

# Reform

*Norfolk schools have a model for student success—and it starts with accountability*

## Beating the Odds



The city of Norfolk's symbol is the mermaid, but the historic seaport city in the Virginia Tidewater has not led a charmed life. The British burned the city to the ground in 1776. Yellow fever killed a third of the population in 1855. The governor of Virginia in 1958 closed the Norfolk schools rather than allow them to be integrated. Each time fate delivered a cruel blow, the city picked itself up and went back to work. Each time it rises stronger than before.

Like the city, Norfolk Public Schools, the first public school system in Virginia, has seen its fortunes go up and down. It's an urban district that serves a diverse population: 67 percent of students are black and 28 percent are white. More than 65 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunches.

Despite our demographics and limited resources, Norfolk Public Schools continues to make significant improvements in student achievement, attendance, and school climate.

Why should others look to Norfolk as an example of urban reform and success?

It's simple: The people in the Norfolk school system hold themselves accountable.

### **'Promises to keep'**

Although the concept has become an education buzzword, accountability is nothing new for Americans. It has always been one of the defining threads of our country. In his poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Robert Frost touches on the theme of accountability when he says he has "promises to keep" and "miles to go before I sleep."

Our first step toward accountability was the Norfolk Quality Schools Initiative, which started in 1986. Much of it was based on W. Edwards Deming's concept of Total Quality Management (TQM). According to Deming, quality is achieved only when the needs and expectations of the customers are met or exceeded. TQM brings together parts of an organization into a whole. It refocuses organizational management and human resource management on the same goals. Not only does the right hand know what the left is doing, but also they are both working with the same purpose and the same ultimate goals. The two management systems are blended, integrated, and aligned.

The Norfolk Public Schools Guiding Coalition—a committee composed of the superintendent, a school board member, key division representatives, principals, parents, and other community members—meets monthly to identify activities and projects that support the district's focus on instruction.

Although our Total Quality Management system was a step in the right direction, we knew we needed to do more. It was more like following the North Star than a cartographer's measured mile. We knew the direction, not the destination. We now had benchmarks but not conse-

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quences. We still didn't hold people accountable. The next step was to build a comprehensive accountability model.

### All means all

We realized that when the day is done, nothing is more important than instruction—teaching and learning. Our school board adopted one overriding goal: to improve the quality of teaching and learning for all—and all means all. Clearly, instruction would be our reform focus. Under the umbrella of this goal, the board developed three main objectives:

- Ensure the continuous growth of student academic achievement for all.
- Ensure that each school provides a safe, secure, and disciplined teaching and learning environment.
- Ensure that parents, businesses, and community members are actively engaged in the educational process.

This goal and these objectives served as the foundation and framework for our accountability plan. It was designed to be comprehensive, yet focus on continuous improvement. Our focus on instruction would be like a laser—strong and concentrated in the same direction.

### Building around people

We needed to bring our people together. While our total quality schools initiative was developed around concepts, our accountability model would be built around people. We asked for suggestions from school staff and from the community. They agreed that the model had to integrate fairness and accountability. Results had to be measurable and demonstrate continuous improvement. After time and support, there would be consequences.

Douglas B. Reeves, author of *Accountability in Action* and president of the Center for Performance Assessment, helped us develop our accountability model. With his assistance, our staff, community, and school board built the model. Multiple indicators of student achievement—such as the state Standards of Learning test results, Stanford 9 test results, dropout rate, SAT scores, and promotion rates—are analyzed when monitoring progress. It helps ensure that

each student reaches or exceeds the standards for performance and achievement.

The model provides three vantage points from which to gauge progress toward meeting the school board's objectives. These views are called tiers. Tier 1 indicators are at the state (Virginia's Standards of Learning) and division level (attendance rate, positive responses on the Quality Schools Initiative surveys, professional development courses on academic achievement and school climate) and help assess whether state and division expectations are being met.

Tier 2 indicators are school based and help all schools continuously improve to meet state and division expectations. Tier 3 provides the context in which to gauge accountability results, serving as the story behind the numbers. Included are special programs, curricula, projects, and strategies that were used to support success in meeting Tier 1 and Tier 2 indicators.

### Leading by example

Our school board members provide the vision and develop the policies of our district. The idea of developing a comprehensive accountability model came from them. They wanted to build a world-class school district and believed a strong accountability model would serve as a road map. They hired me to carry out their vision.

Actions speak louder than words, as we all know. The Norfolk School Board took the idea of a comprehensive accountability model one step further than usual. It was a long and daring step. It included itself in the model. The philosophy was no longer, "Do as I say, not as I do." Now it was "Do as I do."

We now measure our performances—teachers, principals, the superintendent, and school board members—with the same format. In retreats and study sessions, board members developed specific, measurable objectives for themselves. For each objective—budget, policy, personnel, and support, among others—they charted specific indicators, strategies, professional development activities, implementation monitoring devices, benchmarks and standards, responsibilities, and a detailed action plan.

They were holding us accountable, and they were holding themselves accountable. At the end of each year, the board holds a session devoted to monitoring their progress on meeting district objectives. If the objective was not met or only partially met, the board retains it for the next annual plan and develops new strategies and indicators to help meet the objectives.

When Vincent J. Thomas—former chairman of the Norfolk School Board, former president of the Virginia Board of Education, and four-time mayor of Norfolk—heard about the board's decision to assess its own performance he said, "Now that's good leadership. It sends a visible indication of their dedication. It shows courage and commitment." Parents, teachers, and community leaders, business people, and elected officials echoed his comments. The board was leading by example.

### The results

Some of the gains we've seen from our accountability system include:

- 100 percent of our schools met the state benchmarks in writing in all grades tested.
- 100 percent of our high schools met the state benchmarks in chemistry.
- 100 percent of our middle schools are fully accredited in earth science.
- 100 percent of our middle and high schools showed positive trends in reading, literature, and research.

Also, our schools reduced the achievement gap between white and black students in third, fifth and eighth grades, with both groups continuing to improve. They decreased disciplinary actions by 15 percent, the number of long-term suspensions by 14 percent, and the number of expulsions by 66 percent.

In addition, we have two "90/90/90 schools." These are schools with more than 90 percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, more than 90 percent are minority students, and more than 90 percent of students met high academic standards on the state's Standards of Learning tests.

Norfolk, where it seemed we rarely had good education news, is now receiving

kudos from the local press. An editorial in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* said, "Look to Norfolk ... school officials ought to pick up the phone, ask questions and see what's working in Norfolk. Better yet, they should tour a few high-performing Title I schools down there—and then apply those methods right here in River City."

Another editorial from the *Times-Dispatch* reads, "It is about time officials started shopping for answers. The point of the SOL exercise is not to hammer schools but improve them. Norfolk is a quick drive away."

In recent years, Norfolk has rebuilt, refitted, and refurbished a once-blighted downtown. Today, painted mermaids swim through its streets. Businesses thrive and the downtown shimmers. Rebuilding the historic downtown took vision, initiative, and years of work.

Much like Norfolk's business district, we have transformed our school district. We have raised our test scores, narrowed our achievement gap, and given our district a vision of a world-class future. We certainly aren't where we want to be yet, and we still have "miles to go." We must provide high-quality learning for an increasingly diverse and mobile population, continue to narrow the achievement gap, discover new and different sources of revenue to support public education, continue to recruit and retain talented educators, and engage the public in the education of "their" children. We are on the road, however, and we have a road map to our destination.

Norfolk has always had a way of overcoming obstacles. You could say it's something in the water. Most likely, it's something in the people.

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