

# NOMINATION FORM

**2022-23 A Craig Phillips North Carolina Superintendent of the Year  
AASA 2023 National Superintendent of the Year**

## **SUPERINTENDENT INFORMATION**

Name: Dr. Lane Mills

School System: Wilson County Schools

Mailing Address: PO Box 2048

City, State, ZIP/Postal Code: Wilson, NC 27894

Telephone: (Office: 252-399-7710 Cell: 252-649-5359)

Email: lane.mills@wilsonschoolsnc.net

## **NOMINATOR INFORMATION**

Name: Dr. Christine Fitch

Relationship to Superintendent: Chair of the Wilson County Board of Education

School System: Wilson County Schools

Mailing Address: PO Box 2048

City, State, ZIP/Postal Code: Wilson, NC 27894

Telephone: (Cell: 252-399-9817)



Wilson County Board of Education  
117 N.E. Tarboro St. • PO Box 2048 • Wilson, NC 27894  
252.399.7711 • FAX 252.399.2776

May 1, 2022

Dear Dr. Croom:

It is my honor to nominate Dr. Lane Mills as the North Carolina Superintendent of the Year. He is a deserving candidate because his leadership style is not about receiving accolades for himself, instead he is committed to shared leadership in order to grow other leaders. While most superintendents earn a doctorate in education, his doctorate is in psychology. He began his career as a school psychologist, and to put it plainly, he just gets people. His greatest strength is his ability to see the potential in others - even when they can't see it for themselves. Just ask Debra Simons. As a teacher and then an instructional coach, she never dreamed of becoming a principal, but Dr. Mills knew it was the perfect fit for her. Though she had her doubts, she joined our Aspiring Administrators Program, which was started by Dr. Mills. Five years later after thriving as an assistant principal for one year, she's now the principal of Wells Elementary. Ms. Simons recently shared with me, "Dr. Mills knew this is where I was meant to be. He encouraged me to follow this path, and I'm so thankful he did." Ms. Simons' story is one of many. Dr. Mills has guided thousands of educators and students during his 28 years in education.

How did Dr. Mills know that Ms. Simons would be an effective principal? While his innate ability to see the greatness in others played a role, he also observed her with students, talked with her, and most importantly, he listened to her. He built a relationship with her. Dr. Mills is intentional when he interacts with others, and his commitment to building relationships has allowed him to have a tremendous overall impact on our district. He genuinely cares. He believes relationships built on trust and mutual respect are paramount when it comes to leadership for learning and ensuring the best education possible for our WCS students. He encourages our students, staff, families and the community to learn from and lean on each other. Modeling relationships from the top, Dr. Mills has created a family culture across our district. His professionalism and expertise as a superintendent are second-to-none and while stakeholders value his knowledge, leadership and integrity, they also appreciate how approachable and humorous he is. Dr. Mills makes people laugh - and not just adults. He makes students of all ages laugh. He was recently in a second-grade classroom, and the students had such a good time reading books with him that they asked if he could stay in their classroom forever. I'm sure Dr. Mills was tempted because being in classrooms is where he loves to be. He is vocal about how he thinks of each student as his own and expects nothing less from all our staff.

Dr. Mills wants our story shared, and he wants everyone to know how valued our students, staff, families and community partners are. He is adamant about providing transparent communication. WCS uses an array of communication tools to keep stakeholders informed of news, events and the good things happening in our schools. Dr. Mills believes that effective communication is vital to a relationship, and it's doomed to fail without it. He communicates our message with humor and thought. His presentations are legend. Administrator and district meetings rarely involve "wordy" slides as he relies on humor and images that people remember and talk about well after the meeting. After one annual large community meeting with a featured keynote speaker, Dr. Mills' invited presentation was the one that the public discussed. He was asked to deliver the keynote address the following year because so many people wanted to hear more and remembered the impact. Our staff are still laughing about his "carpool karaoke" from the district startup meeting after his first year as our superintendent. He makes connections with our system and others through his words, humor and messages. During our recent Cognia Accreditation Exit Report, the presenter shared that the team's top finding for our district was incredibly rare - especially during the aftermath of the pandemic. The team shared the following: *District leadership and a stable high functioning Board of Education have established trust in the community served, provided*

