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## Southern Discomfort

Gentrification transforms schools in historic southern city



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# Discomfort

Southern

The influx of business and new residents is changing historic Durham and its school district

*Glenn Cook*

**W**hen Mike Lee moved from Huntsville, Alabama, to Durham, North Carolina, in the late 1990s, a barbed wire fence surrounded the downtown American Tobacco Company complex. It was a sign that times had changed.

Tobacco and textiles, the economic foundations on which Durham was built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were vanishing. The downtown area was blighted, crime was high, and folks were fleeing to suburban areas in nearby Hillsborough and Wake Counties where the high-tech Research Triangle Park thrived.

“It was a completely different place back then,” says Lee, now chairman of the Durham Public Schools board of education. “And that’s part of what we’re fighting now.”

Today, you can’t walk through downtown Durham without seeing signs of a huge economic and cultural renaissance. The American Tobacco Historic District houses high-tech entrepreneurs and startups, among other businesses. What was once an adjacent gravel parking lot now houses the 2,700-seat Durham Performing Arts

Center, one of the most successful venues of its kind in the U.S. The 27-story One City Center, located in the heart of downtown, has apartments available for \$1,500 to \$4,000 a month.

Meanwhile, Durham’s school board and administrators face a complex swirl of issues — some out of their legal and fiscal control — that threaten the district’s long-term future. Even though the city’s population has grown by more than 50,000 since 2010, the district’s enrollment has steadily eroded, down by more than 1,000 students since 2014. State-authorized charters have siphoned almost 7,000 students, and pleas for increased funding from the county have fallen on deaf ears.

“We are at a crossroads,” says Superintendent Pascal Mubenga, who has been in the position since November 2017. “On one hand, you have all this growth, but our enrollment is declining. We have not seen an increase in the white population yet, even though they are moving to Durham. We are concerned about that. We have to compete at a level that we never had to in the past, and it’s not getting any easier.”



PHOTO CREDIT: GLENN COOK - SCENES OF DURHAM

**GENTRIFICATION, RESEGREGATION**

Gentrification — the process of renovating deteriorated urban, mostly low-income neighborhoods to bring in more affluent residents — has been felt in waves in the U.S. since the late 1960s. Usually fueled by public-private partnerships and government policies that are favorable to businesses and large-scale developers, these urban renewal projects reach far and wide across the country.

Critics of gentrification note that low-income families are hit hardest as property values and rental costs rise. For educators, research on gentrification and school choice points to an even more disturbing trend: resegregation.

According to one study, published in 2017 in the *Sociology of Education*, college-educated whites are far more likely to move into low-income neighborhoods if charter and magnet schools are readily available. The study by researchers Francis Pearman and Walker Swaim notes that expanding school choice increases the likelihood of gentrification by 22 percent in the most racially isolated neighborhoods.

“The à la carte nature of school choice works hand in hand with the changes you see in communities that are

gentrifying,” says Carla Shedd, a professor at New York’s CUNY Graduate Center and author of *Unequal City: Race, schools, and perceptions of injustice*. “Having a choice makes you feel like you’re exercising it, even if it’s not a better option.”

In Durham and other large North Carolina districts, the state’s stance on charters and choice is a painful and prickly topic. In 2010, after a decades-long moderate to progressive stance on education, Republicans took control of the House and Senate for the first time since 1870. The next year, the General Assembly lifted the cap on charter schools, which are state authorized and regulated. Other cuts to education funding, including teacher salaries, followed.

“We have a real problem here,” says Helen Ladd, an education economist and professor emeritus at Duke University. “The average per-pupil spending follows the child to a charter, but the district can’t reduce variable spending on teachers and classroom supplies because they have a lot of fixed costs. They must find additional funding or lower the quality of education services that are available. And that will only lead to a spiral.”



Ed Dunlap, executive director of the North Carolina School Boards Association, says that charter school autonomy puts the state’s traditional districts in a bind. Charters can and have sued local boards when disputes arise; opportunities to share noninstructional services, such as transportation, are almost nonexistent.

