EDUCATION

Is Wake losing the school choice battle? How the district competes for students

By T. Keung Hui
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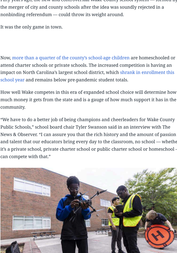

Fifty years after Raleigh and Wake County merged, Wake County Public School System's racially diverse and high-achieving schools are a model for other districts. Seventy podcasts high growth in arts at Apex are leading to crowded schools. Ethan Hyman, Raleigh News & Observer file photo

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50 years of Wake County Public Schools

On July 1, 1976, Raleigh City Schools and the old Wake County system took the history books. Enter the unified Wake County Public School System, which 50 years later, is the biggest school system in North Carolina and the 14th largest nationally. But the district faces new challenges in 2026: both crowded schools and under-enrollment plus major competition from other education options.

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Fifty years ago, the new and controversial Wake County school system — formed by the merger of city and county schools after the idea was soundly rejected in a nonbinding referendum — could throw its weight around.

It was the only game in town.

Now, more than a quarter of the county's school-age children are homeschooled or attend charter schools or private schools. The increased competition is having an impact on Wake County's largest school district, which drops in enrollment this school year and remains below pre-pandemic student totals.

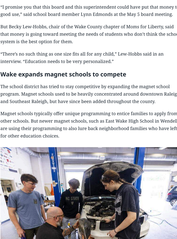
How will Wake compete in this era of expanded school choice will determine how much money it receives from the state and is a sign of how much support has in the community.

"We have to do a better job of being champions and cheerleaders for Wake County Public Schools," school board chair Tyler Swanson said in an interview with The News & Observer. "I can assure you that the rich history and the amount of passion and talent that we have every year to give to the classrooms, no school — whether it's a private school, private charter school or public charter school or homeschool — can compete with that."

Students prepare to fly a drone during a drone technology elective class at East Wake High School in Wendell on Wednesday, May 6, 2026. Travis Long tlong@newsobserver.com

Families leaving the school district

Private schools were the only alternative in 1976 when the Wake County and Raleigh City Schools merged. Now more than 56,000 Wake County students are homeschooled or attend charter schools or private schools — a figure that would make it equivalent to the fourth-largest district in the state.



Adelaide Ortiego reads in her English, Language Arts class at St. Catherine of Siena Catholic School on Thursday, February 12, 2026 in Wake Forest, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

The percentage of Wake County students not attending district schools has risen from 17% in 2012 to a record 20% last school year. Wake County is still the state's largest school district with more than 160,000 students.

Over the last two school years, state data indicates more than 1,400 students have left the Wake County school system to attend private schools using an Opportunity Scholarship to help cover their costs. Since the 2024-25 school year, state lawmakers opened the private school voucher program to all families, regardless of income.

"I know that there's a drive for kids to go to other schools," said Amy Sikorich, Apex Friendship Elementary School's PTA president, in an interview. "But I'm really hoping that we can continue to encourage families to invest back into their own local public schools."

The financial impact is noticeable. This school year, Wake County private schools are getting $79 million in state funding through the Opportunity Scholarship program. Charter schools are getting $80 million in local school funding.

"I promise you that this board and this superintendent could have put that money to good use," said school board member Lynn Edmonds at the May 5 board meeting.

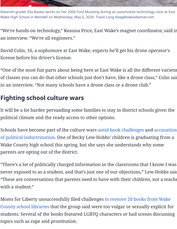
But Becky Lee-Hobbs, chair of the Wake County chapter of Moms for Liberty, said that money is going toward meeting the needs of students who don't think the school system is the best option for them.

"There's no such thing as one size fits all for any child," Lee-Hobbs said in an interview. "Education needs to be very personalized."

Wake expands magnet schools to compete

The school district has tried to stay competitive by expanding the magnet school program. Magnet schools used to be heavily concentrated around downtown Raleigh and Southeast Raleigh, but have since been added throughout the county.

Magnet schools typically offer unique programming to entice families to apply from other schools. But some magnet schools, such as East Wake High School in Wendell, are using their programming to also have back neighborhood families who have left for other education choices.



Tray Triplett, lower center, leads an exploration Technology class at East Wake High School in Wendell on Wednesday, May 6, 2026. Travis Long tlong@newsobserver.com

East Wake calls itself an iTech and Design magnet school, which provides students access to technology such as drones and 3-D printers.

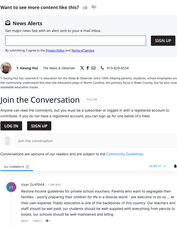
"We're going to see more growth next year in terms of our student population, which is a testament to the school," Eric Bethell, the principal of East Wake High, said in an interview. "Students are staying here versus looking at other options."

