ethnic groups were grateful that they had attended racially diverse schools (Holme et al., 2005; Wells et al., 2009). Despite their acknowledgment of racial tension and inequities at their schools, nearly all of the graduates believed that they learned valuable and unique lessons about race that helped prepare them for life, lessons they could not have learned in any other way. However, Black educators shared a different perspective (Walker, 2009). They voiced opposition to the second-class integration that had occurred and the failure of desegregation to meet Black educators' expectations, making it, in some ways, worse than segregation. In a qualitative study of eight Black superintendents who experienced segregated schools as students before *Brown* and were administrators after *Brown*, Douglass Horsford (2010) found that Black superintendents had mixed feelings about desegregation. Black superintendents acknowledged the benefits of racially diverse schools for individual students but also highlighted the systemic inequities that occurred after *Brown*, including the displacement of Black teachers, tracking Black students into lower level classes, enrolling Black students in special education, and disproportionately disciplining Black students, as well as the diminished self-concept of Black students in desegregated schools. The superintendents in the study concluded that true integration was never actually achieved.

### **Study Context: History of WCPSS's Voluntary Integration**

As we examine the roots and development of a voluntary integration plan in WCPSS, we must contextualize the current situation within the history of WCPSS's voluntary integration efforts beginning in the 1970s. Although voters opposed a merger between Wake County and Raleigh City Schools, business elites in Raleigh believed a desegregated school system was vital to the economic health of the city. Therefore, under pressure from a diverse coalition of business and community leaders, the North Carolina legislature approved the merger, and WCPSS was formed in 1976 as a unified countywide school district (Grant, 2011).

In the 1980s, WCPSS implemented two-way busing and a system of magnet schools. In 1981, five years after the merger, WCPSS established its 15/45 desegregation policy, which stated that no school in the district should have an enrollment with less than 15% or more than 45% Black students (Williams & Houck, 2013). In 1982, WCPSS converted 27 of its schools into magnet schools, mostly located in areas with large shares of students of color. All magnet schools had 100% enrollment and were considered racially balanced (Grant, 2011). Due to these efforts and outcomes, WCPSS was considered an example of successful desegregation (Grant, 2011). While WCPSS was successful at establishing and maintaining racial diversity at the school level, higher levels of within-school segregation meant that different classrooms within the same school were not as racially diverse as the overall school enrollment. Recent research finds that of the five largest counties in the state, WCPSS had the highest level of within-school segregation from 1998 to 2017 (Clotfelter et al., 2021).

In two 1999 cases, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, which has jurisdiction over North Carolina, ruled that the use of a student's race to determine school assignment in order to promote racial and socioeconomic diversity was unconstitutional (*Cappachione v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools*, 1999; *Eisenberg v. Montgomery County Public Schools*, 1999). Therefore, in 2000, WCPSS switched from implementing a race-based student assignment plan to one focused on SES and academic achievement (Williams & Houck, 2013). In doing so, WCPSS became the first metropolitan school district in the country to implement an SES-based student assignment plan. The goal of the plan was to ensure that no school had more than 40% of students who were low income and no more than 25% of students who performed below grade level. The SES- and achievement-based assignment plan of the first decade of the 2000s did not further overall racial desegregation throughout the district (Siegel-Hawley, 2011). However, when focusing on the effect of the plan for a smaller subset of students, Carlson and colleagues (2019) found that the SES- and achievement-based plan did reduce segregation for students who would have attended a majority-minority school in their neighborhood if the district had shifted to a residence-based assignment policy instead (Carlson et al., 2019).

During the 1990s and early 2000s, the combination of rapid population growth, which led to conflict over annual student reassignment as well as year-round schools, and the rise of a new Republican party, which promoted a neighborhood school model instead of the diversity plan, culminated in the 2009 school board election that resulted in the first Republican-affiliated and conservative-leaning school board majority (Parcel & Taylor, 2015). This local election aligned with a state and federal shift in which the North Carolina General Assembly became a Republican supermajority and the U.S. Congress moved to the right as well. The new school board reflected the intense divisions and polarization surrounding Tea Party politics at the national level (Parcel & Taylor, 2015). Wake County residents who identified as liberals or left-leaning were more likely to support racial diversity in schools than those who identified as moderate or conservative (Taylor & Parcel, 2019). However, these findings were insignificant if the parent had a school-aged child; that is, liberal parents were reluctant to support racial desegregation if it theoretically affected their child's classroom as opposed to the district overall (Taylor & Parcel, 2019).

In 2011, just before another election, the school board altered the SES- and achievement-based student assignment policy to ensure that students attended schools "closer to home" (Parcel & Taylor, 2015; Williams & Houck, 2013). After a runoff election in 2011, Democrats regained control of the board, and in 2012, the board returned to an address-based plan with expanded magnet programs. In 2013, the board changed the assignment plan again in order to include efforts to minimize high concentrations of low-performing and low-income students; however, the diversity-focused assignment plans of the past were never fully reestablished (Parcel & Taylor, 2015). This study focuses on the time period after previous research ended by describing the social and

political context surrounding WCPSS's renewed commitment to pursuing voluntary integration in 2019.

