

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

To promote unity, Rocky Mount should have a voice in school talks

Negotiations on school funding for the Nash-Rocky Mount Public Schools district have taken a positive turn in the past few days. Nash and Edgecombe county commissioners have sent a delegation to meet with Rocky Mount city officials. Let us hope for the best as all the parties involved in the education of our students move toward a solution.

Rocky Mount's population shift from 1990 through 2014 is a story of white flight – the concentration of wealth and development in Nash County and disinvestment in the Edgecombe County side of Rocky Mount. This story is ongoing and about to take a giant step in the wrong direction with the proposed division of the Nash-Rocky Mount district along the county line.

In 1970, the number of African-Americans in the city stood at just half that of white residents. Over the next two decades, both black and white populations grew but at different rates, so

that by 1990 the totals for the two groupings were about equal.

Then in 1992, Rocky Mount led the way 1) in addressing unresolved issues of racial segregation, and 2) in forming through a contentious process the current Nash-Rocky Mount district.

The city's white population peaked in 1990, then declined as both the African-American and overall population of the city continued to climb through 2010. By then, the city faced difficult economic conditions, underscored by the 2009 Forbes report classifying Rocky Mount as one of the 10 most impoverished cities in the country.

White people and their money have gravitated out of Rocky Mount and, as a result, the per-person tax base for Nash County increased significantly, while that of Edgecombe County and the city of Rocky Mount declined.

People living in economically more prosperous Nash County now are being led to further a

process of voluntary (white) segregation – by jettisoning the Edgecombe County students (mostly poor and African-American) and putting the responsibility for their education on economically strapped Edgecombe County.

Replayed in this controversy so far is the pattern of Southern politics – historically: the unwillingness of white people to unite with their black fellow citizens to advance the common good. Both Nash and Edgecombe counties have higher than average poverty rates while white poverty runs about one-third that of African-Americans. In this situation, everyone would benefit by working together to address the common needs of our children.

One Nash County leader was quoted as saying, "Why wouldn't they want to educate their own children?" In reality, the children in the Rocky Mount schools, from both sides of the county line, have always been our

– Rocky Mount's – schoolchildren.

We care about the diminished prospects of children forced into the overstretched Edgecombe County school district. We also care about the threatened increased exclusivity of Nash County schools and the bad example the county-line split will provide our youth by using public policy to increase relative privilege.

The Nash County board's refusal to include Rocky Mount as an equal party in the negotiations 1) denies the historical reality of Rocky Mount as the responsible party in the education of the city's children, and 2) given the city's significant 61 percent black majority, removes from the table an advocate for the primarily African-American students on the Edgecombe side of the city.

To move forward, the city of Rocky Mount should be made a full and central participant in the current negotiations.

Any agreement should take into account the interdependent character of the Twin Counties' economies and social relationships, despite their unequal levels of economic development. This real world unity becomes clear in the U.S. Census Bureau's designation of the two counties as part of a single Metropolitan Statistical Area.

Based on the recognition of a common interest in the well-being of our children, our city and county leaders should demonstrate a sense of mutual responsibility for the educational outcomes of all children in the Rocky Mount metropolitan area. Instead of being the subject of divisive wrangling, Rocky Mount should be seen as a central and unifying presence in the region.

CHIP SMITH
Rocky Mount

Dr. Smith is active with the Rocky Mount Racial Justice Group and can be reached at rsmith39@centurylink.net.

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