

# Wilmington Education Task Force

## Final Report



April 2008

*The Wilmington Education Task Force Study Committee was  
created by  
Senate Joint Resolution 3 and chaired  
by Senator Margaret Rose Henry.*

# Report of the Wilmington Education Task Force

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## The Wilmington Education Task Force Appointed Members

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

The Honorable Margaret Rose Henry  
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Dr. Robert Andrzejewski  
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*Red Clay Consolidated School District*

The Honorable Joseph Miro  
*Delaware House of Representatives*

Dr. George Meney  
*Superintendent*  
*Colonial School District*

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

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*Member, Red Clay School Board*

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

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The Honorable Valerie Woodruff  
*Secretary of Education*

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*President, Brandywine School Board*

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*Delaware Charter School Network*

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*Public School Parent*

Merrie Pritchett  
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## BACKGROUND

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

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

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

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

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

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

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

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

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

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



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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

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

- Implement a weighted-student funding formula statewide to reflect the diverse needs of students and to ensure that schools have adequate and equitable funding needed to provide quality schools and academic offerings.
- Provide greater flexibility in funding formulas in order to direct funding to the school building and classroom level in response to student needs and where learning takes place.

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

- Establish system of continuous tracking of education data specific to students residing in the City of Wilmington and that attend public schools, including local districts, and Vo-Tech and charter schools alike.
- Ensure that a variety of data is used to enable improved student learning and achievement and to determine quality learning opportunities; including, but not limited to, student growth overtime.

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

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

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

- Consideration should be given in the long term to the creation of one northern New Castle County School District comprised of the City of Wilmington and all suburbs north of the city.
- **Ensure representation on the local school board is maintained; thus, any seated school board members must retain their seats until the next election and the City of Wilmington must have proportional representation on the resulting school district school boards.** Those areas in the City that are shifted from one district to another should retain their school board seat/member on the new school district board until the next election. In addition, if any re-districting occurs, Wilmington Residents must continue to be represented adequately.
- **Time must be given to implement the changes to the district lines.** Wilmington has lived with the division into four school districts for 30 years. New changes must be implemented carefully and thoughtfully with a wide variety of stakeholders included in the planning.
- **Changes to districts lines should be as revenue neutral as possible.** It is not the intent of this recommendation to create a system where there are "winners" and "losers" in resulting revenue flows associated with property taxes — any reorganization must balance implementation effects so that the impact is as revenue neutral as possible.

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

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

- **One or more middle schools should be created in the City of Wilmington.** Christina School District and Brandywine School District are currently committed to placing middle schools in Wilmington.
- **A comprehensive public high school should be created in the city.** Currently, all of the four school district high schools are in the suburbs. Given the lack of land available for new construction, it may be preferable to rehabilitate an empty or underutilized public building. Regarding feeder patterns, special arrangements could be made so the high school could accept students from all city school districts and, therefore, costs could be shared.
- **Consider state funding to provide transportation to high school students who want to “choice” to high schools in surrounding districts.** The state’s current public school choice law does not provide transportation to families. Many families in the City of Wilmington do not have a means to transport their child to a high school outside of their feeder pattern.

**Professional Staff: More training and unconventional recruitment methods are needed to attract and retain urban educators.**

- Recruit and train effective school building leadership and teachers to ensure that leadership, teaching and learning occur with high expectations for all students.
- Equip, empower and expect all teaching staff to build a repertoire of effective instructional strategies to deliver high quality, standards based curriculum.
- Link school leadership, teacher and staff to professional development with high expectation for student learning
- Create an urban professional development center in the City of Wilmington to model best practices in contemporary urban education and to help recruit new school leaders and teachers.

- **Remove barriers to equal access to education** by increasing the number of vocational technical seats available to city students and any admission practices of public schools, including charter schools, which limit the number of students who can attend.
- **Ensure equity and access of the latest technology available in city public schools.** Enhance and use information technology to help students meet the academic standards and develop the skills needed by a world-class work force.
- **Annual assessments should be challenging but flexible.** When the DSTP is revised next year, the new test must measure growth over time. Students should be assessed at multiple times throughout the year to help improve teacher instruction and provide more accurate, customized data on each child's progress.