In 2019-2020, WCPSS served 161,907 students (Wake County Public School System, 2021), making it the 14th largest school district in the nation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). The number of students in WCPSS increased by more than 20,000 over the decade of 2010-2020 (WCPSS, 2021), with most of the growth among Latinx and Asian students while White and Black enrollments declined. In the 2018-19 school year, 46% of the district's students identified as White, 23% Black, 18% Latinx, 9% Asian, and 4% two or more races. Additionally, 32% of students in the county qualified for free or reduced-price meals. In addition to changing more schools from traditional to year-round calendar schedules in order to accommodate multiple tracks of students in the same school building, the district built more than 30 schools in 10 years. There are currently 191 schools, the majority (116) of which are elementary (WCPSS, 2021). Nearly 40 schools in the district are magnets: 19 elementary, 9 middle, and 10 high schools.

## **Methods**

This single case study describes the political and social contexts surrounding the early stages of developing a voluntary integration plan in WCPSS.

### **Case Selection**

Consistent with a CPA approach, we purposefully selected WCPSS for several reasons. First, as described above, WCPSS has a history of voluntary integration efforts, allowing us to learn about the current development of the plan within the context of past success. Second, since the board shifted its focus away from diversity as a priority in its student assignment policy, the district has been resegregating, prompting the current board to recommit to integration. Finally, the board's recommitment to pursuing integration allowed us the opportunity to examine how a district designs voluntary integration in a political and social environment that has changed substantially since its prior efforts. These characteristics made WCPSS an ideal site for conducting our study. Our case is bounded by both time and place in that we are exploring the political and social context in Wake County from summer 2019 when the board announced that "resegregation will not happen on our watch" through early 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic diverted the board's attention away from the integration plan and onto responding to the pandemic.

### **Data Collection**

Consistent with case study research and in order to provide an in-depth description of our case, we draw on multiple data sources, including interviews, documents, and enrollment data (Yin, 2017). We used purposeful sampling for maximum variation (Patton, 2015) to recruit participants who have knowledge and experience with WCPSS's integration plan and who represent different stakeholders. The eight participants include leaders of equity- and justice-focused organizations, a statewide organization focused on preK-12 education issues, an organization bridging the education and business communities in Wake County, three school board members, and one state legislator who represents Wake County (Table 1). Using CPA to guide our participant selection, it was particularly important to include equity- and justice-focused organizations given CPA's focus on the involvement or exclusion of marginalized groups in the policymaking process as well as representatives of the business community and policymakers who wield political and economic power and resources in the district. With approval from our university IRB and consent from all participants, real names are used in this article.



**Table 1***Participants*

Name	Position	Organization
Craston Artis	Community Leader & Activist	Community Equity Leadership Team
Lynn Edmonds	Outreach Director	Public Schools First NC
Tim Lavallee	Vice President of Policy & Research	WakeEd Partnership
Letha Muhammad	Director	Education Justice Alliance
Roxie Cash	Board Member, Vice Chair 2020	WCPSS
Christine Kushner	Board Member	WCPSS
Jim Martin	Board Member, Chair 2019	WCPSS
Julie von Haefen	Representative	NC Legislature

Interviews, which occurred during Winter 2019 and Spring 2020, were semi-structured and lasted 35 to 85 minutes. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for this study because they allowed us to ask participants the same set of questions and gather perspectives from all participants on the same issues while also exploring different or related topics depending on participants' perspectives, experience, and knowledge (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Saldaña & Omasta, 2022). Guided by CPA, to describe the roots and development of the voluntary plan, we asked participants about why the district took action at the time it did, what the political context was, and what successes and challenges were associated with designing the plan. To understand the involvement and exclusion of marginalized groups in the early stages of developing the voluntary integration plan, interview topics included personal and organizational involvement with designing the integration plan, who was included and excluded from the process, and how communication was conducted about the process and the plan. To gauge the potential impact of the plan, we asked participants about their priorities for the plan itself and how those might differ from others' priorities. To examine the distribution of power and resources, we asked participants to discuss the political climate surrounding the process of designing the integration plan as well as current inequities in the school district. We audio-recorded all interviews and sent recordings to an outside vendor for transcription.

We also collected data from documents, such as school board meeting minutes, policy handbooks, news media articles, and publicly available social media posts. We gathered publicly available student enrollment data from WCPSS. These data sources provided information about board members' stances, agenda items and public comments during board meetings, perspectives of various community members, particularly those from marginalized groups, and factual data about the district and the county.

**Data Analysis**

We began our data analysis by memoing during the process of data collection. We used inductive coding to allow categories to emerge from the data. To enhance intercoder reliability, all three authors independently coded an interview transcript, compared codes, developed a codebook, independently coded another transcript, and refined the codes. Our CPA lens guided us to notice issues of power, resources, involvement, and exclusion. For our first cycle of coding, we used descriptive, in vivo, process, and concept coding. From this cycle, we ultimately generated 35 codes, including, for example, resistance to change, privilege, racism, resource distribution, engaging the community, transportation, housing, charters, and leadership. We then conducted a second cycle of coding, which allowed us to combine our codes into 12 broader categories, such as participation in

the process, spreading awareness, and goals for the plan. Finally, we developed five assertions about the political and social context within which WCPSS is developing a voluntary integration plan (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2013).

The combination of documents and interviews allowed for triangulation between multiple data sources and strengthened the trustworthiness of our findings. In addition, participants reviewed and provided feedback on a draft of our findings. Overall, participants confirmed that the findings accurately represented their perspectives and the broader story of WCPSS's efforts to develop a voluntary integration plan. Two participants requested slight changes to the wording of quotes (one quote for each participant), and one participant corrected an inaccurate fact about an event.

