

BACK-TO-SCHOOL ESSAY

Superintendent retiring amid national award-winning progress

BY JOHN O. SIMPSON

It should come as no surprise to the community that Norfolk Public Schools is the subject of increased national attention. The hard work of staff members across our public school district has resulted in tremendous gains in student achievement and led to numerous awards.



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Later this month, I will have the honor of traveling to California to be a part of the Broad Foundation award ceremony. For the second year in a row, Norfolk Public Schools has been selected as a finalist for the Broad Prize for urban education. This recognition places us one of the top five urban school districts in the country.

Just like last year, being a Broad finalist guarantees us \$125,000 in scholarship money for our graduates. It was with great pride that we awarded those scholarships in early summer. The hard work of our staff and our students paid off for our graduates. If we win this year, the scholarship will increase to half a million dollars for the graduates of the Class of 2005.

We also learned that Norfolk Public Schools earned the Medallion for Performance Excellence for the Senate Productivity Quality Award. This state recognition is based on the same criteria as the prestigious Baldrige Award and recognizes organizations focused on continuous improvement.

None of these awards would have happened without the support of a visionary School Board. Our School Board has been recognized for its excellence in governance. In August we learned that the board is one of three finalists

nationwide for the first award for Urban School Board Excellence, given by the National School Boards Association's Council of Urban Boards of Education.

I mention these awards to illustrate just how far our district has come in the last several years. Just like our city, our public schools are experiencing an exciting renaissance. But our work is not complete. We have resolved to become a world-class school district by 2010. This commitment is more than just an abstract label or a pie-in-the-sky dream. We have defined clear indicators that will let us – and you, the community – know when we have reached our target.

In a world-class school district:

- All students possess the habits of powerful literacy.
- All achievement gaps are closed.
- All schools exceed state and national performance standards.
- All students access exciting options and opportunities upon graduation.

Already, we have clear indications that these are achievable results. The number of schools meeting full accreditation climbed from only 4 percent five years ago to approximately 80 percent based on preliminary spring 2004 data. And even though state standards say that only 70 percent need to succeed in order to reach full accreditation, we have schools exceeding that benchmark and focusing on universal success.

Over the past five years we have seen the disparity in scores between African-American and white students narrow by 10, 20 and even 30 percent in some areas. The number of schools making Adequate Yearly Progress increased significantly this year. And all of these advances come because of our commitment to regular

assessment of student performance and our willingness to base instructional decisions on data. We no longer need to wait for the year-end autopsy to find out where the problem areas lie. Our teachers can provide timely, directed remediation to ensure that each child rises to his or her full potential.

Even though I will retire from Norfolk Public Schools at the end of this month, I am confident that this district will continue to move forward on its journey toward world-class status. Instructional leaders in our school buildings and in central administration share this vision of greatness for our schools. Teachers in classrooms all across the district are holding themselves personally accountable for the success of each student. Non-instructional staff all across the city are going above and beyond the call of duty to be a part of your children's learning and to ensure that our students have safe environments conducive to quality instruction.

With a dedicated staff such as this, anything is possible for Norfolk Public Schools.

Although I look forward to exciting new challenges after my retirement, it saddens me to leave the superintendency. I have grown as an educator and a person because of my time in Norfolk. It has been a tremendous honor to work with the highly skilled professional educators and dedicated community members here in Norfolk.

I would like to say "thank you" to the close friends I have gained across the city. Thank you for being staunch supporters of public education. Thank you for making the education of Norfolk's children a top priority. I urge you to maintain your commitment to public education and challenge you to become even more involved in our public schools over the coming years.

John O. Simpson has been superintendent of Norfolk Public Schools for six years and was Virginia Superintendent of the Year for 2004. He recently announced that he will retire from his Norfolk job on Sept. 30 to become a consultant for a private education foundation.