

Tata wants more "resources" — that's "money" to us civilians

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Anthony Tata was a popular guest Thursday night at a dinner meeting of the Wake County Taxpayers Association. The conservative group, its ranks swelled to about 200 for the first public appearance of Wake's new superintendent of schools, laughed at his jokes. (The most important criteria in the search process, Tata quipped, was that the choice "be non-controversial."). When Tata said he likes bass fishing, they offered him directions to the best fishing holes. They nodded when Tata said that he comes from a family of educators. They cheered as he told them that 100 percent of the proceeds from his military action novels goes to help wounded veterans at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. "I don't keep a dime of that money for myself," Tata declared.

There was just one thing Tata said that failed to meet with the group's approval. Tata was asked — by someone who's not a member — about the WCTA's opposition to previous school bond issues, including its role in defeating a major bond referendum a decade ago. Tata acknowledged that the school system is way behind on building new schools to keep up with the county's "exploding growth." Within 90 days, he said, he expects to have a handle on how many more schools are needed and how much they'll cost.

"And it's a strategic vision thing, because you can't continue to put a band-aid on it," Tata continued. "You gotta make sure you get those dollars from somewhere."

Dollars? All of a sudden every WCTA member seemed to be looking in his or her lap to see if their napkins were straight. The only sound in the room was the rustling of many fannies.

The first question on people's minds as Tata prepares to take charge of the school system Jan. 31 is how he'll line up on the inflamed issues of student assignment, neighborhood schools and diverse schools. In his various meetings in the community last week and in a press conference Friday, Tata said he's listening to all sides on the subject and hasn't reached any conclusions.

Before he can address student assignment, however, Tata must also come to grips with the enormous financial challenges ahead for Wake's schools. He talked about a \$100 million budget gap looming for the 2011-12 school year (in a \$1.4 billion budget) if state aid is cut and county funding remains flat — as is expected with the Republican takeovers of the General Assembly and the Wake County Board of Commissioners.

Beyond that, another school bond campaign is coming soon to meet a projected need for up to 33 new schools by 2020 at a cost of some \$2 billion. But there's no consensus about how soon that vote should occur or how ambitious it should be — that is, how many of those needed dollars it should seek from the voters.

For Tata to be successful in this, his first job as an education leader following a 28-year military career and a brief stint in charge of logistics for the much smaller Washington, DC school system, he'll need to forge a bond issue consensus in a county—and on a school board—where the political divisions are deep and increasingly bitter.

Historically, Democratic voters have been more willing to support school funding, while Republicans have resisted. Democrats, especially African-Americans, are also more pro-diversity, but the 5-4 Republican majority of the school board — and the new 4-3 Republican majority on the county commissioners board — seemingly support neighborhood schools whether they're diverse or not.

And it's the Republicans who hired Tata, the ex-military man who's been moonlighting in DC for the past year as a conservative pundit and Obama Administration critic.

A big question for Tata is whether a bond campaign can be successful if the school board goes all-in for neighborhood schools and stiffes the Democrats who would ordinarily be expected, on a school bond, to vote yes.

For that matter, even if they get their way on neighborhood schools, will the notoriously anti-taxation Republicans vote for a bond issue that would raise their taxes?

Or will Tata try to steer the school board to a middle course on the diversity and assignment issues as step one to passing a bond?

Tata was pressed hard for some clues about his diversity views when he met with reporters Friday. Asked what lessons he'd drawn from his year and a half in the Washington school system, Tata said the policy there is that every child should be within walking distance of the elementary school to which they're assigned.

“What I've seen in Washington, DC is that neighborhood schools are working,” he added.

What that answer says about the schools in Wake County, however, is doubtful.

Tata was brought to DC as part of a reform team led by then-Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee, who recently resigned. In a September, 2010 report titled “3 Years of Progress,” Rhee claimed success based on the district's own testing programs and its percentage gains on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

True, the Washington schools improved, but from a starting point of almost total failure. For example, on the fourth-grade and eighth-grade NAEP math tests, the number of students there performing at grade level was 11 percent and 8 percent, respectively, for the 2006-07 school year. In two years, those figures improved to 14 percent and 11

percent—the biggest percentage increase in the country, the report bragged. But they're still the worst in the country.

And Washington's neighborhood schools aren't just segregated, they're almost entirely black and Hispanic, because upscale families — minorities as well as whites — put their kids in private schools if they can afford them. Overall, the public school system has just 46,000 students (compared to Wake's 143,000), 93 percent of whom are minorities.

In contrast to Wake's problem of too few buildings, Washington has been forced to close many schools, Tata said, while others remain open but are far below capacity.

Moreover, as a 2008 report by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, showed, while Washington school officials often say they spend about \$8,000 a year per student, they're talking about local funds only. When federal funds are added, the total budget for the DC schools then and now is about \$1.2 billion—or almost as much as Wake County for one-third as many students.

Tata talked about Washington's program of "tailoring" schools to students' needs, suggesting that if a neighborhood schools policy here results in high-poverty or resegregated schools, he'd apply Washington's policy of providing them with "a full-service wrap-around" of social workers, psychologists, nurses, "whatever they need."

Where he'd find the money to pay for such "wrap-around" supplements, he didn't say.

"It is possible," he insisted, "to have good strong neighborhood schools where you have good resourcing."

Tata did pledge, however, to focus on student achievement and on closing the achievement gap between middle-class students and those classed as economically disadvantaged. And he said he'd take his lead, not from the school board, but from principals and teachers, making sure "that they have the resources they need to get the job done."

Unlike Washington's schools, Wake's are excellent now, Tata remarked, and the challenge is to make them better — "world-class," in fact.

In that task, Tata said he'll chart his own course and be "my own man," not a puppet of the Republican school board majority.

With Board Chair Ron Margiotta listening intently, Tata added: "Anybody who thinks I'm in their pocket has another think coming."