### **Limitations**

We were not able to interview all board members nor were we able to gather data from all community groups that operate in Wake County. Although we requested interviews from additional stakeholders in order to learn about their perspectives firsthand, notably absent from this data are the perspectives of Keith Sutton, the 2020 board chair, as well as WCPSS's superintendent and members of Latinx and Asian American community organizations. Although we tried various approaches to engage participants from members of these groups, they declined to participate, potentially due to competing demands, such as deportation concerns or racist incidents associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Raleigh Convergence, 2021; Rodríguez, 2019). Several additional participants had agreed to be interviewed, but stay-at-home orders that were implemented across North Carolina due to COVID-19 prevented them from engaging, even remotely, with our study. Without these participants, we are missing interview data from key stakeholders whose potentially different perspectives could have further complexified or altered our findings. However, by supplementing our interview data with documents, we believe we have accurately represented as many perspectives as possible.

We acknowledge that using participants' real names rather than pseudonyms could have prevented them from disclosing controversial, confidential, or sensitive information during our interviews. However, in consenting to participate in this study, participants had the option of using their real name or a pseudonym, and all participants voluntarily chose to use their real names. Therefore, despite this potential limitation, we believe we have been able to capture participants' perspectives and honor their desires for how to participate in the study.

### **Findings**

The political and social contexts within which WCPSS was developing a voluntary integration plan were complex. The social context and uneven residential development within the large geographic region served by the district impacted logistical considerations for the plan and presented the challenge of needing to continuously educate new residents about the benefits of an integration plan. The proliferation of unregulated school choice, particularly charter schools, made the board's work more complex by providing options for parents who opposed the integration plan to leave the district schools. With alternative educational options available, developing community buy-in was critical; however, there were numerous community stakeholders, many of whom had different perspectives on integrating WCPSS. The inequitable distribution of power and resources impacted the support for and viability of an integration plan. Finally, the political context of the school board itself further complicated the process of designing a voluntary integration plan.

## **Wake County Social Context and Growth**

The social influence on policymaking in WCPSS was characterized by population growth that impacted the district's socioeconomic and racial diversity. WCPSS is a countywide school district that serves students across 835 square miles (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Wake County is home to North Carolina's state capital, Raleigh, as well as 11 other municipalities. With a total population of over 1.1 million residents in 2019, it was the most populous and fastest growing county in the state (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Wake experienced a 23% increase in population over the last 10 years (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.), with much of that growth attributed to people moving into the county, especially from northeastern states. An integration plan that served the entire district had to consider the population at the time of the plan's creation as well as the continuous growth and development across the 12 municipalities within the county.

As a result of the population growth in Wake County, an ideological challenge arose. In many cases, the growth in these communities came from people moving from the Northeast into Wake County. School systems in the Northeast tend to be smaller, more fragmented, and more segregated (Ayscue & Orfield, 2014; Bischoff, 2008). Thus, incoming residents from the Northeast were accustomed to purchasing homes in order to have their children attend a particular school. Tim Lavalley, Vice President of Policy and Research for WakeEd Partnership, explained that new residents may have chosen Wake County for the schools without understanding the implications: "For a number of people who are coming from other states, particularly northern states where a lot of school districts are municipally run rather than countywide, they pick and choose where they're going to live a lot around the school system." However, WCPSS is a large, countywide district with magnet schools, year-round schools, and base schools that may be capped due to capacity constraints. Therefore, purchasing a home in a certain location did not guarantee that one's child would attend the closest school for the duration of their education. Without this knowledge, some middle- and upper-middle-class residents, many of whom were also White, became frustrated and expressed opposition to reassignment plans in general. Further, their newcomer status meant that these families did not experience WCPSS's past successful integration efforts or their benefits. Public Schools First NC Outreach Director Lynn Edmonds stated, "It's going to take constant messaging and ... public relations to try to get new residents to understand why this matters, why it's important, what the values are for every kid. It's a challenge."

In addition to this ideological challenge, growth created logistical challenges for the district's integration plan. Many of the municipalities that comprise Wake County were characterized by extreme income disparities. For example, the towns of Cary and Garner, which border Raleigh to the west and south, had similar White populations (68% and 65%, respectively), but the median income in Cary was over \$100,000 compared to just over \$60,000 in Garner (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a, 2019b). These disparities were visible in the capital city as well. The neighborhoods of Raleigh changed dramatically along the beltline that circled the city. In historically Black neighborhoods, gentrification was pricing many Black residents out of their homes (Badger et al., 2019). Much of the growth, particularly in once-rural areas like Morrisville, Holly Springs, and Fuquay-Varina, was due to new development of virgin land, where most of the new residents were White or Asian. A logistical challenge of addressing resegregation existed because the fastest growing suburbs were predominantly White and wealthy.

As housing developments for middle- and upper-middle-class families were constructed in various burgeoning parts of the county, the board had to weigh how to assign those students to schools in a way that did not further segregation. Board member Roxie Cash said:

Housing has always been a problem for the school board. The density in the housing that all the municipalities have done has really put us in a predicament,

especially places like Morrisville, Fuquay, Apex, and Holly Springs ... and not having any affordable housing [in those places].

