

BACK-T-SCHOOL ESSAY

Climb on board: The dream to be world-class belongs to all

BY STEPHEN C. JONES

I'm excited to join Norfolk Public Schools. As I talked with people across the nation and began to consider where I might want eventually to end my career,



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Norfolk Public Schools kept creeping into the conversation.

This school system has earned a tremendous reputation across the nation as an organization that has defied the odds and found a way to ensure that all children achieve at a high level. You can't go far in education circles without hearing about the tremendous work Norfolk Public Schools has done to improve urban education.

But there were other factors to consider. During my visits to Norfolk, it became abundantly clear that this is a city on the move, a city of diverse residents working together to build vibrant communities. While I am in no rush to retire, the amount of gray hair on my head stands testament to the fact that I needed to give thought to where I wanted to establish a permanent home.

As my wife, Marilyn, and I began to think and pray about this important decision, it became apparent that Norfolk was the place to be.

We have grandchildren and a daughter living in Baltimore. We have relatives in Chesapeake and northern North Carolina. So, as I began to consider a move from Syracuse, N.Y., I thought: What better place to go? Where else could I demonstrate, without question, that all students can learn; that all truly means all? Where else could I go and

prove that my life's ambition of closing achievement gaps and ensuring equitable education was achievable? Where else could I work to fulfill my professional goals and still be close to family?

The answer was simple: Norfolk Public Schools and the city of Norfolk.

Those who know me know that I have held a lifelong commitment to urban education. I have held nearly every job possible in education – as a teacher, principal, administrator and superintendent. I worked with the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation and its Community of Caring program.

Each of these experiences has prepared me for the job I face today. And each of these experiences has taught me an important lesson – our communities and schools are inextricably linked. You can deal with neither in isolation. I firmly believe that schools and churches are anchors for our communities, and during my tenure I will do everything in my power to strengthen the bonds between our neighborhoods and our schools.

Norfolk Public Schools has made remarkable progress over the past five years. But our goal is to become a world-class school district by the year 2010. By then, we will ensure that:

- All achievement gaps will be closed.
- All students will be powerfully literate.
- All schools will exceed state and national benchmarks.
- All students will be ready to access exciting options and opportunities after graduation.

I liken this journey to climbing Mount Everest. We are at base camp. We have had a difficult, but successful climb thus far. Our des-

tinuation – the summit – is in sight. But we have another difficult climb ahead.

Why we struggle to achieve this dream? Why this should be a community priority? I want you to imagine a world populated by graduates from our soon-to-be world-class school system. Imagine a world filled with powerfully literate people. Imagine a world where people recognize that they are part of something bigger than themselves; where people listen to each other and deal with conflict productively; where people take care of each other and their community. What could these citizens accomplish? What works of art could they produce? What "genius" could they inspire? If we don't learn democracy in school, where else will we learn it?

This dream to be world-class cannot be driven just by the superintendent. It cannot be driven by the School Board or by principals alone. This dream belongs to everyone and must be propelled by everyone.

I am willing to lead this effort. I am willing to be part of the team that works diligently to achieve this kind of success. I commit myself not just to our schools, but also to our community. I ask you to roll up your sleeves and join me in building world-class schools and better neighborhoods.

I look forward to seeing you in our schools and in our neighborhoods. On behalf of my family, thank you so much for the warm welcome you have extended.

■ *Stephen C. Jones is the new superintendent of Norfolk Public Schools. He previously served as superintendent of the Syracuse, N.Y., City School District. He began his career in education in 1970 as a social studies teacher. Jones is a graduate of Morgan State University in Baltimore, where he earned a bachelor of science degree in history in 1970, a master's in educational administration and supervision in 1982, and a doctorate in urban educational leadership in 1990.*