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Positive thinking about Norfolk schools

BY STEPHEN C. JONES

As an educator and an optimist, I've always seen the glass as half full. Perhaps that's why the recent State of the Region Report on urban public education bothered me so.

The Old Dominion University report indicates that nearly 60 percent of Norfolk public school students who entered ninth grade in 2001 did not graduate four years later. But it also shows divisions with graduation rates higher than 100 percent.

That demonstrates the flaw in using this type of measurement. It does not account for student mobility and other factors. In

Norfolk, 27 percent of our students move to a different school each year.

The state recently changed its graduation reporting formula to better mirror No Child Left Behind requirements. According to that formula, Norfolk students have graduated at a rate of 71 to 72 percent over the past three years.

Even this method is not a perfect representation, but I believe it more accurately reflects issues of mobility and accounts for students who graduate in five or more years.

Regardless of methodology used, I believe we all can agree that we are not satisfied when nearly one-third of students do not graduate. Preventing dropouts, minimizing retention rates and maximizing graduation rates are critical.

But I am confident we can do better. I am confident because I have seen the kind of performance our highly qualified staff has enabled in our students.

Achievement gaps between ethnic and socioeconomic groups have narrowed dramatically. Achievement for all groups has increased. In fact, Standard & Poor's recognized Norfolk on www.schoolmatters.com for consistently outperforming demographically similar school systems in the state.

This is all the more impressive because we have an open-door policy. We take students as they come and promise to move them all to the same finish line. We don't have, or believe in, admission standards.

As a city and a region, we must constantly celebrate this tremendous success. To do otherwise shows disrespect for our students and teachers. They work too hard to be slighted.

The problem with "glass is half empty" thinking is it implies you are looking for the bottom and using that as your measure. I know that one day the glass will overflow because we have capable students and talented staff members doing all they can to beat the odds.

Public education must be a top priority. We must continue to have a community discussion about the importance of rigor and accountability. We must continue to believe in the potential of and hold high expectations for every child. We must continue to support the efforts of our teachers and students.

We stand by our promise that Norfolk public schools will become a world-class school system by 2010. We hold ourselves accountable daily for ensuring that all students achieve at high levels — and all means all.

- Stephen C. Jones is the superintendent of Norfolk public schools.



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