On the other hand, some municipalities were developing affordable housing. One such example was Cary, which had the fourth highest median individual income of all 12 municipalities in Wake County (Data Commons, 2021). Board member Christine Kushner explained: “The town of Cary is doing an affordable housing project. They’re very excited about it. It’s near East Cary Middle School, which is probably the highest level of poverty in Cary.” Locating an affordable housing development in the same area as a school that already enrolled a large share of low-income students was likely to further exacerbate segregation, unless intentional steps were taken to support integration. While she acknowledged the difficulty of developing affordable housing and appreciated that Cary is doing it, Kushner indicated that a strengthened relationship between the school district leaders and municipal leaders would be helpful in order to “make that a conscious part of their decision making—how it impacts schools.”

Due to WCPSS’s large geographic size, transportation was another challenge. To provide transportation to students who were not within walking distance of their schools, the district used various strategies, including traditional busing and express busing for magnet schools where students took the bus from a central location to the magnet school. Cash highlighted the need to provide efficient transportation in order to facilitate integration through the use of magnet schools, but acknowledged that board members “have not paid attention to how fast you get the magnet kids downtown. If you have to move kids for diversity, they’ve got to move quickly.”

Multiple participants explained that to develop an integration plan that included transporting students across the county without making them endure disproportionately long bus rides, the district would need additional funding. More funding was also necessary for other programs that may have become part of the integration plan, such as providing before- and after-school care and sustaining magnet programs after grant funding ended. In Wake County, most taxpayers did not have school-aged children. Board member Jim Martin explained, “Part of our challenge is, ‘How do we make this work convincing so that the 70% of the people who are funding the work think it’s the right work to be done even though it’s not a direct benefit to their kid?’” According to the U.S. Census, 70% of Wake County residents are over the age of 16 and in the civilian workforce. It is this group of residents that Martin is referring to, as well as the challenge of making the school board’s work compelling to them.

### **Proliferation of Unregulated Choice**

To understand the distribution of power and resources in WCPSS is to understand the choice landscape, which offers families the power to exit the district as well as the diversion of state, federal, and local resources to these choice options. The proliferation of unregulated school choice options in Wake County, such as charter schools, private school vouchers, and homeschools, made designing a voluntary integration plan difficult because unregulated choice has historically provided families with ways to leave the district’s schools if they opposed the integration plan. In 2011, as part of the federal initiative Race to the Top, the state lifted the cap of 100 charter schools for North Carolina. Since that time, charters have doubled in the state, with 24 operating in Wake County alone during the time of our data collection (N.C. Department of Public Instruction, n.d. a). Private school vouchers and homeschooling were also on the rise in North Carolina (Hui, 2019b; Osborne, 2017). In 2019, 78% of students in Wake County attended WCPSS while the remaining 22% enrolled in charters, homeschools, or private schools (Hui, 2019c). Of the 24 charter schools enrolling students in the 2019-2020 school year, 15 enrolled majority White students; the second largest enrollment group was Asian. Participants consistently cited charter schools and to a lesser

extent vouchers as major challenges to successfully designing a voluntary integration plan for WCPSS.

Charter schools provided an opportunity for families to exercise their power and choose to exit the traditional public schools if they were unhappy with their school assignments, as Edmonds explained:

The legislature has made it easier for families to flee the public school system. And what I mean by that is, they took the cap off of charter schools and they introduced private school vouchers to North Carolina. There's also this narrative that our public schools are failing and so [there is] this rise in promoting school choice.

Within this educational landscape, board members were acutely aware of the possibility of an exodus and likely White flight from WCPSS if families opposed the integration plan, as Kushner noted: “We could devise a program to integrate our schools, but as long as parents have an unregulated way out, using public dollars, they can exercise that option to leave our schools.”

In addition, some charter schools were exclusionary through their admissions procedures or their failure to provide support services. State representative Julie von Haefen explained the ways in which charter schools were not a true choice for all families, particularly low-income students or students with special needs:

They don't provide all the services that public schools do. They don't provide meals. They don't provide special education. ... They don't provide transportation. And these are all barriers to children who can't take advantage of that choice....The one thing here in North Carolina that's caused so many problems is the proliferation of charter schools and how that is affecting the segregation of our schools.

Further complicating the charter landscape, the mechanism for approving and renewing charter schools was largely beyond the control of local educational agencies (LEAs), such as WCPSS. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's Charter Schools Advisory Board (CSAB) made recommendations to the State Board of Education (SBE) regarding approval and renewal of charters (N.C. Department of Public Instruction, n.d. b). LEAs could provide recommendations to the CSAB regarding charters within their boundary lines, but the CSAB was not required to heed the recommendations. In 2019, Martin and Superintendent Moore wrote a letter to the SBE stating that Wake County had reached a “saturation point” with charter schools that added to “de facto segregation” (Martin & Moore, 2019). They requested that the SBE delay or deny approval of the five proposed charters; however, the SBE eventually approved all five (Childress, 2019; Hinchcliffe, 2019). Thus, WCPSS board members lacked power and control over whether or where charters were authorized in Wake County and therefore could not manage charter school segregation. Recounting a recent example of this difficulty, Cash described how charters were drawing students in areas with new housing developments:

What happened in Wendell Falls is the Wendell mayor—and I don't even think he knows how much damage he did—he built a development. There are a lot of developments going on there—[many with] big homes—that we needed for our public schools in Wendell. He actually let the charter purchase the land next door to Wendell Falls and name their charter off the neighborhood.

In this instance, the population growth, a housing development, and a charter school combined in a way that was likely to exacerbate segregation by steering the middle-class families in the new housing development to the charter school located adjacent to it.

