

Strategies

FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS ON DISTRICT-LEVEL CHANGE

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in cooperation with the
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SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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Reculturing for All Means All

"On Wall Street, a world dominated by multibillion-dollar deals, seven-figure bonuses and exotic financial products like weather derivatives, the success of a firm might just rest on the most intangible and least financial element of all: culture." So reads the lead paragraph of a recent article in the business section of the *New York Times* (6/14/2005).

One could just as easily say that in public education, a world increasingly dominated by federal and state pressure to raise scores in all subgroups of students on machine-graded standardized tests, the success of a district might just rest on the most intangible and least measurable element of all: culture.

Although no one factor—not even one as pervasive and consequential as organizational culture—can account for the success of a system as complex and multifaceted as a public school district, a strong case can be made for culture as the primary factor determining successful improvement of K–12 public education.

It seems a no-brainer to say that a politicized, fear-based, top-down, excuse-prone, bureaucratic culture is antithetical to sustainable high performance in public education;

whereas a culture of trust, openness, collaboration, and results orientation that is built on shared ownership of a compelling vision of the future is essential for sustaining high performance in public schools. Culture not only matters, it is a *sine qua non* of educational improvement.

OK, but what exactly is organizational culture? In essence, it is the underlying shared beliefs, history, assumptions, norms, and values that manifest themselves in patterns of behavior, or, in other words, "the way we do things around here."

 **Culture not only matters, it is a *sine qua non* of educational improvement.**

I recently spent a day with an experienced sailboat skipper. It was fascinating to see him glean information from clouds, light, water surface, and wind that I had been unable to recognize, much less interpret. He set the overall course for our outing and made dozens upon dozens of tactical decisions based in part on these readings.

Similarly, the outward manifestations of organizational culture are difficult to "read." Yet developing the capacity to interpret and influence culture is essential to leadership. As Edgar Schein, in his book *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, points out: "The bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures

will manage them. Cultural understanding is desirable for all of us, but it is essential to leaders if they are to lead." Further, Gerry Schmidt and Lisa Jackson, principals of the Matrix Consulting Group, note, "When leaders are educated to properly cultivate it, culture becomes the rocket booster of change, helping align, empower, and develop people toward highly focused and adaptable behaviors."

This "cultivating" of culture to transform "the way we do things around here" is what we mean by "reculturing," which is the theme of this issue. A great deal of change in organizations in no way resembles reculturing. "Change in large companies has become an almost daily onslaught of initiatives, strategies, and flavor-of-the-month programs," say Schmidt and Jackson. "Rarely do these efforts link together, integrate, or sustain—and rarely do they

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address the critical success factor in sustainable change—changing behavior,” changing culture.

In This Issue

Two earlier issues of this publication (October 2002 and November 2001) have focused on the challenges involved in creating and sustaining systems of public education in which All Means All; in other words, in which strategies are being employed to narrow and ultimately close gaps between groups of students across the racial and socioeconomic spectrum.

This issue extends that exploration by focusing in depth on the interplay between reculturing and becoming a high-performance system engaged in continuous improvement. Unlike previous issues, this one is devoted entirely to one district, specifically, Norfolk Public Schools in Virginia, where the transformation of organizational culture has gone hand-in-hand with significant increases in overall student performance and noteworthy contraction of gaps between categories of students, particularly between African American and white students.

When the culture of a large and complex system changes dramatically during the tenure of one leader, Superintendent John Simpson in the Norfolk case, a key question naturally surfaces: What will happen when the leader leaves—as Simpson did in September of 2004? Will the old culture reassert itself?

An important aspect of the Norfolk case is that throughout the entire 2004–05 school year, when the district was led by an interim superintendent who everybody knew would not seek the permanent position, the district continued to make

significant changes while staying the course of continuous improvement that Simpson had set. In other words, contrary to what often happens, the district was not stuck in a holding pattern. One contributing factor may be that the school board actively supported and participated in the reculturing. And they gave the interim administration full authorization to sustain and further advance radical changes in organizational culture and structure that Simpson had initiated.

A new superintendent, Stephen Jones, has now taken the reins of the district, while several of Simpson’s cabinet members have left to become

 **In Norfolk Public Schools in Virginia, the transformation of organizational culture has gone hand-in-hand with significant increases in overall student performance.**

superintendents of other districts. Only time will tell how deeply and broadly rooted is the transformation of Norfolk’s organizational culture.

An Invitation

Your thoughts, reactions, and recommendations are always welcomed. We’re particularly interested to know whether you liked having a single, more extensive, and in-depth case study or whether you prefer issues that look at the progress of several school systems in less depth and detail. Send comments to sthompson@foundation.us.panasonic.com.

