



Moving the Lines

Redistricting presents a series of challenges and hard choices for school board members

Jason H. Silverman

“Dr. Silverman, I have a bone to pick with you,” were among the first words I heard after a very short-lived victory celebration following my election to the Rock Hill School Board. I didn’t realize what that truly meant.

When I was elected to my first term four years ago, I had taught about elections in American history many times during my two-plus decades as a university professor. But, until this experience, I had never been involved in one. Naively, I insisted throughout my first campaign that politics had no place in education. The education of children should be at the forefront.

Little did I know what I was getting myself into. The 2002 election signaled the completion of Rock Hill’s transition from an entirely at-large school board to one in which five of the seven trustees were elected by districts. Single mem-

ber districts ensure diversity on the board, but the tendency is to represent a narrowly defined geographic area, since these are the people who elected you.

To me, a truly valuable school board member walks a fine and constantly shifting line between representing one’s constituents as well as all the children in the school district. All children matter in all decisions, not just a select few.

Almost immediately, a debate over school boundaries put my noble principles to the test.

All for one or all for all?

In 2002, construction was about to begin on Rock Hill’s third high school, the first to be opened in the city in more than 30 years. The perception established over the years was that the existing high schools and the sides of the city

in which they were located had become a land of “haves” and “have-nots.”

Rock Hill is on the South Carolina-North Carolina border, just south of Charlotte, which has seen its share of boundary issues over the past decade. But our situation was not like that of Charlotte, which faced community uproar and court battles over its system of busing students to achieve diversity in the late 1990s. Instead, it was like many others found across the country, rife with neighborhood politics and rooted in a desire to preserve tradition.

In Rock Hill, a community with multiple-generation families, I heard repeatedly, “My family has always gone to Northwestern,” or “We’ve always gone to Rock Hill.” The prospect of a third high school, while needed, threatened to divide long-standing community loyalties.

Complicating matters was the board’s 4-3 vote, just before I was elected, to locate the new high school in the southeastern part of the city. The decision, made just before the election, was extremely controversial. Most people assumed that Rock Hill’s growth would be in the northwestern part of the city toward Charlotte, while others believed there was enormous potential in the southeastern part.

To the new board’s credit, and against national trends to the contrary, we decided to ensure that the school’s student population was as balanced in as many categories as possible. To achieve this, the district faced a very significant, and long needed, change in attendance lines.

For several months, a citywide committee looked at demographics and growth projections. Armed with a sea of data, they ultimately made recommendations to the board. As luck would have it, my voting district absorbed a good deal of the trauma. Children in my neighborhood, including my son, would go to a different, and farther away, high school for the first time in more than three decades.

As the new map was discussed and debated, and as I was deluged with angry phone calls and e-mails from constituents, I wondered why I left the comfortable confines of my classroom to serve on a school board. But in the end, the new map was adopted, construction was begun and completed, and a \$41 million state-of-the-art high school was opened in its controversial location. The new attendance zones were put into operation.

Were some of my constituents upset? Initially, yes, and some still might be miffed about the process. Still, I believe the right decisions were made and political expediency was set aside for the good of all children. For the first time in many years, a form of balance was achieved in the city and, in the words of a long-time friend, the school board had actually “done good.” Few votes that I took during my term were more rewarding than this one.

Continuing challenges

There was no time to pat ourselves on the back, however. Soon, with the district growing at far too swift a pace, it

became apparent that we needed more schools. In early 2005, work started on a \$92 million bond referendum to repair and refurbish existing schools and to build two more elementary schools and one more middle school. We also needed to start thinking about a fourth high school.

Scars remained from our previous boundary debate, so the board undertook a massive homework assignment as we began the process. With the support of some fine folks and months of planning, consulting, refining, lobbying, explaining, explaining some more, justifying, explaining even more, and holding our collective breaths, we were able to pass the bond referendum. It was an example, yet again, of how our community admirably unites to support public education, despite some issues that may divide us.

After the April 2005 bond referendum, we went back to the drawing board. We had to rearrange attendance lines in Rock Hill for the next three successive years to accommodate two new elementary schools (one in the northwestern portion of the city and the other in the southeastern section), and then again for the entire city for the new middle school.

No school board can do something like this alone. We hired the research group that assisted us in the high school reassignment to provide us with demographic data. This group specializes in the use of mathematical models to improve decision making. Using management science tools, they helped us make wise decisions, evaluate policy alternatives, and allocate resources efficiently. The company’s integrated planning—which combines community and regional data, 10-year economic and demographic forecasts, demographic and land use studies, digitized pupil and school location files, and mathematical optimization algorithms—provided us quantitative support in revising existing attendance boundaries and in creating new ones.

That, however, is only the numbers side of the equation. We also encouraged local participation with a growth management advisory group that looked at our data and made recommendations. To ensure that no one felt left out, we held public hearings, public focus sessions, and board work sessions to gather opinions before we voted on a plan.

Is everyone happy? Absolutely not, but we try hard to avoid any one neighborhood from feeling picked upon. With our continued growth, this will be ongoing for at least the next three years—virtually all of my next term!

Sooner or later, perhaps we will break even in having folks mad at us. We remain committed to balance and equity, and, for that, I am quite proud of our efforts.

Would I do it again? Recently, my wife and I were in the grocery store when someone came up to me and said (yep, you got it), “Dr. Silverman, I have a bone to pick with you.” It’s become a mantra, of sorts, and I think I would kind of miss it. ■

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