### **Support for and Resistance to an Integration Plan**

CPA is also interested in how marginalized groups are or are not involved in the policymaking process, and an attention to “silences,” or what is left out of the process (Chase, 2014). Therefore, we attended to who was involved and how, as well as the nature of this engagement, during the early stages of developing a voluntary integration plan. The many stakeholders in Wake County represented varying perspectives on integration and the process of developing an integration plan. Kushner believed that many parents across the district supported integration: “Multiple studies over decades show that integrated schools benefit all children—Black children, White children, Asian children, all children. I believe that. I think we need to talk about it more because I do think people support integrated schools.”

Black community members had varying opinions about integration, including being skeptical and cautiously optimistic regarding the intentions and outcomes that may have been generated through an integration plan. Community Equity Leadership Team (CELT) Member Craston Artis explained the range of perspectives from Black community members and the need to discuss and address their views:

There are so many different opinions, and I’m mainly speaking for the Black community. ... Whether it’s those that feel as though desegregation is the goal or that is the goal that people assumed was achieved but was really left on the table and not necessarily completed, ... to those who feel like Black children leaving Black-run institutions was a mistake and that that’s a part of the problem, to others that feel like other options like charter schools should be explored.

He continued, “There’s not any talk and conversation about, ‘Okay, what were the short-term and long-term damages done within the Black community because of that? What are the true impediments of segregated schools? And then how do we address those?’ We don’t go deeper to have that conversation.” In raising these questions, Artis conveyed concerns about the potential impact of the policy, informed by past harm that Black students, educators, and communities experienced as a result of desegregation efforts.

Other Black community members expressed concerns about what happens inside desegregated schools, and they emphasized the importance of promoting equity and valuing Black and Brown students within desegregated schools in order to achieve true integration. Education Justice Alliance Director Letha Muhammad highlighted the importance of “recognizing that institutional and structural racism is still a problem in the district.” She continued, “Disparities exist when it comes to the ways in which Black kids and Brown kids are disciplined in the district; disparities exist when it comes to access to academically gifted courses or college readiness or AP courses.” She described the need to promote understanding, be respectful, and have high expectations for students of color in desegregated schools:

I want to ensure that whatever policy or plan they put in place, that at the end of that bus ride, wherever those kids end up going, the people in the building understand who they’re bringing into the building. So, understand the young people and have high expectations for them.

Furthermore, she explained the importance of implementing discipline fairly with all students, saying, “In order to address the issue of disparity in the school-to-prison pipeline, we have to

admit that it's actually there." Any discussion of addressing equity and integration within schools, she asserted, "would require intentionally looking at staff and the ways in which discipline is meted out against certain populations of students and not others." Similarly, Artis's organization, CELT, emphasized the need to address school resource officers as well as racial disproportionality in discipline, including in what may appear to be desegregated schools. Moreover, culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) was also a priority for CELT, as Artis explained:

I think you have to have a culture within a school that understands how to approach things differently. ... A lot of times when people say culturally relevant instruction, they think there's this magical way that you're supposed to talk to Black students differently or Latino students differently or whatever. No, I'm talking about a curriculum and a content, particularly in literacy and social studies, where the students see themselves in the content.

Another way to provide culturally relevant pedagogy and ensure that students can engage with the curriculum is to provide language support. Advocating for English and native language acquisition was a priority for local Latinx and Asian advocacy groups (e.g., El Centro Hispano, Asian Americans Advancing Justice). These groups also advocated for increased support of undocumented students so that students felt safe in their schools (Rodríguez, 2019). Moreover, Artis pointed out that yet another way to increase safety and belonging is for students, particularly Black students, to have teachers of the same race.

On the other hand, some White parents opposed integration because they wanted to keep their children closer to home where they could build community in neighborhood schools and would not have to endure long bus rides. Edmonds believed this perspective could be attributed to a focus on their own children and lack of knowledge about the benefits of integration for everyone:

I just think a lot of parents that might initially push back or choose charter or voucher, ... certainly they're not bad parents. They're not even bad community members. I think they've just not thought about the implications beyond their own child and their own home and their own family. And I think there are a lot of people that if they're just presented with the benefits for the whole, that they would actually stick with us and be supportive of an initiative like this. ... And I think the more we talk about that, I think some parents, not all, but some parents would reconsider and go, "I do want to be a part of this, I do want to contribute to the health of the whole."

However, others believed White parents' opposition was rooted in privilege and racism. Clarifying that she was referring to some White, Asian, and wealthy families, Kushner stated, "Certain communities really push their privilege, and we [the board] have to make sure that we're not just hearing the loudest voices." Lavalley concurred, and was more explicit in describing what occurred 10 years earlier when diversity was removed from WCPSS's student assignment priorities as well as what he believed remains the perspective of some wealthy, White families:

The themes that came through were neighborhood schools, and I think neighborhood schools were a veil for, and this is very frank language, "We moved to an area where people look like us and we want our schools to reflect that area."

Board members acknowledged the many varying perspectives that existed and the need to incorporate them into the process. Board member Martin was aware of concerns from Black community members: “There’s also a fair amount of fear in some of the Black and lower income areas that, ‘Are we going to just be taken advantage of again?’” Recognizing that “integration efforts, historically, have been made on the backs of people of color, and people of low wealth,” Martin stated, “We need to make sure that’s not what we do if we want it to be successful.” Knowing this history, the board was working to design a new way of implementing integration that would bring students together and provide equitable learning experiences. Rather than simply moving students around from school to school, early discussions indicated that the board was seeking to adopt a comprehensive approach to integrate schools that included magnets, student assignment using the county’s economic health index, renovating or building new schools, strengthening curriculum, providing before- and after-school care, and improving transportation.