—*Scott Thompson, Editor*

About the PANASONIC FOUNDATION

The Panasonic Foundation was established in 1984 by the Panasonic Corporation of North America. It works in long-term partnership with a select number of school districts that serve a large proportion of children in poverty to help them develop the system-level policies, practices, and structures necessary to improve achievement for ALL students: All Means All.

About the AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

The mission of the American Association of School Administrators, the organization of school system leaders, is to support and develop effective school system leaders who are dedicated to the highest quality public education for all children.

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Norfolk, VA:

Creating a High-Performance Culture

Norfolk, Virginia, which boasts the largest naval base in the world, is home to more than 241,000 people, and its public school district serves about 37,000 students. Although the majority of the city's residents are white, about 68 percent of the district's students are African American. This differential is attributable

SUPERINTENDENT:
Stephen C. Jones

DISTRICT SIZE:
37,000 students

to several factors, including the substantial number of white children attending

private or parochial schools and the razing of some public housing projects that were home to many children of color to make room for expensive homes that house comparatively few children.

About 26 percent of students in Norfolk Public Schools (NPS) are white, with a sprinkling of Asian, Hispanic, and American Indian children. More than 63 percent of children qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch, and nearly 15 percent are designated for special education services.

The public school population in Norfolk is declining. Student achievement, on the other hand, has been on a steady climb for seven years. Indeed, scores on the state's Standards of Learning (SOL) tests have increased substantially at *all grades levels* and in *all subject areas*. The table on this page lists a few highlights.

SOL Tests	Percent Passing in 1997–98	Percent Passing in 2003–04
3rd grade math	47%	81%
3rd grade history & social studies	28%	82%
8th grade history & social studies	18.7%	87.4%
Algebra II	26.4%	87.7%

During the same time period, the district has seen the number of fully accredited schools climb from 27 to 36 out of a total of 49 schools, and a marked reduction in the achievement gap between white and African American students. (The number of accredited schools has since climbed to 47 out of 49.) In 1998, there was a strong negative correlation between the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunches and the percentage of students who scored "proficient" or higher on the state exam. "Today," according to Douglas Reeves, CEO of the Center for Performance Assessment, "that correlation is near zero."

The district's accomplishments have attracted national attention. The district was awarded the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2005 and had been a finalist for that award in the two previous years. NPS also received the Education Trust's 2003 "Dispelling the Myth" award, which recognizes schools and districts that "are helping to dispel the devastating myth that poor and minority children cannot learn to high academic levels." And past superintendent John Simpson was the recipient of the 2002 Richard R. Green Award from the Council of Great City Schools,

which recognizes one educator in the nation for outstanding contributions to urban education.

The impressive outcomes beg the question: How? An important part of the answer in Norfolk has to do with the transformation of organizational culture.

The Culture Then and Now

The change in the culture of Norfolk Public Schools since 1998, when Simpson was hired as the new superintendent, to July of 2005, when Stephen Jones became superintendent, has been dramatic. The "Then and Now" chart that begins on page 4 provides a detailed look at the change.

Starting with Vision and Trust Building

Changing a culture as large and complex as that of an urban school district serving 37,000 students in nearly 50 schools is necessarily a multifaceted challenge. Both colleagues and outside observers say that Simpson came to the district with a strong sense of vision and an unyielding focus on improving student learning. "The vision became clearer and the trust started coming

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THEN

An Excuses Mentality

"Part of our culture was that 'we're an urban school district with a lot of kids in poverty, a lot of kids who are minority . . . So therefore our main job is not academic achievement but to give kids things they aren't getting in other places. If you're not doing well in school, that's OK because we'll be sure you're fed,'" says Denise Schnitzer, who was interim superintendent during the 2004–05 school year. "It was an excuses mentality."

School-Averse Central Office

"People who came to central office [10 years ago] saw it as a promotion and 'now I don't have to go back to the classroom; I can go out and supervise,'" says Thom Lockamy, chief academic officer. "I remember the first time I asked staff members to cover classes while I worked with a group of teachers. I had 22 staff people, and the school had 23 teachers. I was going to send all the staff people to cover the classes. Two out of 22 actually covered classrooms. The others found meetings to go to."

Fear and Mistrust

According to John Simpson, when he arrived in the district in 1998, the culture was one in which "trust was not seen as a high value," and people did not feel free to take risks, due in part to a top-down management style that did not invite participation, communicate support, or promote two-way communication. "There was fear of reprisals if you tried to stand out too much," he says.

