

2008 State of the Schools Address
Stephen C. Jones
January 31, 2008

*Exceeding Expectations:
Engaging with our Heads, Hearts and Hands*

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for joining me tonight.

This has been a productive year for Norfolk Public Schools... We have been hard at work developing and implementing a strategic plan for the school system. As you know, we have declared that we will become a world-class school system where all children are successful... and ALL means ALL.

But delivering on that promise is not easy. It requires tremendous planning... tremendous effort... and tremendous follow-up. So as we developed our strategic plan, we looked to a national model... an organization that benefits from strong employee belief in its mission and vision... a company recognized by its community for highly skilled employees with remarkable commitment to the core business.

We focused on a company that draws CEOs and senior leaders from all over the country to its base of operations so that these visitors can learn how to replicate its business practices... an organization that partnered with Fortune 500 companies to advance its goals and productivity.

As we planned our strategy, we carefully examined a company that has seen double-digit performance improvements in key sectors over the last five years... an organization featured for its accomplishments in national media such as the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, and U.S. News & World Report.

Ladies and gentlemen: We focused on ourselves. That's a bold statement... but the bottom line is that Norfolk Public Schools is a national model. More than 24 groups including superintendents, principals and other educators from across the country came to our school system over the last two years. Our School Board was recognized as the best urban board in the country in 2006 and was named a finalist for that honor in 2004 and 2005.

I'm not saying we're perfect... and we're certainly not arrogant enough to believe that we have nothing to learn from other school systems or the business community. But I think it's important to remind you of these facts.

You see, as a city... perhaps even as a region... we have a hard time believing we are worthy of greatness... And that's a problem. If we don't believe, we can't achieve.

We've been engaged in focus group discussions with employees and community members and we've learned two important facts:

1. We are one of the area's best kept secrets, and
2. We are our own worst enemy.

One of our biggest challenges is our community's inability to recognize Norfolk Public Schools' success... And, one of our biggest weaknesses is our own inability to share our accomplishments. We just don't seem to be able to believe good things about ourselves... whether we're talking about the schools or the city. For example:

Who would believe that we could win the Broad Prize and recognition as the best urban school system in the country? Who would believe that we could be in the running as one of the top four urban school systems for three years in a row?

Who would believe that we could become a regional leader in the development of light rail?

Who would believe that Norfolk could produce the National Middle School Principal of the Year... or a mall downtown where people would be willing to pay to park?

Who would believe that an NPS teacher will be standing with the President of the United States in the Rose Garden this Spring as one of four finalists for... and, perhaps, the winner of... the title of National Teacher of the Year?

Who would believe that we could build a competitive cruise ship terminal and deliver major redevelopment projects like Broad Creek and East Beach?

Who would believe that we could have over 1,800 students in an urban public school system taking Advanced Placement courses and scoring well enough on their exams to earn over \$400,000 worth of college credit?

Who would believe that graduates of the Class of 2007 could be offered in excess of \$16 million in scholarships?

Who would believe that schools serving the neediest of students in the city could demonstrate 100 percent proficiency on state exams?

Who would believe that we could establish an Education Foundation and host an event that raises over \$57,000 for teacher mini-grants.

I believe... And, I think those of you in this auditorium tonight believe. I also think that there are people in our community who want to believe too.

As a school system, we are exceeding expectations every day. And we can reach even greater heights... if, as a community, we engage with our heads, hearts and hands.

Engaging with our Heads

Engaging with our heads should be easy... that's all about reviewing data and holding the school system accountable. I am pleased to report this evening that that our schools are strong and healthy:

- Elementary school Standards of Learning test pass rates exceeded state benchmarks for 10 of 11 subjects and reflect one-year gains in four areas.
- Middle school Standards of Learning test pass rates exceeded state benchmarks for five out of nine subjects and reflect one-year gains in four of nine areas.
- Standards of Learning end-of-course test pass rates exceeded state benchmarks for all 12 subjects and reflect one-year gains in five of 12 areas.
- The five-year achievement gap between scores of African American students and Caucasian students decreased for 20 of 26 Standards of Learning tests

Clearly, Norfolk Public Schools has increased performance significantly over the last five years. You'll see proof of that in the Annual Report you received as you entered. This publication is available on our web site along with our Division Performance Report and Executive Summary... a document that provides an in-depth accounting of the school system's achievement as compared to state benchmarks and critical performance measures. Each school also posts its annual data on its website... so be sure to visit us online at www.npsk12.com and find out more.

You see, that's another part of engaging with your head. Don't believe rumors or misinformation... or even the hype. Be a critical consumer... Be sure to check out the facts for yourself... We welcome being held accountable and we will be among the first to tell you about our struggles.

Our progress is undeniable, but we face some significant challenges moving forward:

- Although all our elementary and high schools made full accreditation, only two of our nine middle schools did so. This is due in part to broadened state testing requirements and particular difficulties in middle school math. As a result, all our schools are focusing on math and reading instruction and our central administration staff is providing high levels of math support. But we can't focus only on minimum competence...
- We also must ensure that we provide challenging options for our gifted and high-achieving students. We know ALL students can meet high expectations and excel... but we also know that some of our students need even more.
- We also know that attendance plays a critical role in student performance. Our

data tell us that when a student misses a significant number of days, achievement on Standards of Learning tests drops dramatically. We know that chronic absenteeism begins in fifth grade and increases through middle school and the critical ninth grade transition. We need your help in ensuring that all students are in school... every day... learning.