Community buy-in is undoubtedly necessary in order to design and implement a voluntary integration plan successfully. However, at this early stage, participation was generally confined to board members and RTI International, an independent, nonprofit institute retained by the board to assist with the process, along with engagement from Superintendent Cathy Moore and her team. Much of the work in designing the plan was discussed at the 2019 board retreat and in subsequent work sessions. The board had not yet solicited input from community groups, an approach that was receiving mixed feedback. Lavallee asserted:

I would guarantee you that 99% of the community has no idea this work is going on. And that’s a good and bad thing. It’s good because they don’t know it and [won’t] develop a negative opinion based on negative information. So that’s where it’s good. It’s bad because this is work that could ultimately affect them and they’re not part of the process.

Regardless of when the community is included, community groups believed that parents and students should be included in this process. They agreed that information about the board’s process was very difficult to locate and should be made more publicly available. Board members concurred that involvement from stakeholders, whom they mention as including business leaders, municipal leaders, county commissioners, and faith leaders, was critical, and some saw the lack of such involvement thus far as a shortcoming. Kushner said:

We need community involvement and community buy-in, and that is something the board has sought in the past. Formal community engagement is needed because we know that the only way we can go forward is if our community supports our work to integrate schools.

Martin emphasized that the board must focus on listening to communities of color and creating solutions that are beneficial for all: “How do we ensure that we have those conversations—that we’ll listen, that we’re authentic, and we’re not just the great White father coming to save you?”

### **Distribution of Power and Resources**

In creating a voluntary integration plan, the ways in which power is distributed become evident, and the need for equitable distribution of resources was a priority for many. For example, Lavallee questioned, “Is it the desegregation that’s the problem or is it the resource allocation that’s the problem?” Lavallee explained that schools may have different resources because of “the ability to raise funds privately and through the PTAs.” Muhammad described an example of such differences: “Southeast Raleigh High School down the road has a different pool of resources than



say Broughton over off of Peace Street. Broughton has a foundation with, I heard, a million-dollar endowment for the school.” Muhammad emphasized the need to address these very real differences by “building into that policy a more equitable distribution of funds to ensure that the young people on one side of town have just as much access as young people in another part of town.”

As it was in the 1976 merger, the business community was another source of power and resources. However, as Edmonds described, the business community’s stance on education and integration was uncertain: “The Chamber of Commerce looks different than it did 10 years ago.” Due to changes in leadership, Edmonds said, “They’ve been quieter on schools ... in the last five to six years, so I don’t really know what to expect from them. But I hope that they’ll be supportive.” She continued, “I think they understand the value of a healthy school system and how that is helpful to our economy and attracting businesses here, but they just haven’t been vocal about increasing funding for education, teacher pay.” Despite this uncertainty, Martin called the business community their “most powerful ally.” Lavalley, whose organization, WakeEd Partnership, often served as a bridge between the education and business communities, expected that WCPSS would have their support:

Where the business community comes in is to be able to say, “We’re not doing this just because we want to reach the 40% window, right? We’re doing it because we want every kid who enters [to be successful], whether you’re a wealthy, White family with all the resources available to you outside of school to make sure your child is academically successful ... [or a] non-White child who doesn’t speak English, whose parents are living on subsistence wages or even on government assistance.”

Although the business community had not voiced its position, most participants believed it supported the board’s integration efforts as it did when the city and county schools merged in 1976.

### **School Board Political Context**

Because CPA challenges “traditional notions of power, politics, and governance” (Horsford et al., 2018, p. 21), it is important to attend to these three factors on the school board, namely the power that board members hold, the political role of the board, and the way the board governs itself. As is evidenced by our findings on the social and political context that exists in Wake County, designing a voluntary integration plan was contentious work. At the time of data collection, WCPSS board members served two-year terms. Designing and implementing an integration plan is a lengthy process that typically requires more than two years if done in a comprehensive and systematic manner. Therefore, not only was it difficult for board members to accomplish this task within a two-year term, but since it is contentious work, they risked potentially jeopardizing their reelection as well as disrupting the continuity of the work if their constituents were dissatisfied with the direction in which they were moving. Cash explained, “That’s a problem because when you want to do something giant and big and bold, it takes more than two years to prove that it’s working.” The two-year term made engaging in this work both logistically difficult and politically risky.

Despite the political risks, some school board members joined the board with the explicit goal of addressing segregation in WCPSS; others had goals of serving in state and federal positions. Cash, Martin, and Kushner were invested in serving at the local level to this point, with voluntary integration as a top priority. Having served on the WCPSS board of education from 1991 to 1999, Cash, a Republican, returned to the board in 2016. Her long-standing engagement with integration efforts through participation in the integration efforts of the 1990s informed her stance on the board’s current efforts:

I saw how our schools were segregated again. Even schools right next to each other didn't match each other, like a Brooks [Museums Magnet Elementary School] and a Green [Magnet Elementary School] right next to each other. One was almost all White and one was almost all Black. I said, "We've got to completely start over. It would be doable because when it started years and years ago, they had nothing. So we can surely do it."