Isolation of Schools

When Reeves of the Center for Performance Assessment began working with the district as an outside provider of technical assistance not long after Simpson became superintendent, he found pockets of excellence and widespread disbelief that these pockets existed or could exist. "I'd come to a principals' meeting full of enthusiasm about the wonderful practice I'd seen in a Norfolk classroom or school," Reeves reports, "and other principals would look at me like I was from Mars—some even asserting, 'Well, you just can't do that.'"

NOW

No Excuses

The "no excuses" philosophy that Simpson insisted on now pervades the central office and schools. At Northside Middle School, for example, principal Andrea Tottossy uses situational questions when interviewing prospective teachers, including one concerning a persistently low-performing child with lots of social issues. If the prospective teacher's response involves excuse making, the interview is over, Tottossy says. She is looking for teachers who see student learning as their professional responsibility.

Central Office Supporting Schools

"The expectation that the executive directors received from Dr. Simpson was that we would do everything possible to help our schools be successful and that we would do everything possible to build a culture of trust," says Linda O'Konek, executive director of elementary schools.

Encouraging Risk Taking

Sharon Byrdsong, principal of Azalea Gardens Middle School, says, "I don't think we're afraid to take risks in our building, because the culture is so supportive."

Schools Learning Together

Principal Christine Harris of Sherwood Forest Elementary School says, "I found in the past that we were like isolated boats in what our school did. It wasn't so much of a sharing community. Now we pair up and do walk-throughs, and the staff from other schools will come to our inservices. I think there's a lot more honesty and mutual respect." "We had one school that failed the Standards of Learning tests miserably," says Anna Dodson, vice chair of the school board. "The next year that school went from almost at the bottom to almost at the top. Now that makes a believer of other schools, other principals, and other teachers."

THEN	NOW
<p>Staying Out of the Limelight</p> <p>“It was not a culture where principals or teachers wanted to be singled out [even for praise],” says Cathy Lassiter, senior director of leadership and capacity development, “because your peers and colleagues would say, ‘Who the hell does she think she is?’”</p>	<p>Celebrating Good News</p> <p>Vince Rhodes, manager of communications and media relations, describes a speech that Simpson made at a districtwide convocation for school and district administrators in which he asked three or four principals to stand up. Rhodes quotes Simpson as saying, “They’ve got 100 percent of their kids doing well on this specific test. Let’s give them a round of applause.” Simpson then said, “This is great stuff. Who else has got a story?” A forest of extended arms could be seen in response. Principals were not only openly tooting their own horns, but commending each other.</p>
<p>Uncoordinated Programs</p> <p>Lassiter also points out that before John Simpson became superintendent in 1998, “you had schools that could do whatever they wanted. We had 21 different reading programs. . . . There wasn’t any central force driving everything.”</p>	<p>Moving in the Same Direction</p> <p>The district now has a single systemwide curriculum. For elementary reading, NPS has adopted Harcourt Trophies. Lassiter says that having a single program has enabled “tremendous collaboration” within and between schools.</p>
<p>It’s Who You Know</p> <p>Lockamy was an assistant superintendent in 1997. He returned from a vacation to learn that he was being promoted to deputy superintendent. The reason: a person on his staff had approached a school board member, indicating her desire to be an assistant superintendent. It was necessary to promote Lockamy to create an opening for another assistant superintendent. At the time, central office was a bureaucracy rife with politics and favoritism.</p>	<p>It’s How Well You Perform</p> <p>“The strength of leadership in central office is dramatically higher now than 10 years ago,” according to Reeves. Simpson promoted several principals of high-performing schools into senior leadership positions in the central office, including O’Konek, Lassiter, and Chief Operations Officer Mike Spencer. By so doing, Simpson not only ensured that schools would have a strong “voice” within the central office, but also increased the central office’s capacity to provide the kind of support that schools needed.</p>

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because you could see predictable patterns of behavior,” says communications manager Vince Rhodes. “Improving student achievement was the ultimate goal. That was the thing that drove everything else.”

Fred Schmitt, the chief financial officer, says Simpson called himself “the bandleader. He got out there on a regular basis—talked to the community, talked to principals, talked to teachers about what his vision was.”

Early in Simpson’s tenure he took his administrative team, including school-level as well as system-level administrators, on a retreat at Windmill Point, which

according to Lassiter is “in the middle of nowhere.” At this event, Simpson began to instill his “no excuses” philosophy by bringing in Jeff Howard as the featured speaker. Howard, the founder of the Efficacy Institute, challenges the notion that intelligence is fixed or that IQ necessarily determines a person’s lot in life. Given the right conditions and expectations, Howard argues, intelligence can be developed. And at the same retreat, literacy expert Helene Hodges of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development spoke about instructional practices that can lead to improved success for all students. Lassiter says “that laid the groundwork” for much that would follow.

