

THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE LOWER CAPE FEAR  
Serving Brunswick, New Hanover, and Pender Counties, NC

Statement for New Hanover County Board of Education on School Redistricting, Nov. 7, 2017.

The League of Women Voters is committed, nationally, statewide and locally to socio-economic and racial diversity in schools. Such diversity is necessary to achieve equal access to quality education. The League of Women Voters of the Lower Cape Fear came before you in May of 2006 and again in September 2008 to express serious concern about proposed redistricting plans which had the potential to create schools with disproportionate numbers of students from one race or socio-economic group. These concerns have become reality. Over half of NHC schools are now racially imbalanced. Snipes, Freeman, Virgo, Gregory, and Williston are racially imbalanced and have over 80% of students living in poverty (receiving free and reduced lunch). They have also been identified as low performing schools by the State for the last 3 years. To date, efforts by the Board to increase diversity at Snipes, Freeman and Virgo through the creation of magnet programs in these schools (Williston is not a designated magnet school), have not been successful, they have actually lost students and are well below student capacity (28%, 34% and 70% respectively) while many traditional suburban schools are overcrowded. The recent move of the popular language immersion program to the International School at Gregory has helped increase diversity at this school, and there is a waiting list for this program.

Research has shown that ALL students benefit from attending schools with student populations that reflect the diversity of their community. A real challenge occurs when the majority of the students in a school are living in poverty. Then the needs of these students can overwhelm the school's resources and the ability of its teachers to teach effectively. New Hanover County is not alone in struggling with this problem. In the 2016-2017 school year, 98% of schools in North Carolina receiving an F grade, and 92% of those receiving a D grade, were schools with 50% of more of their students living in poverty.

The NHCS first guiding principle for redistricting is that a diverse student body is important and valued. This principle often conflicts with the stated desire of keeping students in "neighborhood schools." However with changes in population we question whether neighborhood schools still exist? Not all neighborhoods have schools, and schools are not always situated close to areas with high numbers of school age children. The term "community schools" may be a more accurate description, and implies inclusiveness and an ownership by a community of neighborhoods of the schools. We believe that the main guiding principle for redistricting should be equal opportunity for access to a quality education throughout the school district.

Redistricting of schools is always painful. Moving is difficult, and most families do not want to change schools. There are considerable challenges to maintaining proximity to the nearest school and at the same time diversifying the student population. This will require creativity and courage from our School Board. Blaming parents for lack of involvement or our local planners for concentrating subsidized housing in certain areas is not productive. These are real barriers, but our School District and our community have an obligation to find solutions. We must increase the racial and socio-economic diversity in all of our schools in order to provide the best possible educational opportunities for all New Hanover County students. We owe this to our children. Every child should have an opportunity for success, and success should not depend on his or her zip code. New Hanover County's greatest asset is our people, and our jobs and economy depend on the quality of our public schools.

The League of Women Voters of the Lower Cape Fear appreciates your time.