Since the cap was lifted, the number of charters has risen to 199; 17 are within Durham’s boundaries. The district gave \$24.1 million in state funding to charters in 2018-19, even as its enrollment declined to just over 32,000 students. Today, more than 80 percent of Durham’s students are minority; 62.2 percent qualify for free and reduced-price lunch.

“We would be able to offer a lot more to all of our students if we had that money,” Mubenga says. “Parents want more programming, such as dual language, and innovations. There’s a lot of innovation we could bring that everyone could benefit from, and we could keep and recruit the best teachers because they could be well compensated through a local supplement.”

Lee agrees. While not addressing charters directly, he says, “I think North Carolina has it backwards. They

want to give tax breaks and incentives to get businesses to come here, but that doesn’t add up to a lot for these companies. I think we should flip that and focus on creating a strong foundational public education layer that provides our kids with the skills they need. If we can do that, companies will come.”

### CHILDREN’S INITIATIVE

In 2009, a group of community members started looking at ways to help youth in East Durham, then the city’s most vulnerable neighborhood. That led to the formation of the East Durham Children’s Initiative (EDCI) and the EDCI Zone, a 120-block, 1.2 square mile area served by four traditional schools and two charters.

Now in its eighth year, the private foundation-funded EDCI provides extensive social and emotional support services to more than 2,000 children starting at birth and continuing to age 14. It also provides funding for family advocates who are hired and paid for by the school district.

Most important, it’s making an impact. According to the most recent evaluation by Duke University’s Center for Child and Family Policy, youth who take part in EDCI’s

early childhood services are more likely to arrive healthy and prepared for kindergarten. Those who stay with the program have better outcomes in school, and families feel a strong connection and sense of support from EDCI.

“Our view has always been that we need interventions and supports targeted toward the time the kids are not in school,” says David Reese, EDCI’s president and CEO. “We train teachers to teach kids how to read, not how to teach kids to navigate the effects of poverty when they’re in a learning environment.

“Our advocates have an unwritten mantra: Regardless of whether they had hot water on last night, heat on last night, whether the cops were next door, as many of our EDCI kids as possible should be at school tomorrow morning ready to rock and roll.”

EDCI also is providing implicit bias training to teachers to help them understand “why communities look the way communities look.” Reese says future plans involve possibly expanding the program to other communities.

Barker French, one of the founding members, says EDCI’s model is not necessary for all children.

“One of the misconceptions, particularly among our political leaders, is that we need to serve all kids in Durham,” French says. “All kids in Durham don’t need what we do, but you can go to areas of Durham and find families who are just as challenged, and who could use the kind of help we provide.”

Since EDCI was formed, the neighborhood has become caught up in the city’s rapid redevelopment. Outside the organization’s office, housed in a church on Angier Avenue, construction is ongoing on a new restaurant/bar and several other businesses that will be open before summer ends.

“This community has to find a way to continue to grow and diversify while gentrifying, while continuing to embrace its history and the community members within this space,” Reese says. “This is not an ‘or’ proposition. It’s an ‘and.’ Too much progress has been made here.”

## RELENTLESS PROMOTION

When Lee ran for the board in 2014, he wanted to bring a noneducator’s point of view to the schools. The parent of three also says he sees “the squeeze” of gentrification on young families.

“As a black man in Durham, I see segregation and gentrification through a different lens,” he says. “I see it up close and personal, and it’s real. Not all of it is negative, I think. I think a change in the city’s demographics can

be beneficial. Durham is a city full of culture, full of that Southern type of coolness. Bull City. That identity is how you pull in diverse families.”

More important, how do you keep them? First, Lee says, you must “relentlessly promote” the programs the district offers. Second, businesses must support the Durham Public Schools Foundation, a nonprofit formed last year to “provide money for the schools that the state won’t.” The foundation raised \$125,000 from 90 businesses in its first month and has handed out more than \$55,000 in grants to schools.

Minnie Forte-Brown, who preceded Lee as board chair and is on NSBA’s board of directors, says the district should “magnetize every school so every school is a magnet to people.”

“Charters? They’re here. That tsunami is here,” she says. “Let’s not worry about it. The legislature is creating charters and we all know what they want to do. We have to be the draw. DPS has to be the draw. Children have to want to be there. We have to let parents know that we produce the kids who go to Harvard, MIT, Duke. Our parents have to know that and feel comfortable with that.”

