

NOMINATION FORM

**2021-22 A Craig Phillips North Carolina Superintendent of the Year
AASA 2022 National Superintendent of the Year**

SUPERINTENDENT INFORMATION

Name: Lane B. Mills, Ph.D.

School System: Wilson County Schools

Mailing Address: PO Box 2048

City, State, ZIP/Postal Code: Wilson, NC 27894-2048

Telephone: (Office: 252-399-7711 Cell: 252-649-5359)

Email: lane.mills@wilsonschoolsnc.net

NOMINATOR INFORMATION

Name: Christine Fitch, Ed.D.

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 27894-2048

Telephone: (Cell: 252-399-9817)

Email:

Please complete this form and a letter (no more than 2 pages) providing justification and supporting information for your nomination. The letter should include information about the nominee's leadership for learning, communication, professionalism, community involvement, and overall impact on the school district.

Mail or email the completed nomination form and supporting letter by **May 1st** to:

Ed Croom, Central Carolina RESA Executive Director

Mail: Central Carolina RESA, Suite 104, 7208 Falls of Neuse Rd, Raleigh, NC 27615

Or

Email: croome@ccresa.net

If you have questions, contact Ed Croom (croome@ccresa.net) or Dana Stutzman (officemanager@ccresa.net) at 919-882-5951.



May 1, 2021

Dear Dr. Croom:

When Dr. Mills became superintendent of Wilson County Schools (WCS) in July 2016, the district was already designated as a Low Performing School District that ranked 90th in the state. In the three school years that followed, WCS experienced the highest increase in proficiency of any district in the state and was only seven percentage points away from being one of the top 20 highest performing school systems in North Carolina. It's no coincidence that the vast improvement in performance directly correlates with Dr. Mills' time as superintendent. Many people have asked how this shift was possible, and I can wholeheartedly say that it was because of Dr. Mills. His **overall impact on our school district** is that he completely transformed it. I've worked with dozens of superintendents at the local and state level during my 30+ year tenure on the Wilson County Board of Education, and I know the qualities that make a superintendent great. I also respect the weight the distinction of North Carolina Superintendent of the Year holds, and I believe Dr. Mills is the most deserving candidate.

The academic turnaround in our schools during Dr. Mills' tenure is proof of his **leadership for learning**. The district's trend performance data provide a clear picture of the progress. He accomplished this feat by refocusing our efforts on the basic principles that lead to academic success - high quality educators, safety, engagement and parent/community involvement. However, learning also extends beyond academic knowledge. Skills such as teamwork, flexibility, problem solving, grace and patience must also be learned in order to be successful. These skills became especially important in March 2020 when Covid-19 arrived. Dr. Mills possesses these skills and led us as we faced the unknown. There were countless decisions to be made, and the challenge was that the information needed to make decisions changed daily. When the state advised the closure of schools, Dr. Mills' first priority was to ensure meals were still provided to students. He worked with our School Nutrition Department to find options and thankfully, we were able to offer curbside meals to all children in the county ages 1-18 at no cost. Once that need was met, the priority shifted to instruction. Most school districts, ours included, were not equipped to provide comprehensive online instruction to thousands of students at one time. Under his guidance, students and staff were equipped with devices for remote learning; connectivity issues were addressed; and students, staff and families were trained on how to effectively use the devices to access programs and complete assignments. Our district remained in remote learning when the 2020-2021 school year began. In October 2020, we began offering a hybrid model of remote and in-person learning in elementary and middle schools. The priority then shifted to safety. Dr. Mills guided our schools as they socially distanced classrooms, distributed masks, began temperature checks, shared information about Covid-19 cases and continued to offer curbside meals. By March 1, 2021, all of our students had the option to attend school on campus. When I think back to how far we have come in a year's time, I know that it was all because of Dr. Mills and his clear direction.

During the first week our buildings were closed, Dr. Mills was adamant about reassuring stakeholders and staying in **communication** with them through phone messages, emails, the district website and social media. He wanted everyone to know that the top priority at that time was taking care of yourself and family - not worrying about what was going to happen with instruction, grades and testing. Under Dr. Mills' leadership, staff and families have grown accustomed to the district keeping them informed. This expectation was established prior to Covid-19, and it eased fears during this unprecedented time. As we continued to provide updates to stakeholders in the following weeks, "grace" became the key word in Dr. Mills' messaging - everyone needed to extend it and receive it. When students were able to return to face-to-face instruction,

Dr. Mills was committed to transparency regarding Covid-19 cases. Messages are sent to families and staff whose schools are affected by cases, and the district's Covid-19 Dashboard is updated daily - not weekly. Dr. Mills also prioritized communicating with staff to make sure they knew they were supported. In August 2020 prior to the start of our current school year, Dr. Mills sent staff an email that resonated so deeply, they are still talking about it. He wrote, "It occurred to me that this year it doesn't matter how long I've been in my position or how long all of you have been in your roles. This year, we are at the starting line together, and we are all beginners because none of us have ever opened a school year under these conditions. So, here's to our first year together – learning alongside each other, our students and their families to find the best ways to "do school." Although we might have some wobbles along the way, we are all in it for the best reason - OUR kids." You could almost hear the collective sigh of relief as staff read his message. They felt supported and were relieved that the superintendent was going to be at the starting line to run the race, so to speak, with them.

But it wasn't just our students, staff and families who needed to hear from Dr. Mills for inspiration and hope - the entire community was looking to him for guidance. Dr. Mills' **community involvement** has been paramount during this time. He has participated in numerous forums, panels, podcasts and virtual meetings. He also serves on local committees including The Wilson Education Partnership and Wilson Forward as well as civic organizations including Kiwanis and Rotary. He recently met with the Wilson Board of Realtors and has repeatedly been one of the keynote speakers at our town's most prestigious event for local business leaders - the Wilson Forward Annual Meeting. But perhaps his most notable community partnership is the one he has with our County Manager and Commissioners. His willingness to show them firsthand our facility needs by taking them on school tours led to an increase in the funding they provide to WCS - an increase in the millions. The Commissioners have also been very supportive of our plans to construct a new facility for one of our early colleges using Needs-Based Public School Capital funds from the state. Without hesitation, they agreed to fund the required \$5 million match and are also providing an additional \$4 million for the new facility. Dr. Mills serves as a bridge between the Commissioners and our Board. Because he brought us together and strengthened our partnership, both boards - the Wilson County Board of Education and the Wilson County Board of Commissioners - were recognized by the NC School Boards Association in November 2020 as the top boards of their kind in the state.

Dr. Mills' **professionalism** is valued and respected in his field, and he participates in various professional organizations. He attends CCRESA meetings and participates in the CCRESA Equity Council. He is an NCSSA Executive Board member and served on the Accountability and Testing Task Force for Region 3. He was a part of the NCStar School Improvement Planning presentation to the State Board of Education in July 2020. Dr. Mills has close relationships with other superintendents and collaborates with them on best practices. He is not threatened by the success of others and is everyone's champion. Recently, he encouraged a valued member of his Senior Staff to become the superintendent in a neighboring county because he knew he would be great. Valuing the wisdom and experience of others, Dr. Mills seeks retired superintendents as mentors. He also calls on them to fill vacancies at Central Office and lead workshops for administrators.

On behalf of the Wilson County Board of Education, I thank you for your time and trust that you recognize how Dr. Mills has transformed our district. Imagine what he could accomplish at the state level as the North Carolina Superintendent of the Year.

Sincerely,



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