

Focused on getting it right with Wake schools

BY PHIL KIRK

What would make more than 700 people gather on a Wednesday night to sit at small tables and talk about their aspirations for public education?

This is not a hypothetical question. This is what happened in Wake County the first week of August when the Wake County Public School System convened a town hall meeting as part of a new strategic plan.

Point of View

Plenty of people have blamed public education for all sorts of society's ills and have little good to say about a system that is still a community's best path to prosperity. They might say it's easy for a system the size of Wake's to gather that many people. That it's no big deal.

They would be incorrect on both counts. Public schools are one of those areas in which it's far easier to rally an unhappy crowd than a room full of people willing to discuss a school system already doing well.

But Wake County is not your typical community. I have known this for the many years I have lived here. I have also come to understand how others see Wake County in my previous roles as State Board of Education chair, president of the N.C. Citizens for Business and Industry (now the NC Chamber) and even chief of staff for two North Carolina governors and a U.S. senator.

Wake can draw 700 people together on a Wednesday night to talk

That was followed by focus group discussions of more than 100 people digging deeper into the question of what matters most to Wake's residents. It's easy to ask supporters what they think, but this group also included parents at private schools, dropouts and even a few students who unfortunately found themselves in the county jail.

Based on the responses of those people and dozens of teachers, parents, business leaders, church leaders and community groups, a list of recurring themes was compiled and released as a community survey.

An amazing 11,000 people responded to that survey. The company that conducted the focus group sessions and analyzed the survey results said it was the biggest response rate it had ever seen for a survey of its kind. Moreover, more than 9,400 people answered every question!

From that survey, the 10 top issues were compiled. Given the process used, it's hard to argue this was a random wish list of a some hand-picked group.

The 700 people discussed those 10 issues for more than an hour before ranking them in importance. No. 1 by a wide margin is recruiting, developing and retaining high-quality employees.

Did the current political environment influence that choice? Probably. Barely a week went by during the recent legislative session when teacher pay and recruitment weren't in the headlines.

But it's also the right choice in any environment. Ask business leaders

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See what the task force has done and what it plans at wcpss.net/vision

er on a Wednesday night to talk about public schools because they understand the value of a strong public education system.

That helps explain why I'm happy to serve as co-chair of a work team that will help create the next strategic plan for the Wake County Public School System. My partner in this endeavor is Dr. Marvin Connelly, the school system's chief of staff.

The work team itself is an impressive group of about 40 people, including principals, students, business leaders, parents and teachers. But the work preceding the town hall meeting was just as revealing.

Any smart leader could create a solid strategic plan with a little bit of time to think about it. A smarter leader would ask the community what it wants. That is the question Superintendent Jim Merrill started asking this spring.

Several hundred gathered on a Friday evening in May to hear a keynote speaker talk about trends in society with an eye toward schools.

environment. Ask business leaders how far they can get without high-quality employees. The answer is the same one a principal would offer.

But the community got it right in other areas, too. Providing an appropriate rigorous education at all levels scored high. So did graduating students on time and ready for life after high school. A wide-ranging curriculum is also important to residents here.

So now the group I co-chair with Dr. Connelly will get to work. From now until November, we will meet regularly to create a mission, a vision and a few key goals that incorporate our community's desires for our students.

It won't be a laundry list of everyone's favorite programs. It's not even likely to be a long document. But it's my expectation this work group – like this community – will make a powerful statement about the value and importance of our public schools.

Phil Kirk is former chairman of the State Board of Education and the North Carolina Chamber.