**Additional study is needed on urban education.**

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

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

- Explore research and implementation of a unified best practice model of holistic community-based education across school districts in Northern New Castle County serving Wilmington students without regard to the geographic location of the public school. The Comer School Model is one best practice example.
- Explore implementation and funding of effective family/community engagement models that over time result in improved academic performance, decreased suspensions/expulsions, higher graduation rates, and increased college matriculation for Wilmington public school students.
- **Develop a Citywide Implementation Plan.** The plan should be established with key committee members and select external partners with deep national experience in urban school reform. The end product of this analysis might include:

**A. Establishing Appropriate Outcomes**

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

**B. Conduct a Gap Analysis**

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

**C. Build On What is Working**

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

**D. Implementation Strategy**

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

- a) Tangible and realistic action items;
- b) Associated time lines and estimated costs for implementation (i.e. phasing tied to systemic changes and stakeholder priorities);
- c) Stakeholders accountable for implementation;
- d) Regulatory/Legislative changes required; and
- e) Funding requirements/needs

**E. Funding for Plan Design**

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

CITY OF WILMINGTON  
DELAWARE



Report of the City of Wilmington  
On  
HOUSE BILL 300  
OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL ACT

March 2001

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CITY OF WILMINGTON  
DELAWARE

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## I. Executive Summary

The State of Delaware General Assembly enacted House Bill 300, the Neighborhood School Act of 2000 (Act). This bill required the Brandywine, Colonial, Christina, and Red Clay Consolidated School Districts to develop Neighborhood School Plans that allow every student to attend the grade-appropriate school geographically closest to the student's home. Furthermore, this Act, specifically its amendment, established the Wilmington Neighborhood Schools Committee (WNSC) and charged the Committee with recommending a plan. Accordingly, the WNSC, through its document, *A Report of the Wilmington Neighborhood Schools Committee*, analyzed the impact of this Act on the City of Wilmington, and made its recommendations to the Mayor and City Council of the City of Wilmington.

In keeping with the mandates of this Act, the Mayor and City Council reviewed WNSC's report. The City of Wilmington joins the WNSC and its position that the Neighborhood School Act raises several legal and constitutional concerns. School assignments based only on students geographical location, without addressing the educational and learning environments currently facing our children, serves only to intensify the existing boundaries between income and race. The Act, as drafted or when implemented, will not only create racially identifiable schools, but also form the basis for legal challenges.

Notwithstanding, the City conducted its analysis of the Act's potential impact on the children of Wilmington. The City of Wilmington submits this report to address the recommendations submitted by WNSC and to provide the recommendations to the General Assembly for implementing the Act in the City of Wilmington. The City's Neighborhood School Plan creates a consortium of independent public charter schools for grades

pre-school through high school. The consortium will empower Wilmington with the ability to educate its youth and create neighborhood schools in a responsible manner. Additionally, the plan recommends that the General Assembly abolish the existing four-district configuration, and that the State adopts the "River Plan" that requires only Brandywine, Red Clay to provide public school education for the City of Wilmington.

Working within legislatively imposed time constraints, and in the hopes of safeguarding all children within Wilmington and New Castle County, the City of Wilmington calls upon the General Assembly to accept this plan. Under the circumstances, we believe that this plan best positions our children in regards to the implementation of HB 300.

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## II. Background

In the year 2000, the Delaware General Assembly enacted House Bill 300 Neighborhood Schools Act of 2000, which required the Brandywine, Colonial, Christina, and Red Clay Consolidated School Districts to develop and implement Neighborhood School Plans. The Act required every student to attend a grade-appropriate school that is geographically closest to the student's home. The Act, in essence, required any implementation plan to:

- Consider the student's geographic distance and protect against assignments that create substantial hardships to a school, school district, student, or a student's family, and
- Make student assignments based on geographic distances and not on race or any other criterion. The plan could not consider the racial composition of the schools.

Additionally, Section 223 of the Act established the Wilmington Neighborhood Schools Committee (WNSC). This section required the WNSC to review and analyze current public school feeder patterns, current resource allocations among the districts, current populations of children residing in the City of Wilmington attending public schools, and population projections for children residing in the City of Wilmington, who are likely to attend public schools in the future.

Based on the aforementioned information and analysis, the WNSC submitted its recommendations to the Mayor and City Council by January 3, 2001. Such recommendations addressed concerns surrounding the "Creation of a Wilmington School District, neighborhood schools within the current district configurations and neighborhood schools under some alternative district configuration." Furthermore, the WNSC's recommendations identified specific time-lines for implementation, as well as specific actions, legislative or otherwise, required to implement the

recommendations. The recommendations also estimated the costs or savings; both in terms of capital expenses and/or operational expenses based on existing unit count allocations and the required local match.

Next, the City Council and the Mayor of the City of Wilmington reviewed the WNSC's recommendations and submitted a plan on behalf of the City of Wilmington. The City of Wilmington committed extensive efforts and resources to conduct a comprehensive review of the Act and the WNSC's report. The City of Wilmington conducted community meetings and forums throughout the City to obtain public comments and reactions to the WNSC's report.

Based upon these efforts, the City developed a neighborhood schools plan that creates a structure designed to minimize the risks currently faced by Wilmington's children, and maximize opportunities for children to achieve academic success.