Martin and Kushner, both Democrats, joined the board in 2011 as a direct response to the 2009 Tea Party takeover of the school board. Martin explained his motivation:

Dealing with segregation and the issues surrounding it is one of the big issues as to why I ran in the first place. The decisions that were made before I got onto the board had pretty drastic impacts. I think that my colleagues and I were able to fairly successfully put our finger in the dike and stop the hemorrhaging, but we really have not been able to reverse those trends.

Since joining the board, he has focused on his desire to address resegregation in WCPSS. When he became board chair in 2019, he brought the issue to the top of the board's agenda. In Summer 2019, the board declared, "Resegregation will not happen on our watch." At that time, the board retained RTI International to facilitate work on their voluntary integration plan. At their board retreat that June, RTI facilitators guided board members through WCPSS data and worked to set a vision for the future. In addition to data and research supporting integration, the board also investigated the district's transportation, magnet schools, year-round enrollment, and student assignment policy, indicating that these factors may have been integral to the new plan.

Rather than the standard two-year term in the role of chair, Martin served as board chair for one year, and in 2020 following a 5-4 vote, Sutton took over the leadership position. Assuming the position of vice chair in 2020, Cash urged board members to take bold action to address resegregation:

I was so loud behind the scenes. I wanted to be loud at the board table, but I also knew that wasn't the way to really get good press. So I met with Keith Sutton, Christine Kushner, Jim Martin, and Monika Johnson-Hostler. I met with the four people that I thought should be the face of integration, if anything. I just point-blank said, "Do you believe in integrated schools? You don't act like it." ... I said, "We're going to have to be bold ... We've got to do something big."

As the new chair, Sutton had the opportunity to set the board's agenda. The board's work on integration slowed during the beginning of 2020, and the engagement with RTI was allowed to expire. While running for a state or federal position does not in any way imply that board members lack commitment to their work on the local school board, it does indicate a desire to step up to a larger political platform. Although ultimately neither was elected to the position they sought and both remained on the WCPSS school board at the time of data collection, in 2020, Keith Sutton ran for state superintendent of public instruction and Monika Johnson-Hostler ran in the primary for the Second District seat for the U.S. Congress. Assuming the position of board chair in 2020, Sutton was balancing his district service with a state-level campaign; we can speculate that it may have been unwise for his political career to take a strong stance on a potentially contentious issue such as integration while also running for state office. From former chair Martin's perspective:

I am disappointed that political decisions and then COVID have disrupted this important work. I remain very committed to the work of desegregation. I think

our superintendent and board generally are committed to this work, but we have lost some leadership and advocacy around it.

Not long into 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the world, requiring WCPSS and districts across the country to immediately address the crisis of how to meet students' needs when in-person instruction was not possible, thus halting progress on the voluntary integration plan. In the absence of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is unclear whether the voluntary integration plan would have moved forward as it was being designed by the board or whether the different perspectives and interests of key stakeholders would have altered, or even stalled, meaningful integration. As of the writing of this article, the issue of integration had not yet reentered the board's discussions and the composition of the board had already changed. In November 2021, Sutton vacated his seat on the board as he became superintendent of a different school district, and five school board members, including Cash, Kushner, and Martin, indicated they would not run for reelection in the November 2022 election. If the work resumes, it will occur within this very complex and ever-evolving political, social, and educational context.

## **Discussion**

This study describes the political and social contexts surrounding the process of developing a voluntary integration plan in WCPSS. The case of WCPSS sheds light on how a countywide school district developed a voluntary integration plan in a time of unregulated choice (Cobb & Glass, 2009). In doing so, this case, which was once a national model for successful school desegregation, provides insight into the current politics of voluntary integration.

Consistent with prior research, our critical policy analysis of this case highlights the complex political and social context within which school boards pursue voluntary integration (Diem et al., 2015). In the current context, population growth and residential development, varied perspectives of community stakeholders, the challenge of achieving true integration, unregulated choice, inequitable distribution of power and resources, and school board politics largely shape the process of developing a voluntary integration plan.

Population growth and uneven development across the large countywide district create both ideological and logistical challenges. While this growth may seem innocuous, perhaps even beneficial for Wake County, our CPA framework pushes us to see its effects on already marginalized groups and on residential segregation. Population growth that began in the 1980s (Parcel & Taylor, 2015) and the subsequent development of segregated residential neighborhoods continue to pose a challenge to the board's efforts to address resegregation. Participants discussed the challenges of suburban growth and housing developments, and they must attend to these factors if a voluntary integration plan is to succeed. Although gentrification is occurring in some parts of Raleigh, unlike the concerns often expressed in other districts experiencing pockets of gentrification (Diem et al., 2019), racial change in the capital city did not seem to be a concern for the participants in our study.

Consistent with research surrounding the shift in the district's diversity policy around 2009-2010 (Parcel & Taylor, 2015), many varying perceptions about integration permeate the district. Bringing together communities with different perspectives and creating a diverse coalition of support for voluntary integration, as was instrumental in facilitating the merger of the city and county schools in the 1970s (Williams & Houck, 2013), is critical to moving this plan forward. However, many participants in our study, including stakeholders of color, indicated that they had not yet been approached by the board or invited to engage in the process. They also believe the board should make information about the process transparent and more readily available, as the board itself has not yet directly engaged community groups. It is possible that because our data

collection occurred relatively early in the process (Winter 2019-2020), the board might have soon begun to engage the public if the response to the COVID-19 pandemic had not become the focus of the board's work.

