



Why I Retired

By Jeff Ruppenthal, former North Carolina public school principal

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On July 1st, I retired from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools after having served for 31 years. The majority of my years were spent as an elementary school principal. I myself am a product of CMS having graduated from West Charlotte High School. Needless to say, I have witnessed much and have a unique perspective when it comes to the state of public schools in North Carolina.

Since I am only in my 50s, I am often confronted with the question as to why I am retiring as a principal at such an early age. To be honest, I was not even considering retiring until the pandemic struck. However the weight of the impact of COVID and other “underlying forces” prompted this change in my life. Below is a litany of “my reasons” for retirement. It had reached the point that I was so frustrated that I felt I was battling an unwinnable war. The “hits” kept coming with no relief in sight.

However, I want to make it clear that my decision is not an abandonment of my life-long commitment to public schools but rather a transition to play a more active role in being an advocate for them, without the constraints of having to remain outwardly impartial to the myriad of issues. I continue to firmly believe that our state is only as strong as our traditional school systems. Some legislators wrongfully believe that meaningful school reform means spending money on charter schools and private school vouchers. A future of growth and prosperity for all citizens of North Carolina is inextricably linked to strong traditional public schools. I am determined to help shout that message from the mountaintop!

Reasons for My Retirement

Impact of COVID - I will never forget Friday, March 20, 2020. As buses were leaving our lot, I had little idea that the world was about to be completely upended, and that was to be the last “normal” school day for the next two and a half years. At first, the groundswell of public support and overall goodwill for the heroic work done by teachers and school staff was encouraging and helped sustain us. It was gratifying to have our hard work realized and appreciated.

Money and resources poured in from all levels of government. However, those feelings were fleeting as the pandemic progressed and the situation became hotly politicized. Kids came back to school, standardized testing resumed, and the emphasis quickly shifted back to finger pointing at schools for “lost learning”.

Now COVID funding has almost completely dried up. Positions that became nearly indispensable, such as increased funding for Exceptional Children teachers and mental health professionals, are no longer available. It's back to “do more with less”. Yet the learning gaps and social/mental health issues students face in the wake of the pandemic are still pervasive.

Teacher Crisis - My last school assignment as a principal was in a suburban school located in North Mecklenburg County. I was fortunate in that we never had difficulty attracting quality teachers for nearly all positions. That started to change shortly before the pandemic and has snowballed to an exponential degree post-COVID.

Of course, North Carolina's infamous low state ranking for teacher pay is the main culprit. The increases in state pay to public school educators has been minimal and in no way keeping with the rising costs of living. Also, salary schedules are capped. Who wants to enter a profession where opportunities for increased compensation hardly exist?

But teacher pay is only part of the equation. For years it has felt that the NCGA has practiced “death by a thousand cuts” as laws and policies have been enacted to make the profession in this state less and less desirable. For example, continued care on the state health plan for future retirees was dropped. Master's pay was eliminated, which sent another strong message to teachers that their continuing efforts to improve as professionals was not valued.

Couple all of that with the cultural wars teachers now have to navigate and the increase in the overall workload brought on by the effects of the pandemic, then the lack of quality teacher candidates should come as a shock to no one. College education programs for teachers have steadily declined nationwide over the past several years and is particularly noticeable in a state like North Carolina.

What became most unsettling for me is the dearth of qualified candidates for our most vulnerable of students. My last school had three self-contained classes for EC students with moderate to severe cognitive and/or physical disabilities. These positions were always difficult to fill. Now it has become nearly impossible. As a result, thousands of our neediest students statewide are being taught in classes with unqualified substitutes or guest teachers. This reality kept me up at night.

Charter Schools and Vouchers - I am a proponent of school choice and clearly understand the need for parents to be able to make school decisions that will best fit the needs of their child. However, in North Carolina, legislative decisions involving “school choice” have all come at the expense of the state's traditional public school systems. Instead of strengthening traditional public schools and expanding choices within them, it seems the “school choice” legislation has become a thinly veiled ruse to undermine and dismantle traditional public schools.

I think the original intention for public charter schools was a good one. These schools were to be bastions of innovation that would work in partnership with traditional public schools. The number of allowed charter schools was initially capped and schools applying for a charter had to have a compelling reason to form such as a unique curriculum or approach to learning. That is no longer the case in North Carolina. The cap was lifted several years ago and instead of supporting traditional public schools, these schools compete with them.

And the playing field is not level. Charter schools do not have to provide transportation or meals, which inherently excludes many students. Some of these schools even have parent volunteer requirements which again, exclude. And to add insult to injury, other restrictions are placed on traditional public schools, such as the setting of the dates of the school calendar that charter schools do not have to abide by. Why are only the traditional public school systems held captive by the state's tourism industry?

The calendar issue is only one example of the pervasive inequity. The lack of accountability and oversight of the state's charter schools is shocking. Yet it is even more egregious when you look at the state's school voucher or "opportunity scholarships" program. Millions of dollars are being handed out to private schools statewide with absolutely no evident system of accountability or oversight.

What is most disturbing is the NCGA's increased fervor to expand the program. The latest statistics point to the fact that this money is now largely going towards funding private education for students whose parents already have the means to support a private education for their child without assistance. How is that fiscally responsible? And what about the education these students are receiving in these situations? No one knows as private schools are accountable to no one. They alone decide their own curriculum and accountability decisions. Bags of cash are being dropped at the doorsteps of schools and the state is looking the other way.

That's quite a list of grievances. It had reached a point where it became too overwhelming, and I felt my impact was diminishing at an ever-increasing rate. I have decided that my best leverage point is to get this tragic story out front and center to the citizens of North Carolina. I know most people recognize that teacher pay is low, but they do not see the sense of despair and urgency that I described above as the media keeps the focus on the cultural wars and national issues such as the presidential race.

The politicalization of whether or not to support our state's traditional public schools should not exist - yet that is where we are. The disdain of some politicians towards traditional public school employees is palpable. It is felt by teachers, administrators and school staff throughout the state - regardless of their political affiliation. The North Carolina State Constitution's Article IX, Section 2, "Uniform System of Schools", requires the General Assembly to provide a free public school system that is general and uniform. That state constitutional requirement has always been a unique bedrock for North Carolina. We can and have to do better.

I truly believe this lack of support for our public schools will have detrimental effects on North Carolina's ability to grow and prosper. We are only as strong as our public schools.

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