Wendell was the state's fastest-growing town last year. The NBO previously reported. Wake was the second-fastest, Rolesville was fifth and Knightdale was ninth on the list.

But even with the area's growth, Bethell said East Wake is still trying to overcome "that perception that we're far out there in the past." The magnet program is the lowest concept the school district has tried over the past two decades to help East Wake.

"There's a lot of literacy in in this community and at this school, a lot of great history that we want to have," Bethell said. "But it's also changing some of that public perception of things that may have taken place here."

The school also has an extensive career and technical education program offering automotive technology, agriculture and other options.



Dawesh-grader Ella Baxter works on her 2006 Ford Mustang during an automotive technology class at East Wake High School in Wendell on Wednesday, May 6, 2026. Travis Long tlong@newsobserver.com

"We're hands-on technology," Kesauna Price, East Wake's magnet coordinator, said in an interview. "We're all engineers."

David Colón, 16, a sophomore at East Wake, expects he'll get his drone operator's license before his driver's license.

"One of the most fun parts about being here at East Wake is all the different varieties of classes you can do that other schools just don't have, like a drone class," Colón said in an interview. "Not many schools have a drone class or a drone club."

Fighting school culture wars

It will be a lot harder persuading some families to stay in district schools given the political climate and the ready access to other options.

Schools have become part of the culture wars until book challenges and accusations of political indoctrination. One of Becky Lee-Hobbs' children is graduating from a Wake County high school this spring, but she says she understands why some parents are opting out of the district.

"There's a lot of politically charged information in the classrooms that I know I was never exposed to as a student, and that's just one of our objections," Lee-Hobbs said. "These are conversations that parents need to have with their children, not a teacher with a student."

Moms for Liberty unsuccessful filed challenges to remove 20 books from Wake County school libraries that the group said were too vulgar or sexually explicit for students. Seventy of the books featured LGBTQ characters or had scenes discussing topics such as rape and prostitution.

The book challenges come at a time when Republican state lawmakers have passed laws that ban teaching about the civil rights that restrict access to LGBTQ materials in grades K-4. There's a new bill that would expand the Parents Bill of Rights to limit book usage in the elementary school libraries and allow parents to file lawsuits against schools accused of violating the law.

Swanson, the school board chair, said they can try to find common ground with parents who have concerns about the district. But Swanson also believes there's a limit to what they can do.

"My problem and concerns I have is we can't tell other parents what's best for their kids, and we can't govern for all parents," Swanson said.

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May 28, 2026 5:15 AM

This story was originally published May 28, 2026 at 5:15 AM with the headline "Is Wake losing the school choice battle? How the district competes for students."

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T. Keung Hui The News & Observer
T. Keung Hui has covered K-12 education for the News & Observer since 1999, helping parents, students, school employees and the community understand the ever-changing public school system in North Carolina. His primary focus is Wake County, but he also covers statewide education issues.

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ALL COMMENTS (2) NEWEST

User 2149944 • 1 DAY AGO
Replace income guidelines for private school vouchers. Parents who want to segregate their families - poorly preparing their children for life in a diverse world - are welcome to do so, ...or their parents can pay for their tuition out of their own pocket. Taxpayers should not be forced to support racist schools, but students should be well supplied with everything from pencils to computers to other children in WCPSS schools.
0 Points REPLY REPORT
Incidental Effe • 1 DAY AGO
Reply to User 2149944
"Bilingo" What does that mean?
T. Keung Hui is the N&O's best reporter, but you've been misled by this incomplete statement in his article.
"Since the 2024-25 school year, state lawmakers opened the private school voucher program to all families, regardless of income."
What he failed to mention is that only low-income families get the FULL voucher amounts. Middle-income families get reduced vouchers, and high-income families get even less.
In the highest income "reward tier," the voucher amounts are less than half the amounts given to low-income families.
The article also should have mentioned that ALL the vouchers are for much less than WCPSS spends per student. Private school tuition is much higher than public school tuition, because money when they spend their children's public schools, and they increase the resources per student for children still in WCPSS schools.
The Opportunity Scholarship voucher system is a win-win. Most importantly, it's a WIN win for children who are in schools that meet their needs, rather than stuck in schools which did not. But it's also a win for taxpayers, who will save money when the kids who left WCPSS are less crowded, and which have more resources available per child.
Many children do not thrive in one-size-fits-all government schools. Many spend 15 years in those schools, and graduate while still functionally literate and innumerate, and ill-equipped to prosper in a modern economy.
Every such case is a tragedy. Opportunity Scholarships reduce the number of those tragedies.
Oh, and BTW, segregated schools (if they even exist anymore) would not qualify for the Opportunity Scholarship program. People who claim vouchers are for "segregation" are just plain lying. Full stop.
Anti-voucher is anti-education and anti-child.
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