



# Bridges Collaborative Member Spotlights: Approaches to Integration in North Carolina

MARCH 28, 2022 – SALMA ELSAYED

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Across North Carolina, segregation has increased between 1998 and 2016. This increase has primarily affected students in urban areas, where one third of students in the state attend school. According to a recent study by Duke University researchers Charles Clotfelter, Helen Ladd, and Mavzuna Turaeva and UNC-Chapel Hill professor Steven Hemelt, white–Black segregation statewide rose by 25 percent during this time, and white–Latinx segregation more than tripled, with even greater increases in urban areas.

Despite ample research demonstrating that integrated schools reduce racial bias and lead to stronger academic and health outcomes for students, the retreat by federal courts from desegregation remedies and a lack of political will has facilitated school resegregation across the state. In this political climate, school districts across North Carolina have had to find innovative approaches to decrease racial isolation across public schools. They have done so by establishing magnet schools that appeal to a diverse range of parents, using socioeconomic status to integrate schools, and even pairing elementary schools with different demographics.

These districts include Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, Wake County Public Schools, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, who have pursued different strategies

to reverse pervasive resegregation of their schools. In 2018, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools began pairing elementary schools by merging two school zones and combining students from two elementary schools, Billingsville Elementary-Primary Campus and Cotswold IB World School-Intermediate Campus, into one school: Billingsville-Cotswold.

In Winston-Salem/Forsyth County and Wake County Schools, magnet schools have offered an opportunity to create diverse schools with an inclusive and rigorous education. One example from Winston-Salem/Forsyth County is Wiley Magnet Middle School, a middle school whose core values include equity and a student-centered approach. In Wake County, another magnet middle school, Moore Square Magnet Middle School, is a gifted-and-talented and academically and intellectually gifted (AIG) basics middle school. Roughly one-third of students at Moore Square Magnet Middle School are from the school's geographic attendance zone, while two-thirds apply through the magnet process. Each school in each of these districts can provide insights on how promising integration practices can create strong schools for all students.

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This report can be found online at <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/bridges-collaborative-member-spotlights-approaches-to-integration-in-north-carolina/>

## Wake County Public Schools: Moore Square Magnet Middle School

In 1976, the Raleigh City and Wake County school districts merged as Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) and began implementing a voluntary desegregation plan. The following year, WCPSS, the largest school district in North Carolina, established two magnet schools in the downtown Raleigh area to attract white families to an area that historically had few white students, while also filling underutilized buildings. Over the past forty years, the number of magnet schools in the district has increased to fifty-four schools, and the model has been nationally recognized. WCPSS combines their magnet schools with their student assignment plan, which uses demographic information about the socioeconomic status of a student's base school and home address in school selection. The popularity of magnet schools within Wake County has helped reduce high concentrations of poverty and integrate schools while providing innovative educational opportunities.

Moore Square Magnet is situated in downtown Raleigh and has gone through significant changes to its theme since it opened in the early 2000s. When the school was founded, the proximity of Moore Square to the downtown area allowed teachers to take students on frequent walking trips to visit museums, which became Moore Square's magnet school theme. The theme shifted around 2013 to become a gifted-and-talented (GT) and academically or intellectually gifted (AIG) basics middle school. AIG students, a designation developed by the state, comprise 53 percent of the Moore Square student population. AIG students can apply to Moore Square Magnet and will be enrolled in the school's AIG Basics program, which provides tailored support to help ensure students are challenged and reaching their individual learning goals. However, all other students can apply to Moore Square as well, and all students participate in the GT program, which is based on the belief that all students have gifts and talents to be nurtured. Once students are accepted, they are not separated based on whether or not they qualify for the AIG program. Students are mixed together in classrooms, and all Moore teachers

receive AIG training to help them differentiate instruction for each student's needs. This was an intentional and recent shift made by Moore Square's equity team, who realized that separating the students created a "school within a school," Principal Leslie Taylor explained. Instead, "we want to provide a high quality, rigorous curriculum that is accessible to all students. For example, we're working intentionally to realize the level and rigor of the math curriculum that we're offering all students, not just those identified as AIG students," Taylor continued. While in some middle schools, students can take math 6 or a more advanced class, math 6 plus, all students at Moore Square take math 6 plus.

