“Community Conversations” on the State of Education in Halifax County

About the “Community Conversations” Series
In May 2011, the UNC Center for Civil Rights released “Unless Our Children Begin to Learn Together...”: The State of Education in Halifax County, a comprehensive analysis of the history, educational impacts and legal implications of maintaining three school districts in Halifax County, NC. Following the release of this report, the Center will spend Summer/Fall 2011 engaging community members, stakeholders and education leaders in “Community Conversations” about the state of education in Halifax County.

The goal of the Community Conversations series is to use the Halifax report as a tool to spark informed conversations about the state of education in the three districts in Halifax County, the reasons for maintaining three separate districts, and the possibility of district unification. The Community Conversations series will also provide a frame of reference to discuss racial isolation and academic achievement gaps in a distinctly rural setting. Lastly, the Community Conversations will provide the Center with opportunities to interact with those most impacted by the educational system in Halifax County and to collect feedback on the report.

Each session will be hosted by a local community partner and/or advocacy organization with a direct stake in Halifax County’s schools. The host organization will conduct outreach and publicize the sessions. The community partners also will assist in facilitating the discussion.

Session Structure
The Community Conversations will be divided into four (4) sections:
Part 1: Presentation/overview of key findings in Report
Part 2: Q&A about Report
Part 3: Discussion Questions
Part 4: Wrap-up/Synthesis of Discussion Questions/Designing an Action Plan

The presentation/overview of the key findings in the report will frame the goals and purposes of the report and emphasize the following three (3) points:

1. HCPS is almost 100% Black and one of the lowest performing school districts in the state; WCS has similar test scores and demographics. In contrast, RRGSD is mostly White and much higher performing. This current reality is rooted in the historical legacy of Jim Crow segregation and imbalanced economic development throughout the county.
2. A unified Halifax County public school district would be a significant first step towards protecting the constitutional rights of all children and would create an atmosphere where student achievement could flourish. A unified district could allow for more efficient student assignment; better utilization of schools; more equitable access to educational and
community resources; and an environment conducive to attracting and retaining high quality teachers.

3. Most importantly, **district unification** could address old racial tensions and provide opportunities for meaningful integration within the county’s schools. A unified, county-wide commitment to enhanced educational outcomes for all children will also likely impact a number of critical factors affecting economic development in the area, including population growth, property values, and employment opportunities. However, there are interim steps that are based in good rural school policy that can and should be considered to build a solid foundation if and when district unification occurs, such as shared community learning opportunities and enrichment programs, magnet schools, interdistrict transfers, and shared resources.

The Q&A section will provide an opportunity for clarification questions and free-flowing discussion and feedback from attendees about the report findings, methods, goals, etc.

The Discussion Question section will provide an opportunity to engage attendees in discussion about the broader thematic issues of the report. The facilitator will pose three standard discussion questions:

**Q1:** What things in the report really stood out to you or surprised you?  
**Q2:** Do you believe that the schools in Halifax County are segregated? Why or why not? How are the three separate school districts impacting the education of students and the larger community?  
**Q3:** Do you feel that a unified county school district is a possibility in Halifax County? What are your hopes and fears about district unification? What needs to happen before it could become a viable option? (what are the actions that need to be taken to overcome those barriers?) How would district unification improve Halifax County?

The session will end with an opportunity to review consistent themes/concerns, brainstorm community action plans to address the issues raised in the discussion, and complete evaluations.