### III. Wilmington Neighborhood School Committee's Report

#### A. AN OVERVIEW OF THE WNSC'S REPORT

The Wilmington Neighborhood School Committee (WNSC) conducted numerous public meetings between May 2000 and January 2001. They also invited the Delaware Department of Education and several researchers to present information concerning district configuration; student learning environments; and information about the demographics of Delaware's school districts. Based on the information gathered, the WNSC made the following pertinent findings relating to the City of Wilmington<sup>1</sup>:

- Approximately eleven thousand (11,000) students reside within the City of Wilmington.
- Seventy-eight percent (78%) of Wilmington's children are African-American as opposed to only thirty-one percent (31%) statewide.
- Thirteen percent (13%) of Wilmington's children are Latino-American students as opposed to only five percent (5%) statewide.
- Seventy five percent (75%) of Wilmington's children come from low-income families as opposed to only thirty-three percent (33%) statewide.
- Twenty-one percent (21%) of Wilmington's children are special needs as opposed to only eleven percent (11%) statewide.
- Students living in the City of Wilmington have a collective 1.7 Grade Point Average (GPA).
- There is an educational achievement gap between Wilmington's children and their peers throughout the state.

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<sup>1</sup> The Committee's findings referenced children attending a Delaware Public School.

Given these findings, the Committee focused on increasing achievement, and recommended Universal Components in this regard. Furthermore, the Committee recommended two school district options. In essence, they recommended the following:

- Option One: The Committee recommended that the City adopt a metropolitan plan. Under this plan the City of Wilmington, Red Clay Consolidated, and Brandywine School Districts would merge to create one school district. The newly created district would operate all schools located in these geographical areas and educate approximately 31,000 students.
- Option Two: The Committee recommended that the City adopt a Wilmington Charter School District. Under this plan, the City of Wilmington would agree to assume control of all schools located within the City and organize these schools into a district of individually chartered schools. The newly created charter district would have (3) three years to convert all schools located in the City into charter schools and affect approximately 11,000 students.

The WNSC concluded that to achieve neighborhood school assignments based only on geographic proximity, without addressing the educational and learning environments currently facing our children, serves only to intensify the existing boundaries between income and race. The WNSC also expressed sincere concerns regarding the potential "unconstitutional[ity]" of the Neighborhood School Act. The WNSC's majority felt that the implementation of the Act could "illegally create racially identifiable high-poverty schools." Notwithstanding their reservations, the WNSC proposed several Universal Components that they believe must be implemented regardless of the plan.

**B. ASSESSMENT OF WNSC REPORT**

The Wilmington City Council and Mayor adopts the WNSC's "Universal Components." The recommendations are contained in Appendix A. The City concurs with the WNSC's position that it is important to close the existing achievement gap between students who live in Wilmington and their New Castle County counterparts. We believe that the appropriate remedy to this achievement gap is to implement the WNSC's Universal Components.

In accepting the WNSC's report, the Council and Mayor join the Wilmington Neighborhood School Committee in its position for a need to guard against creating systematically disadvantaged schools within the City of Wilmington. Any Neighborhood School Plan adopted by the General Assembly must:

- Support racial diversity and not purposefully create racially identifiable, highly impoverished schools.
- Ensure that there are provisions that improve the education of children living in Wilmington.
- Eliminate any achievement gap between Wilmington's students and their peers in Northern New Castle County and throughout the state.
- Include some institution or mechanism that confers local school control within the four districts for overseeing the education of Wilmington's children.

Additionally, the City concludes that the plan must provide opportunities for Wilmington's students to attend quality neighborhood schools from K-12 within the City of Wilmington. Furthermore, the selected plan must endow Wilmington's parents and community with meaningful control over the entity/process that governs neighborhood schools.



#### **IV. City of Wilmington's Recommended Plan**

The City of Wilmington recognizes its charge as prescribed by the Neighborhood School Act of 2000, and as such, adopted the following mission statement:

*"The City of Wilmington strives to provide our youth with increased opportunities to attend quality neighborhood schools from K-12. The aforementioned efforts seek to endow this urban community with meaningful control over the entity/process that governs neighborhood schools, while ensuring academic achievement and racial diversity."*

The City concludes that the creation of a "Wilmington School District" is not in the best interest of Wilmington's students, at this time. Therefore, in accordance with the aforementioned mission Statement and pursuant to the WNSC's report, the Wilmington City Council and Mayor recommend the following:

- That the General Assembly adopts the "River Plan" districting configuration that requires the Brandywine and Red Clay School Districts to provide public education to the City of Wilmington;
- That the General Assembly adopts the Wilmington Public Charter School Consortium model;
- That the General Assembly implements the City of Wilmington's Educational Enhancement Recommendations;
- That the General Assembly implements the WNSC's Universal Components;
- That the General Assembly establishes an Outreach Library Program;
- That the General Assembly establishes a Statewide Special Education/Learning Disability Advocacy Office to address the needs of special education and learning disabled students.