Forte-Brown, a Durham native who has been on the board since 2004, is matter-of-fact about the changes her city is undergoing.

“Growth is positive, but if people can’t stay in the city, that’s a negative. We have to have affordable housing. This can’t just be a city for young affluent people,” she says. “At the same time, it’s an exciting opportunity for us. Growth opportunities are there. We can bring in thought leaders who have jobs we haven’t even thought of for our children. We are responding to it, as efficiently and thoughtfully as we can.”

## MAGNETS

Patti Crum has seen numerous changes since she became principal of George Watts Montessori Magnet School in Trinity Park, a neighborhood that reaches to the edge of Duke University. The neighborhood was once home to Duke’s fraternity houses, large 100-year-old dwellings that were refurbished and sold to young families as the magnet school was opening.

“That changed things for us,” says Crum, who opened the school, which brings in its 389 students by a combination of lottery and those who live in the attendance zone.

Nearly half of all Durham public schools are magnets, but few have seen the demographic transformation that has

hit Watts. When it first opened, the school was 60 percent Hispanic, 28 percent African American, and 12 percent white. Today, it is 60 percent white, 25 percent Hispanic and 15 percent African-American.

“It’s been an adjustment,” says Crum. “There are challenges learning how to navigate parents who come in with a sense of entitlement, but at the same time they are so very involved in their kids and in volunteering at our school. We rely on their talents.”

These are the types of things you often see in schools of choice: higher levels of parent involvement, low turnover among staff, limited mobility among students. They also prove the point of many in traditional public education, that well-run magnet schools can be just as effective — if not more — than schools of choice.

Despite some pressure to turn Watts into a neighborhood school, Crum says she’s happy that Durham has left it as a magnet.

“That’s a gift,” she says. “Anywhere someone moves, they can still come here to school. That’s huge. If all our schools could have the luxury of a stable student body that wants to be there, you can build strong relationships with families. And ultimately that’s good for kids.”

### CHALLENGES AND CHANGE

When James Hopkins took over as principal at Lakewood Elementary in 2017, he saw the effects of what Lee describes as a “generational curse” on some of Durham’s more challenged schools. Two months into his new role, the school was in danger of being taken over by the state because it ranked near the bottom in student achievement.

“It was a hurricane, man,” says Hopkins, who had been an assistant principal in Chapel Hill before he took over at Lakewood. “We were very vocal. When teachers were sitting there saying, ‘I didn’t sign up to teach these types of kids,’ or would demonstrate a lack of belief in our students, I told them they couldn’t be here.”

Lakewood, which serves 400 students, was taken off the state list, but Hopkins was just getting started. His next goal: Change perceptions about a school that is 55 percent Hispanic, 38 percent African American, and only 5.2 percent white, yet in a rapidly changing neighborhood.

“We are going out and recruiting parents and bringing them into the school,” Hopkins says, noting student achievement has improved by double digits in all areas since his arrival and was on pace to exceed growth in 2018-19. “I want this school to be a reflection of its community,

and currently it’s not.”

Hopkins acknowledges it’s been difficult to get white families to look at Lakewood, but he’s seen improved participation at parent meetings. “We are averaging 41 parents at our parent meetings; last year we averaged six. Parents are coming out because they sense something is going on. They want to be part of it.”

Given Durham’s tight finances, the investment made in turning around Lakewood has been substantial. The school, which had four principals in the previous 10 years before Hopkins’ arrival, has two instructional coaches, a dean of students, a social worker, and a student support staff member. All staff have received training on students’ social and emotional needs.

“The district has invested in us and we’re going to return that investment,” Hopkins says. “We are very grateful for that, and it is paying off.”

Lee says he’s realistic about the challenges Lakewood and other schools in Durham face.

“Turning this around is not an overnight thing,” he says. “This is something that is decades old. The schools have a reputation, because traditionally the highest percentage of race and socioeconomic status in Durham is black and brown. There’s a fear of what Durham used to be. For that to change, we’ve got to show them what Durham is now. We have to be generational curse eliminators.”

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