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Katherine Green, John Luke (behind sign), Michelle Green and Melissa Green protest the school reassignment plan in front of Apex High School before a hearing with the school board. About 20 percent of Wake students would be moved. Staff Photos by Ted Richardson



Jennifer Credle addresses the school board as Osvaldo Franco, left, waits his turn to speak. About 200 people attended the first of five hearings this month.

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Wake parents seek changes in reassignment plan

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APEX - Parents, students and elected officials pleaded with Wake County school board members Monday to change a plan that would move 25,486 students to different schools over the next three years.

It's a scene that will be repeated several times this week and next as the school board holds four more public hearings on the plan to fill new schools while maintaining diversity in the school system. Vocal groups have formed to demand that specific neighborhoods be dropped from the plan.

"It's not all right to steam ahead with a flawed plan," Cary parent Tracy Lowder said at the hearing at Apex High School, which drew about 200 people.

Wake annually reassigns students to fill new schools, ease crowding at existing schools and promote diversity.

School officials try to balance the percentages of low-income students, special-education

students and students with limited English language skills at individual schools. For the first time, the state's largest school district is also trying to keep elementary students bundled together in middle school and middle school students together in high school.

This is the first time Wake has tried to inform parents more than one year ahead of time where their children could go to school.

Among the most vocal opponents of the new plan are four neighborhoods along the Cary/Apex border that are scheduled to be switched from Apex High School to Athens Drive High School, a school inside the Beltline. The move is intended to relieve crowding at Apex, fill empty seats at Athens Drive and boost diversity at both schools. Athens Drive has a higher percentage of low-income students than Apex.

Before the hearing, about 30 Apex students rallied in front of the school to urge that they be allowed to stay. They chanted, "Apex is our home."

"I hope they'll listen to us because we're the ones who will be affected," said Catherine Smith, 15, a sophomore facing reassignment who organized the rally.

Speakers at the hearing argued that Apex is no longer overcrowded because new classroom trailers were installed this month. They contended that Athens Drive's percentage of low-income students is acceptable compared with other schools inside the Beltline.

These speakers urged the school board to change the assignments so students could go to middle schools closer to where they live, then on to Apex High. They now attend Dillard Drive Middle School in Raleigh near the Cary border.

"Please keep us at Apex High and leave us the semblance of community we have," said Rob Bromley, an Apex High School parent.

The Apex High School parents were backed by several elected officials who spoke on their behalf, including Cary Mayor Harold Weinbrecht, usually a strong supporter of the school system.

Weinbrecht said the economic diversity policy is a good goal, but the way it's being implemented has become "destructive" and is pushing Cary parents past the "tipping point."

"Reviewing a policy is a good thing, especially when your policy is causing harm," Weinbrecht said.

Apex Mayor Keith Weatherly, a critic of the diversity policy, said it's time to change the priorities used in reassignment and send children to schools close to where they live. The school district uses distance to school as one factor but weighs it against other priorities, such as diversity.

"Students should go to the closest school or the next closest school," Weatherly said. "Siblings should never be separated."

Several speakers also urged the school board to drop the reassignment of year-round application students from Turner Creek Elementary School in Cary to Laurel Park Elementary School.

The school board will continue to collect public comments before voting on the plan Feb. 3.

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HAVE YOUR SAY

Four more public hearings on the Wake reassignment plan will be held from 6:30 to 9 p.m. on these dates:

* Thursday at Southeast Raleigh High School, 2600 Rock Quarry Road, Raleigh.

- * Monday at Millbrook High School, 2201 Spring Forest Road, Raleigh.
- * Jan. 14 at Fuquay-Varina High School, 201 Bengal Blvd., Fuquay-Varina.
- * Jan. 15 at East Wake High School, 5101 Rolesville Road, Wendell.

Register to speak by calling 850-1600 between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. weekdays. After hours, call 850-1630 and leave a message. Or sign up online at <http://ap2008.wcpss.net/signup/assignment/index.html>.

Registration is on a first-come, first-served basis.

SEE THE PLAN

Go to www.wcpss.net/assignment-proposal/index.html to see the reassignment plan.

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