



Head of the Class

How One General Counsel Became a Superintendent

By Glenn Cook

MAURICE “MO” GREEN can hold court on a variety of topics—the challenges of being a corporate lawyer, improving educational opportunities for minority children, building a loyal leadership team, or the joy (and occasional agony) associated with being a longtime Duke Blue Devils fan.

Ask Green to talk about himself, however, and he’s hesitant. The superintendent of Guilford County Schools, a successful corporate attorney who made a midcareer switch into public education more than a decade ago, says his story “is not that interesting.”

“Mo doesn’t like to draw attention to himself,” says Nora Carr, who Green recruited to be his chief of staff when he moved to Guilford in 2008. “He really stays below the radar. He’d much rather talk about kids or programs that help kids than what he’s done.”



Mo Green greets students. He implemented a “Mo Wants to Know” tour when he was first hired.

What Green has done over the past seven years is significant. Since taking over as the leader of North Carolina’s third largest school district, a majority-minority system with more than 70,000 students, he has led the district to the highest graduation rate in its history. Today, almost 90 percent of students graduate from the district’s high schools, and more than one-third of them have passed at least one Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exam or college course.

Guilford was named one of three National Districts of Character in 2013 and is in position to be part of the national Say Yes to Education initiative, a program that guarantees all graduates will have access to college or post-secondary education. The district is working with a team of community leaders to raise \$28 million in pledges from corporate donors and foundations.

“I tend to be a dreamer in the sense that I don’t understand why every kid can’t graduate at the highest levels on the SAT or ACT or get a four on every Advanced Placement exam,” Green says. “Why can’t we do that? Why can’t we send every kid on a study abroad program? Why not set our bar at academic excellence and do everything we can to reach it?”

A Practical Mind With a Practical Approach

It’s a wet, drizzly Friday afternoon, and Green is drained from the week as he sits down to talk about his transition from attorney to educator. The night before, the district held its annual “State of Our Schools”

event before a capacity crowd at the Carolina Theater in Greensboro.

There, Green talked candidly about the district’s successes (graduation rates, huge increases in volunteer hours and cash/in-kind donations), as well as its missteps, the largest of which involved the suspension of a federally funded technology venture due to concerns about hardware supplied by the vendor. The project, which was implemented and then pulled from 18 middle schools, was a stain on an otherwise outstanding year for the district.

“We’re open,” he says. “You saw that last night. We’re candid and tell you, ‘Here’s the good. Here’s the bad.’ We have to be that way. Otherwise no one will trust us.”

Trust and character are words Green uses often. He is also a planner and goal-oriented, traits that served him well at Smith Helms Mullins & Moore in Charlotte, where he became a partner within seven years after graduating from law school and completing two federal clerkships. Those same traits also have helped him to push the school system forward.

“Because I’m a lawyer, one of the things that I do is ask a lot of questions. I’m always probing and probing. I know the team doesn’t like it sometimes, but it is a way of getting information that can help us get to better decisions,” he says. “I don’t want to implement anything until we ask all the questions we can ask. Even then, sometimes things don’t work out like you thought, but you never stop asking questions.”

Therence Pickett, vice president and general counsel for Volvo Group North America and Mack Trucks Inc., in Greensboro, says Green's candor and integrity are his "greatest strengths."

"He has such a practical mind and takes such a practical approach that he doesn't get distracted by the noise of whatever issue is going on," says Pickett, a classmate of Green's at Duke Law School and a friend for three decades. "He can focus on the specific needs and what needs to be done, then jump in head first and tackle those issues."

Litigator Turned General Counsel

Listening to Green speak, you would never know that he spent the first nine years of his life in Queens, N.Y. He moved with his family to tiny Lizella, Ga., when he was nine and has no traces of a "Yankee" accent. But he recalls family members in New York saying he would make a great lawyer "even before I knew what that meant."

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His father, a small business owner, died the year after the family moved to Georgia, leaving his mother, a nurse who was raised in the Virgin Islands, to raise two young sons.

"My mom grew up exceedingly poor. Her house had a dirt floor," he says. "When she went to New York, she was told nursing was what she needed to do, but she would always tell me she wanted to be an educator. After my dad died, she decided to go back to college to be a teacher. She would always say she wanted to run her own school, so I think maybe in some way I'm living out her dream now."