Rising gentrification in downtown Raleigh decreased the percentage of students on free and reduced lunch in the Moore Square's zone or base population. Yet, Moore Square continues to maintain a diverse population of students because of the student assignment plan, which ensures that gentrification and segregation do not also create homogenous schools. Incoming students at Moore Square come from about twenty different elementary schools and many different towns in the greater Raleigh area. "It's a big commitment for families to make, because we have some families that live twenty-five minutes away from school, but they make the commitment to be a part of the school community despite that distance," Principal Taylor explained.

In addition to the downtown location, rigorous academics, and diverse student population, families make the commitment to attend Moore Square because of the vast elective offerings—over 100 electives for students. "When we talk about tapping into the gifts and talents of students, we have something for everybody," Principal Taylor elucidated. This was part of the draw for Adonya Hood and her daughter Ronni, who is currently an eighth grader at Moore Square. Ronni applied to Moore Square after attending Partnership Magnet Elementary, a small magnet school with a diverse student population that gave her priority to be selected for Moore Square. Adonya and her husband wanted Ronni to continue her schooling in a small and diverse school, but wanted to find a school that offered many different electives. "She does everything. She wants to be involved in everything and wants to learn everything," Adonya remarked. Adonya

and Ronni struggled to name the many clubs and electives that Ronni has explored, but they include Engineering Club, Science Club, Gardening Club, an art program through the museum, Student Council, Video Production, and almost every school play, including *The Lion King*, for which she is currently rehearsing. Ronni has also been able to explore her interest in theater through at least nine theater classes she has taken through the sixth grade. “I remember when I was in sixth grade, I was much more shy than now,” Ronni spoke of the way she developed through the school’s robust offerings.

The diversity and inclusivity of Moore Square has also been invaluable to Adonya, who is deeply involved in the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee at Moore Square. “Raising a Black child, representation is everything,” Adonya emphasized. A diverse student body, while important, should not be the only measure of diversity. “I love the fact that you see the representation, not just with the student population, but with the teachers, the staff, the administrators, the PTSA,” Adonya continued. “I think a lot of what challenges adults is not having the exposure and not growing up in diverse backgrounds...all they know is what they know. And I love the fact that she’s getting this firsthand so early,” she shared. For Ronni, attending middle school with many new students has been exciting for her. “It was really cool. Like seeing the people I met at [elementary school] school be friends with those students.”

The parents have also been able to build a tight-knit community because of the work of the Parent Association. Last summer, they organized welcome events for new families in many of the towns where Moore Square families call home. “We recognize the challenges that emerge when our families live far and wide across our district. We can’t change the distance, but we can build an inclusive, nurturing space that feels safe for all families, regardless of where they live,” Principal Taylor explained.

## Winston-Salem/Forsyth County: Wiley Magnet Middle School

Over 100 west of Moore Square Magnet Middle School, Wiley Magnet Middle School is another diverse and

inclusive school, located in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School District. Prior to *Brown v. Board* in 1954, Black children in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County (WS/FC)—and across the state—attended de jure segregated schools. After a long movement to desegregate schools that ended in a forced federal integration process in 1970, the percentage of Black students in integrated schools increased from 32 percent in 1969 to 79 percent by 1971. In 1981, after the district fully implemented its desegregation plan, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County was considered a unitary district because it had eliminated the impacts of segregation.

However, one decade later, like many other districts across the country, the return to neighborhood schools, federal mandates that eliminated busing, and the continuation of discriminatory housing and zoning laws led to the resegregation of schools in WS/FC. Low-income and African-American families became largely concentrated in just a few lower-performing schools. Today, WS/FC is making strides to address inequities experienced by students of color as a result of segregation. One way it has done so is by reimagining magnet school themes to draw a diverse group of students and families to schools like Wiley Magnet Middle School.

Wiley Magnet Middle School is a STEAM-themed, district-wide magnet school, which integrates the arts with science, technology, engineering, and math. In every classroom, teachers do not just use traditional textbooks, but find a way to allow students to express what they have learned through technology and art. In December, a new facility that includes a gym with air conditioning and new classrooms for dance, chorus, and orchestra opened, expanding the offerings of the school.