- In addition, we are not satisfied with our graduation and drop-out rates. Yes, our graduation rate continues to improve, but if we lose students prior to senior year, how are we being truly successful? A point of pride with public education is that... unlike private schools... we take ALL students. But we must commit to KEEPING all students in public schools and seeing them graduate if we truly want to be world-class.

Unfortunately, there are no easy answers. We must build trusting, caring relationships with our students to make school a safe and desirable place. We need the community to make education a priority and to partner with us to provide critical services and internship opportunities to children. As a city, we must demonstrate that education is to be valued... even treasured.

- As a district, we are committed to finding a better solution for students who do not fare well in the traditional academic setting and cause discipline problems. As we recently reported to the School Board, we seek to consolidate several alternative education programs into one comprehensive facility and have been working with the city to identify a location.

This will allow us not only to provide a more rigorous education to these students but also allow us to streamline our services and return sub-par facilities to the city minimizing costs for repair or replacement. Although we know children must be the top priority for the city of Norfolk, we also know that we must invest wisely.

Engaging with our Hearts

It's been said that the longest distance is between the head and the heart. I'm asking you to travel that distance tonight. "ALL means ALL" is more than a catch phrase... it is a solemn belief.

But, whereas 10 years ago, NPS asked employees to step out on faith regarding that belief, tonight I have offered you more definitive proof. Just look at our data and you can see evidence that every single child can succeed. This is what people travel from all over the country to see... accountability in action... "success for all" made real.

Now, logical arguments and data may quell criticism or "nay-saying," but it doesn't stir passion and action. So, let me share a brief story with you... Some of you may know that I mentor one of our students... And, I join over 700 other mentors in doing so...

The youngster I mentor has had a rough life. He's been retained twice and stable housing

is a difficulty for his family. Shortly after Christmas, I was going to his home to deliver a few holiday gifts. I have to admit: the neighborhood was a bit intimidating... The conditions were poor, but as I pulled up to where he lived a swarm of children surrounded my car. It was my mentee, his siblings, and some neighbors. Several recognized me as the Superintendent of Schools.

As we stood there and talked for a bit, this young man I mentor told me that he was glad the holiday break was coming to an end. He was eager to get back to school... and so were his friends. In fact, his neighbor from down the hall told me that she planned to go to college and began asking me how to go about finding scholarships.

It was an emotional experience for me. You see, despite living in less-than-desirable conditions, these children still have hope. You could see it in their eyes... And these students are like so many in our city.

So, I will not give up on them... Schools make a difference. Schools are their ticket out of those difficult conditions... I'd venture to say that many of you found schools to be a similar ticket out... that someone in your school took a personal interest in you.

I learned years ago from Sergeant Shriver when I worked at Community of Caring that churches and schools were anchor institutions for the community... and it's no less true today than it was then.

We must engage our hearts. If we are truly committed to equity and excellence, we must provide opportunities for all children... remediation... acceleration... whatever it takes for every student to meet his or her potential.

We ignore our students at our peril. We can leave things to chance and let them become tomorrow's drop outs... tomorrow's unemployed... tomorrow's prisoners. Or, we can invest in their future... and ours.

We can ensure that today's students become successful graduates and leaders... that they can elect to enter a competitive college environment or move confidently into the world of work as teachers, shipbuilders, public safety officers, pharmacy technicians, and network engineers.

There are no "disposable children"... They all have tremendous potential. They all can be successful graduates and productive citizens.

Engaging with our Hands

Now, the distance from the head to the heart may be long, but I contend that it's an even further from the heart to the hands... And, it's a divide we must bridge.

Expectations continue to rise... each year the number of students tested increases and the benchmarks rise. We cannot be satisfied with our current level of performance. But, when

we have to fight every single year to maintain the level of service that has made a profound difference in the lives of all our students not just the neediest ones... I'm not sure that our efforts can be sustained.

We have earned the right to be given the benefit of the doubt... Norfolk Public Schools is a "major league" school system with a proven track record... we are worthy of long-term investment. **We simply must consider multi-year investments in our public schools.** Year-to-year, stop-gap funding prevents us from making significant advancements.

We must redouble our efforts at every level of government... federal, state, and local... to commit to long-term, sustainable, and predictable funding for public education. We must... in the current political climate... prevail upon the presidential candidates for adequate federal funding to implement the mandates that they have created.

On Sunday, the New England Patriots will face the New York Giants in the Super Bowl. Imagine if every year these teams had no idea how much money they could spend on players and operations... How successful could they be if they had to negotiate with every player, every year to determine salaries? Imagine if they had to decide each year how many games they could play and what equipment they could afford.

Crazy isn't it? So why should investing long-term in a professional football team make more sense than investing for the long-term in public education... investing in our children.