The law, however, was his first love. Encouraged by his family to pursue an Ivy League education, Green opted to stay closer to his family and go to Duke, where he and Pickett were two of the three African-American males in his law school class.

While in law school, he clerked for two summers at Smith Helms Mullis & Moore. After graduating from Duke law school, he worked as a clerk for U.S. District Court Judge Norwood Carlton Tilley Jr. in Greensboro and for Nathaniel Jones, a renowned civil rights leader who was a judge on the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of

Appeals. After completing his clerkships, he returned to Smith Helms, where he later was the first African-American partner.

"I was one of the guys who wanted to do actual in-court work. Any time people wanted to get into serious litigation, I wanted to be part of it," Green says. "I represented a lot of clients, from criminal defendants to corporate clients. But one of my first clients, as it turned out, was the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. And they were the client I loved the most."

Transitioning From General Counsel

In 2000, the district's general counsel left, and Green decided to apply for the position. The variety of issues a lawyer deals with in a large urban district ("On any given day, who knows what's coming?" he says) appealed to him, as did CMS's mission.

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Green spent five years as general counsel but found his interests broadening beyond the law. When Peter Gorman became superintendent in 2006, he asked Green to be the district's chief operating officer.

"I thought this guy was crazy, but maybe I was too because there I was considering it," Green says. "I decided it was one of those things where the worst that could happen was we would both decide it was not a good decision and I could go back to being a general counsel. Why not do it? Why not try to work with people in a different way?"

Within a year, Green was named deputy superintendent and expanded his responsibilities to include the supervision of academic services. When the Guilford position opened up in 2008, Gorman and others urged him to apply, even though he was a nontraditional candidate.

"I wasn't really trying to be a superintendent, and this was the only position I applied for, but I felt like if folks were encouraging me to do it that I should pursue it," he says. "Every step of the way in the exploration, there were points at which I could have stopped the process or the board could have stopped the process. But it just seemed like the right thing to do."

Investing in Students Is Investing in the Future

Hired in September 2008, Green convinced Carr, who was an assistant superintendent for communications in CMS, to join him in Guilford. Loraine Felder, who has worked with Green since his law days, was hired as his executive assistant.



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“These are people I trust, who know me better than I know myself on some days,” he says. “You need to have people you can count on from the start.”

Green set out on a “Mo Wants to Know” tour, talking to parents, as well as community and business leaders, to learn more about their views of the school system. The tour led to the development of a strategic plan, but the crippling economic recession threatened the district’s initiatives.

“In December, the bottom fell out, and we said we could not do this plan,” he says. “But why not? The bottom was not going to fall out forever. In the meantime, we decided to see if we could raise everyone’s expectations for the district and see if we could get the community to buy into it.”

Guilford’s business community has long supported the district, Green says, but state funding has declined dramatically over the past seven years. Finding money for new initiatives, many of them revolving around technology infrastructure and growth in the early/middle college program, meant the district would have to seek more corporate and foundation funding. And that made Green, by default, the “chief fundraiser in charge,” as Carr describes him.

“We’ve had a great team of business and community leaders who’ve worked with us on this. What we have done is take our plan, shared it with various people and told them this is what we’re planning to do,” Green says. “Our district can’t take money from existing schools and start a new school. We’ve looked at what everything would cost and ways we can fund it and then gone out and tried to raise the money.”

Despite the downturn, the district opened a middle college on the University of North Carolina at Greensboro campus in 2011 and a STEM Early College at North Carolina A&T University in 2012. Private funding was required for both efforts. Because students don’t pay for classes at any of the nine early/middle college schools in Guilford County, fundraising is continuing in earnest.

Pickett, who is on the UNC Board of Governors, says this type of corporate support is critical for K-12 schools and the state’s higher education institutions. He believes Guilford’s administrators have “done a good job in reaching out to the business community in a way that has translated into additional resources that might not otherwise have been available.

“I think Mo’s done a very effective job of seeing what the problems or shortcomings are, matching them with the needs of the students and working tirelessly to plug the gaps,” Pickett says. “That’s his approach to everything. He was the same way when he was in private practice, and he’s doing that today for the betterment of kids.”

As the interview ends, Green points to a statement he made the previous evening about the Say Yes to Education opportunity. He says it sums up his philosophy as an educator, husband and parent.

“Our students are the single best investment we can make in our community, and I also believe it’s the right thing to do,” he says. “The timing is right for this, and we need to come together and make it happen.” ■

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