Today, two-thirds of students at Wiley Magnet Middle School live in its geographic attendance zone, and one-third apply through the magnet process or other WS/FC student assignment process. It is one of the most diverse schools in the district, in which nearly a third of students are white, one-third are Black, and one-third Hispanic. Wiley is not just racially diverse, but also has student learning diversity: it is

the middle school in the district for students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, or students who have a Visual Impairment. Wiley has also long been home to ESL students, prior to all middle schools in the district implementing ESL programs. In Lisa Bodenheimer's seven years as principal, Wiley has grown by over 225 students.

The residential zone surrounding Wiley includes families of different races and incomes, yet the school had struggled with white families opting out of their zone school. Principal Bodenheimer has helped attract families from communities who had previously left the school by developing a strong school culture. "We invited families in to just talk about what my vision was, and what they wanted to see in their school. I think that was very important to our families that they felt like they were being heard. I have an open door policy so that any family who has a concern or has a complaint can come in and we sit down, we talk about it, and we are very transparent about how we address issues," Bodenheimer explained.

Bodenheimer has also made equity a central focus since the beginning of her tenure. Each student at Wiley has one teacher for each of the four core academic subjects. Those teachers would share a group of students, roughly 120 in number, which would be called a team. When Principal Bodenheimer first came to the school, there were two teams in each grade level, largely grouped into gifted students and special education and English language learners. It became apparent to her that these teams created in-school segregation, and were colloquially referred to by the student body as the "dumb team and smart team." Lisa Bodenheimer quickly responded. "We rescheduled everybody, we changed the team names...I integrated the special education students, English language learners, and gifted learners in science and social studies. There is great value in learning from someone different from you, when you're talking about social studies or hypothesizing and analyzing results in science. That was a huge hurdle for teachers, though, because those teachers then had to be prepared to differentiate in a way that they hadn't had to do before. But after a while, that just became the culture," Principal Bodenheimer said of the process.

Betty Jo Moore, a sixth grade science teacher at Wiley Middle School, has witnessed these changes in the past ten years that she has been at the school. One major change the school has worked on is ensuring that "all families have a vested interest in what's going on in the building," Moore explained. Though the Parent-Teacher Association tends towards the white mothers from more affluent areas of the community, the staff and administration have worked to ensure that immigrant parents and lower-income families also have a voice. They have found Spanish and Karenni translators for meetings and sent out materials in families native languages. When their family engagement team learned that some low-income families did not have necessary transportation or childcare to attend those meetings, they went to them and held parent educational programs in apartment complexes. These workshops guide parents on how to access school resources to support their children. Moore has also done homework help sessions at apartment complexes. Additionally, she organizes home visits if families are unable to meet with her in the confines of the school building.

Betty Jo Moore is not just a teacher who cares deeply about her students: she is also the parent of a Wiley alumna. "I wanted my daughter in the school because of the diverse population and we don't even live in the county. So I actually had to pay tuition to have her come to this county because where we live it is not a diverse population. For me, that is not real life," Moore explained. The dedication of staff members like Moore to cultivating a diverse and welcoming community has contributed to the success of Wiley. That dedication is also reflected in Principal Bodenheimer's approach: "Even though I'm a veteran educator, I'm still committed to learning so that my staff watch me do it and follow suit, because then it will trickle down to our kids. It is never too late to reflect on what you believe and who you are, and to try to be different and be better."

## Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District: Billingsville and Cotswold Elementary Schools

The story of resegregation of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District mirrors Wake Forest and Winston-Salem/Forsyth County. In 1964, ten years after *Brown v. Board* mandated that schools must integrate, when a Black couple attempted to enroll their son into an integrated elementary school in Charlotte, their request was denied. After the NAACP sued on behalf of the family, in 1969, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District became the first urban district required to use busing to integrate schools. The large-scale busing system in Charlotte was replicated in dozens of other desegregation plans. Like Winston-Salem/Forsyth County, Charlotte's schools were soon integrated, which lasted for nearly three decades. However, in 2001, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals sided with parents seeking to end the mandatory busing program, ushering an era of neighborhood schools and with them, resegregation.

