

## Pitt County School District Ranks Lowest Among Comparable University School Districts in North Carolina in Several Education Measures

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With the proximity and influence of East Carolina University, many would believe that Pitt County Schools would rate high among public school districts without a major university. However this is not the case.

When comparing Pitt County to the seven other counties in North Carolina with major universities, Pitt County Schools ranks as one of the lowest, if not the lowest, among them for its share of fully licensed teachers, teachers with advanced degrees, highly qualified teachers, board certified teachers, and computers and books available per student. It ranks highest in one area, though: Pitt County Schools has the highest out-of-school suspension rate among school districts in the state housing major universities.

Other school systems examined were in counties that are homes to the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Wake Forest University, North Carolina State University, Duke University and Appalachian State University, the largest universities in North Carolina.

When compared to these other school districts Pitt County Schools does not rank well. The out-of-school suspension rate for Pitt County Schools is the highest among the seven county school systems examined. Pitt County Schools also ranks as one of the lowest for teachers with advanced degrees. In addition, Pitt County Schools has fewer computers available per student and ranks the second lowest in books available per student than any of the other school systems housing major universities in the state.

Tara Harwood, a kindergarten teacher at Falkland Elementary School, says she believes the low socioeconomic status of many students' families is a major factor in the poor standards of Pitt County Schools. Considering that Pitt has high rates of poverty, many parents have a low education level and it is hard for them to contribute to their children's education. Wintre Clark, a teacher at Falkland Elementary, says that many county students cannot rely on their parents to help make sure they are receiving the education they need.

Clark added that many times poor students feel they do not have a way out and have the attitude of "since I grew up poor, I will always be poor."

Harwood is not the only one who points out this trend. Lynn Coats, a special assistant at the State Board of Education, stated that because Pitt County is in a poor region, "there are fewer jobs there, which affect the types of students the schools may have. Since there are less profitable jobs, you may have more students with financial need. Counties such as Wake, Forsyth and Durham have an abundant amount of jobs available and the income level of those towns show that."

Low socioeconomic status is known to lead to low test scores. According to the North Carolina Report Cards, in the 2007-2008 school year the Pitt County School district was below the state average in every end-of-grade testing available at every grade level. While some individual schools were above state level, many were not. In addition, during the same school year 60 percent of Pitt County elementary schools were categorized as “priority schools” based on end-of-grade testing. When a school is categorized as a priority school it means that while many students passed the end-of-grade testing, 50 percent of students enrolled in the school also failed the end-of-grade test.

In addition to the large number of elementary schools categorized as a priority school, 71 percent of Pitt County middle schools were also categorized as priority schools. This means that in the majority of elementary and middle schools in Pitt County only 50 percent of students are passing end-of-grade testing. Many of the high schools are in the same category, with 33 percent of those schools being priority schools and 50 percent being “no recognition” schools. While no recognition schools are slightly better than priority schools, it still means that in some schools up to 40 percent of the students are not passing.

Many observers believe that Pitt County Schools should be better because of the proximity and influence of East Carolina University and its large College of Education. While high schools in the district have 100 percent of their teachers listed as “Highly Qualified,” only 92 percent of these teachers are fully licensed. The Pitt County director of licensed personnel, Dr. Teresa Byrum, says that the difference between a fully licensed teacher and a highly qualified teacher is that fully licensed teachers have received their state licensure to teach from an approved program or institution by the Department of Public Instruction. High qualified teachers, a distinction put into place by the ‘No Child Left Behind Act,’ means that all teachers are qualified in their specific teaching area. To be considered highly qualified the teachers must have taken and passed the praxis, an exam on general education skills that prospective teachers must take before entry into education programs, along with other areas of testing. “The goal for Pitt County is to have 100 percent of all its teachers to be ‘Highly Qualified,’” Bynum said.

While all Pitt County teachers are considered “highly qualified,” the county still ranks as one of the lowest counties for high school teachers with advanced degrees out of the seven counties with major universities in North Carolina, at only 23 percent.

Byrum stated, “Even though ECU is a major teaching college and you would think that many of the teachers there would return to school to further their education, we are finding that those that actually do that are moving out of Pitt County and into school systems in which they will receive more income.”

John Fennimore, an East Carolina graduate and math teacher at Ayden Middle School, says that many teachers with advanced degrees will not come to Greenville because they are not only offered better pay in other school districts but better incentives as well. For example, according to Fennimore, teachers in Pitt County receive only \$150 for

school supplies, while in other school districts many teachers receive much more than that.

Not only does the Pitt County School system provide less money for teacher supplies, it also ranks as one of the lowest among the major university school districts in books and technology. According to the North Carolina School Report Card, the Pitt County school district has 16.99 books available for every student. Of the comparison county school districts, only Wake County Schools was lower, with 15.99 books available for each student. Pitt County also has the lowest number of computers available for students, only one computer available for every 4.19 students. Without more resources for student learning, it may be difficult to try to raise the standards.

Harwood agrees that more computers and books are needed for students. "In general it will make it easier for the students to learn," she said.

And those are not the only problems. The Pitt County school district also had one of the highest suspension rates in the state, with 63 out of every 100 high school students, on average, receiving out-of-school suspensions for the 2007-2008 school year, according to the NC Report Card. Pitt County was higher in suspensions at all three school levels—elementary, middle and high schools—than any of the other seven major university counties. These suspension rates were double the rate in most other counties, and almost six times as much as those received in Watauga County Schools, where Appalachian State University is located.

Coats said she believes that many of these suspensions stem from behavior problems that are not corrected in elementary school. With behavioral problems being so prevalent, this can cause a distraction to other students in the classroom, causing them not to learn as much, she added. Also, when students are suspended they fall behind in their school work. Harwood said parents do not always take the time to try to correct the behavioral problems at home, thus leading to further classroom distractions.

The high suspension rate could be a factor in the poor test scores among Pitt County students, Coats said, adding, "If the faculty concentrated more on correcting behavioral problems, we believe that there could be a possible improvement among test scores."

With such a large teaching university in the county, the Pitt County School system should be doing more to attract those with advanced degrees to teach in the school system, she added.

*Jon Connor, Generra Cornwell and Michael Harris contributed to the reporting of this story.*