Our findings also indicate the need for the district's process to address true integration rather than stopping short at desegregation. Our participants understand that desegregation is a necessary, but not sufficient, first step. They affirm that true integration involves students of different racial and ethnic groups experiencing fair and equal treatment within desegregated—that is, racially diverse—environments, as well as more equitable power and resource distribution. For example, participants describe the need to address discipline, tracking, curriculum and pedagogy, and teacher diversity to ensure that students of color are not marginalized within racially desegregated schools, a situation that is likely to occur in diverse schools if not explicitly and intentionally addressed (Ford et al., 2008; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Losen & Martinez, 2020; Oakes, 2005; Roda, 2015). Therefore, as our participants explain and as prior research shows, there is a critical difference between a desegregation plan and an integration plan.

Our findings highlight the difficulty of promoting integration in an educational landscape that includes numerous unregulated choice options. Similar to nearby Charlotte-Mecklenburg's experience of trying to address segregation in 2016-2017 in the midst of many charter school options (Ayscue et al., 2018), the presence of charters in Wake County provides an opportunity for White flight, making the board's efforts to pursue integration across the district more complex. While the board may set a goal of halting resegregation and promoting integration, they cannot ensure that charter schools in Wake County do not drive resegregation. Further, although less prevalent in our findings, options such as private school vouchers and virtual schools have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, offering additional ways out of WCPSS and potentially hindering the district's efforts to desegregate.

Finally, although multiple participants stated that integration was a goal of all board members, it was evident that board chairs differed in their approaches and priorities. Moreover, all the board members must contend with their own personal views toward integration, along with balancing the opinions of parents and community members. These personal views become more complicated as the makeup of the board changes. As previously mentioned, some participants in this study and members at the time of data collection will no longer serve on the board; similarly, in the interim between data collection and the writing of this article, two participants have become board members. Since board members' views have been found to affect the school board's stance toward integration (Diem et al., 2015), it is important that WCPSS keep integration at the forefront even as the board makeup changes.

The findings from this case enhance our understanding of the current politics of voluntary integration. That is, increasingly racially diverse school districts have stakeholders with differing, and often competing, interests related to integration. In some cases, their perspectives are informed by desegregation efforts of the past. The growth of and access to unregulated choice options that are available for exiting district schools make this work particularly complex. Although important in all contexts, engaging community members and honoring their diverse perspectives are especially important parts of the process, given the voluntary, rather than mandatory, nature of integration efforts. This case also makes clear that any voluntary policy must strive for true integration, not stopping short at desegregation. Without such shared power and inclusive policy priorities, stakeholders who feel that their needs are not being met may exercise their power to withhold support or leave district schools, thereby undermining the potential success of a voluntary integration plan.

## Policy Recommendations

School district policies, cross-sector collaboration, and state-level policies could alter the political and social context within which districts develop voluntary integration plans and strengthen the potential success of the plans. At the district level, our findings highlight the need for school boards to develop community buy-in and a diverse coalition of support, which could include parents, students, educators, advocacy groups, municipal leaders, the business community, and faith leaders. By bringing community members into the process early, school boards could gain community input and support while developing a plan rather than presenting a completed plan and asking people to endorse it at the end. Many participants in our study had previous success working with the school board on other issues, so it is likely that groups in the community may be brought into the process if the voluntary integration planning continues. Hearing their concerns as well as intentionally reaching out to community members will be crucial for the plan's success.

Our findings also emphasize the importance of developing a comprehensive plan that addresses desegregation *and* integration. It is important to be transparent about not only the technical details of how students will be assigned to schools (Diem et al., 2015) but also how a voluntary plan will facilitate integration by tackling issues of equity, access, and inclusion related to discipline, within-school segregation and tracking, language acquisition, curriculum and pedagogy, diversity among teachers and leaders, and professional development. School boards must also ensure that their plans do not harm students and families of color, place the burden for integration on communities of color, or privilege the desires of wealthier White and Asian families. The history of voluntary integration efforts in WCPSS demonstrates the need to continuously monitor and adapt plans as the context and needs evolve. Therefore, school boards should detail how they will engage in ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement of their plans to ensure that integration efforts address the changing needs of the district.

Collaboration among education leaders, municipal leaders, and housing actors could help districts create and implement more effective voluntary integration plans. For example, it would be helpful to establish planning and communication across sectors regarding drawing school attendance boundaries, siting new schools (including charter and magnet schools), creating transportation plans, developing new neighborhoods (including those with affordable housing), and constructing mixed-income or subsidized housing (U.S. Department of Housing et al., 2016). If all stakeholders understand each other's goals, they could work together to minimize residential and school segregation such that district efforts to achieve integration are feasible.

At the state level, strengthening diversity guidelines for charter school authorization and renewal, and requiring charters to proactively pursue integration could aid in districts' current and future efforts to design and implement voluntary integration plans. The State Board of Education has resolved to include equity in its actions, and could suggest the same commitment from the Charter Schools Advisory Board, which recommends charters for approval and renewal.

## Future Research

Research examining the development and implementation of voluntary integration plans in other districts would be useful in developing a deeper understanding of the politics of voluntary integration across the United States. The voices and experiences of Latinx, Asian, and Native American communities unintentionally not included in this study deserve exploration. Given the academic, social, and long-term benefits of integration for students of all races and the current legal context that has placed responsibility for integration on districts in a voluntary manner, it is critical that research continues to study and inform voluntary integration efforts.

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