Like other North Carolina school districts, as Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) contended with the resegregation of their schools, the school board considered different approaches. In 2017, the school board decided to merge two elementary schools with different demographics in what is referred to as school pairings. School pairings have existed since the Civil Rights Era, including in New York City. The process involves merging two schools so that students from both schools attend school on one campus for a few years, then the other campus. Billingsville Elementary School located in a predominantly African-American neighborhood of Greer Heights, and Cotswold Elementary School, an International Baccalaureate (IB) school located in a predominantly white neighborhood, were designated by the school board to be paired because of their close proximity to one another—less than two miles away from one another.

Linda Kroha, former PTA president during the pairing and a mom of three BCE students, spoke of the fear some parents at Cotswold experienced when the pairing was announced. One family she knew had just bought their

home by Cotswold Elementary School, so their children could walk to school. While the mother initially panicked, she realized, "I want to be here if we're going to try to encourage diversity and bring the best of two schools together," Kroha recounted. Many white parents were drawn to Cotswold because of the IB program, and while some left, many stayed to be part of the integration process. "The families who bought in that kindergarten year, bought in. There was a grandmother in particular that was a retired teacher and spent like every Tuesday in kindergarten classes, helping teachers," Kroha recalled. For a school with an International Baccalaureate program, diversifying Cotswold through a pairing was a way of living out their principles of intercultural learning and respect.

The vast majority of the students who had attended Cotswold before the pairing stayed, and the staff and administration took great care to ensure that both communities were involved. Linda Kroha described the pairing as "seamless," and principal Alicia Hash echoed her sentiments. Hash was the principal of Cotswold Elementary before the school pairing and is the current principal of the paired school. "I always wondered why we operated in silos because our campuses were so close. Our students also attended the same middle and high schools." Yet, there were still concerns about losing the existing community on each campus. "There was a huge, huge concern from both campuses about losing the community that was already built," Hash recounted. Cotswold was a bigger school with a very active PTA, and it required a lot of intentionality to create opportunities for Greer Heights families to stay involved. "Even before the merger, we had to be extremely intentional, that the opportunities we presented for parents didn't just lend to parents who work from home or...stay at home," Hash explained. Hash and the BCE staff made sure to create weekend and virtual opportunities for all families to stay involved.

Principal Hash attributes much of the success of the school pairing with the trust the schools built during the transitional year. Her advice to other schools being paired is not to rush the process. Instead, they must believe in the vision and connect with different families to understand their

concerns. Her own daughter was a fifth grader at Cotswold during the merger, giving her a lens into what parents were thinking. Hash realized that relationships were most important in facilitating this change. “Regardless if we’re on two campuses or one, regardless if my campus building sits in my neighborhood or not, regardless if the teacher comes from the previous school or not, when I know that there’s a core team that I’ve built relationships with, and I trust for the well being of my children, when you have that, it just creates support,” she asserted.

## Key Takeaways

These three districts have pursued different strategies to combat resegregation in North Carolina, and other districts can look to each of their approaches when integrating their schools.

- **Offer a wide range of electives.** Moore Square Magnet School has attracted a wide range of families who are willing to travel long distances, so that their children can have access to a school that allows them to explore all their interests.
- **Family engagement.** Offering opportunities for low-income families to have a voice in integrating their children’s school is critical to building a community of trust. Staff and administrators at Wiley Magnet Middle School demonstrate the necessity of meeting families where they are.
- **Transparency.** Include families in conversations about new integration initiatives from the beginning to build a community of trust, as Billingsville–Cotswold Elementary demonstrates.

## Author

**Salma Elsayed** is a sophomore at Harvard College, where she is pursuing a BA in social studies and computer science with a focus on inequality in American education. She is currently the advocacy, health, and housing programming group officer at the Phillips Brooks House Association, the largest public service organization at Harvard, which serves over 10,000 youth and adults in the greater Boston area, and where she supports several programs, organizes Housing Awareness Week, and leads advocacy and organizing trainings. She serves as a staff member for the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, is a labor organizer with the Student Labor Action Movement, and is working to pilot the Housing Opportunities Program to provide rental assistance to low-income families in the greater Boston area. Outside of Harvard, Salma has worked on various education reform issues, including competency-based learning, school funding, and culturally responsive education with several nonprofits and policymakers in New York. Her editorials have been published in the New York Times, Seventeen, and the Harvard Crimson. When she is not organizing, you can find her watching sunsets near the Charles River or exploring Boston.