Carrying the football analogy further... we, too, are victims of free-agency. Because of our significant investment in quality professional development, we know that our teachers are among the best trained and most qualified in the region.

It's common knowledge that, if you teach in Norfolk, you can teach anywhere. But now, our starting salaries are among the lowest in the region. Eighty-five percent of our budget is spent on people... people who work long hours and go far beyond the call of duty to assist our students. We must honor that commitment with competitive salaries. If we hope to achieve greatness, we must be able to retain quality classified, teaching, and administrative staff.

We also must address our facilities needs. Our master facilities study must be funded and we must start with a new K-8 school at Crossroads as our first priority. The average age of our buildings is in excess of 42 years... yes, those buildings are lovingly maintained by our custodial personnel, but we can't expect our employees to continue to work miracles on a daily basis. We must invest in our infrastructure or we will find ourselves with a world-class educational program and no place to offer it.

Increasingly, the state requires that we provide SOL testing by computer. And it has become abundantly clear, that students must have increased computer access and training if they are to thrive as professionals after graduation... but some of our buildings can't even support the power requirements of this new technology.

We need a dedicated, predictable, and long-term revenue stream to support revitalization of our facilities. We aren't asking to be able to spend indiscriminately and without restraint. We have committed to running the most effective and efficient operations possible. As we experience shifts in our population, we will adjust our programs accordingly.

We also have proposed an energy performance contract... a short-term move that will provide significant long-term savings. If approved, schools across the district would benefit from lighting, climate control and other upgrades while positioning the school system to decrease its long-term energy expenses.

Norfolk Public Schools also has asked the state to undertake an efficiency audit of the school system and that process is underway. External professionals have been collecting data, observing our operations, and interviewing people inside and outside the organization. In the next few months, the group will provide us with recommendations to improve efficiency and save money...and, under the terms of our agreement with the state, we are obligated to implement at least half of their suggestions.

But we are not waiting for the results of this study to make changes. We continue to reprogram budgeted monies to address short-term critical challenges and long-term needs. For example, we have used existing funding from our Middle School Quality Education Program to cover costs for additional math positions and instructional programs to boost performance.

In addition, NPS continues to engage in innovative partnerships that allow us to capitalize on community-based skills and resources. For example, the school system is working with the city and ODU as the university moves forward on a project that will provide teachers in our city schools affordable, quality housing.

We also are partnering with Old Dominion University to bring modeling, gaming, and simulation training to our students. NPS is working with Regent University to recruit more people to the profession of teaching...and partnering with Virginia Wesleyan College to ensure more of those teachers hold National Board certification.

We have joined forces with TCC to offer our students opportunities for rigorous course work and advanced studies in the community college setting. We have enlisted the aid of Norfolk State University in bolstering the performing arts specialty program at Booker T. Washington High School. But, this is just the tip of the iceberg...

There are many more opportunities for this community to work together to improve. But, we must ask what it will take for BOTH our city and our schools to be world-class. There are certainly challenges before us:

- We must continue to invest in early childhood education and increase parental involvement in our schools at all levels.

- We must find a way to develop more affordable housing in this city for our families and our teachers.
- We must provide expanded after-school recreational and enrichment opportunities for our children and curb the violence in our neighborhoods.
- We must bring people together to the table to fashion long-range strategies and new solutions for overcoming these challenges.

We must have a broader community conversation about what we want our children to know... what we want our children to do... and what we want our children to be. You see: excellent schools... our best efforts... are necessary conditions... but they are not sufficient alone to solve the problems we face.

The school system needs not just your attention... it needs your support. We are confident in our mission. We are eager to deliver on our promise. We are prepared to share our challenges and shortcomings so that we might improve. We are resolved that every single child in the City of Norfolk will benefit from a world-class education so that we can be globally competitive.

Are you willing to help us? We invite your scrutiny... but we also must have your participation. **We are in this together.**

When someone speaks poorly of the school system, they are speaking poorly of you... they are speaking poorly of your child, your grandchild, your neighbor's child... They are speaking poorly of our teachers... your wives... your husbands... your friends.

They are speaking poorly of your city... and of you. You are our stakeholders and you are our stockholders.... our owners. If we are not doing well, it's is not just our fault... It's yours too.

You must hold us accountable, but you must give us the tools we need. You must not believe the rumors or cling to outdated perceptions... Find out the truth for yourself and share what's good about Norfolk Public Schools.

You must be willing to engage your heads, your hearts, and your hands in the service of our children. After all, as the old saying goes: "If you aren't a part of the solution, you are part of the problem."

Remember: We are judged by how we take care of the neediest among us. We are not evaluated by what we did when it was easy or convenient...

Ladies and Gentlemen: Our true measure as a community is taken when we honor our commitments during difficult and lean times.

WE... you... me... this community... We have the solutions. We can exceed expectations, but we must engage with our heads, hearts, and hands. We must invest our resources, our time, and our effort in our students. We must work together, support each other, and make our children our top priority over the long term.

I stood before you last year and said it... and I will say it again tonight:

These kids are our kids...

These kids are MY kids.

These kids are our future...

Thank you for your attention this evening. I look forward to working with you to ensure every single child benefits from a world class education.

Good night.