*support and provided a voice across constituencies.* The team raved about the high level of trust they witnessed and the evidence that supported it, which included a vast amount of feedback and survey data from stakeholders. The team was impressed that people felt seen and heard even with all the challenges we have faced and continue to face. While the learning loss students have experienced due to the pandemic is alarming, Dr. Mills led WCS through a similar season of instructional gaps before and turned things around. He will do it again.

When Dr. Mills became our superintendent in July 2016, he inherited a Low Performing School District that was ranked 90th in the state. However, in the three school years that followed, WCS experienced the highest increase in proficiency of any district and was only seven percentage points away from being one of the top 20 highest performing districts in the state. It's no coincidence that the vast improvement in performance directly correlates with Dr. Mills' time as superintendent. Had the pandemic not paused state testing for the 2019-20 school year, our students most likely would have continued to perform at a high level. Unfortunately, COVID-19 changed our trajectory. While our 2020-21 results were higher than the state, they were nowhere near where they had been. Dr. Mills needed to have hard conversations with our WCS family in order to change that. He has spent more time in classrooms this year than ever before and while he's seen great things, he's also concerned at the amount of times he's heard "the students are doing the best they can" or "that's how it's always been done." He believes these are dangerous phrases because they can lower expectations. Dr. Mills often talks about how important it is for educators to have a sense of urgency because our students don't get this time back. While our students have been through a lot, they are still capable of greatness. To mitigate learning loss, Dr. Mills is leading WCS in a "back to basics" approach coupled with an increased focus on nurturing the whole child. There is an enhanced emphasis on professional development, leadership training, benchmarks, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) data and lesson planning. We implemented the Opportunity Culture staffing model in 10 schools and will add six more schools next year. We have interventionists at each of our schools to work with students, and we also created a program to identify chronically absent students and collaborate with their families to get them back on track. All of these efforts are working. The second main finding of the Cognia team was as follows: *WCS has the whole child at the center with a focus on social emotional wellbeing, MTSS, PBIS multiple options, open doors, and high expectations for staff and learners.* The Cognia team was impressed with how supported the students they interviewed felt and also how WCS has maintained high expectations for staff and students.

Dr. Mills is invested and involved in our community. He is a member of civic organizations and serves on an array of local and state committees. One of the most notable partnerships he has formed is with our Wilson County Health Department and the Healthcare Foundation of Wilson. Under his leadership, we partnered with them to open three school-based health centers and a mobile dental clinic. The centers provide accessible and affordable health services to all WCS students and staff. The benefits for students have been tremendous because they spend more time in class when they have access to healthcare at school. It is our goal to open centers in all of our middle and high schools. The success of the centers earned WCS the Award for Excellence in Education Programs from the NC School Boards Association this past November. Dr. Mills has also fostered a strong partnership with our County Commissioners. His willingness to show them firsthand our facility needs by taking them on tours of our schools led to millions in additional capital funding to complete school renovations and new construction. There is a shared vision of providing schools and facilities that make our students, staff, families and community proud.

Though not originally from Wilson, Dr. Mills considers it home. He was no stranger to WCS when he became our superintendent in 2016. He had worked here years prior as an assistant superintendent and his daughters grew up here. He knew our potential, and I'm grateful he came back to us - even when we were ranked as one of the lowest performing districts in the state. Just as he saw in Ms. Simons, he saw the greatness in each of us who are a part of the WCS family. Dr. Mills embodies the adage - "Leadership is not about being the best, it's about making everyone else better." What more could you ask for in the North Carolina Superintendent of the Year than someone who sees the best in others and can motivate, encourage and inspire them to reach their full potential?

Sincerely,



Christine L. Fitch, Ed.D  
Chairman, Wilson County Board of Education