According to Linda O’Konek, the process began with the cabinet: “We had to look at ourselves first and change the way we did business. We had to build trust [among ourselves and with the schools] through our actions and through our words.” Part of that came about through the evolution of the makeup of the district’s leadership team.

Simpson listened to principals by participating in their monthly “Principal Dialogues.” While he heard a great deal about central administration’s lack of responsiveness to school needs, he also felt that schools were not facing what he called

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The Panasonic Foundation and Its Leadership Associates Program

The Panasonic Foundation's approach to promoting educational transformation involves the formation of long-term partnerships with public school districts in the United States that are serious and deliberate about systemic reform aimed at closing the achievement gap between poor and minority students and their more advantaged peers. In the context of these partnerships, the Foundation provides expert advice and facilitation, not monetary grants.

When a partnership is established between the Foundation and a school district (the district must serve at least 7,000 students, and at least 30 percent of the students must qualify for free or reduced-price lunches), the Foundation puts together a consulting team that will visit the district on a monthly basis.* During these visits, Panasonic Foundation team members mainly work with school system leaders, including central

office staff, the school board, and the leadership of teacher unions and administrative associations. They may also work with individual schools and school administrators, depending on the particular focus of the partnership, but also in order to have a "reality check" on system-level efforts. The consultants assume a variety of roles as needs and opportunities arise: group facilitator, coach, content expert, critical friend, workshop leader, and confidant. The aim of these interactions and of the partnership itself is the development of structures, cultures, policies, and practices that will translate into improved student learning throughout the system.

Districts participating in the Panasonic Partnership Program also send multi-stakeholder teams of at least eight leaders to the Foundation's Leadership Associates Program (LAP), which consists of three three-day "institutes" each academic year. District leadership teams participating in LAP spend a portion of each institute in plenary sessions with speakers such as Margaret Wheatley, Peter Senge, Robert Evans, Andy Hargreaves, Alan Bersin, and James Sweeney, but the majority of time is spent in facilitated team sessions,

working on the team's goals, or Achievable Results (ARs).

The overarching goal of each partnership is All Means All—that is, to create and sustain a system of schools in which all students are meeting high-level academic standards. Each LAP team is also expected to define ARs that can be addressed in the space of a single academic year and that bring the system substantially closer to achieving the high goal of All Means All.

To learn more about the Panasonic Foundation, visit <http://www.panasonic.com/foundation>.

* The following public school districts are current Panasonic Foundation partners: Atlanta, GA; Columbus, OH; Corpus Christi, TX; Highline, WA; Norfolk, VA; Norristown, PA; Norwalk-La Mirada, CA; Racine, WI; Santa Fe, NM. Past partnerships have included the following: Allentown, PA; Boston, MA; Broward County, FL; Cincinnati, OH; Flint, MI; Hayward, CA; Lancaster, PA; Minneapolis, MN; Pasco County, FL; and San Diego, CA.

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"brutal facts of current reality"—a reality of gaping differentials in the achievement levels of African American and white students and a variety of other achievement gaps.

Simpson felt it necessary to establish baseline data on every school but also understood that, because this was still his first year (1998–99), principals would feel leery about revealing their schools' weaknesses to the wider system. Simpson resolved the dilemma by bringing in outside consultants to conduct a quality performance

assessment, while promising principals that the baseline data belonged to them: they would not be asked to share it outside of their buildings.

At the same time, he made it clear that they were expected to begin using that data to have conversations about the "brutal facts" in their schools. The district, in fact, did not call for schools to share their information, but according to Simpson, the data indeed "woke folks up."

Credibility is another factor that contributes to trust. Simpson demonstrated early on that he knew instruction. He adopted an 8th grade reading class in the school where Lassiter

was then serving as principal. These were the toughest students in the school, she says, all reading two or three years behind their grade level. "He came and did book talks with them. I was so impressed and told all my colleagues, 'That man can teach!' That word spread like wildfire."

What also spread quickly, according to Lassiter, was Simpson's ability to distinguish flash from substance—that "you couldn't fool Simpson." When advocates of a reading program made a glitzy presentation but were unable to produce convincing evidence that their program was making a significant dif-

ference for students, the program was eliminated. Rhodes adds that it was perfectly clear why decisions were being made. “There was no way to spin it off as arbitrary.”

After forming a partnership with the Panasonic Foundation in 2001, NPS adopted the Foundation’s motto, “All Means All,” which was perfectly aligned with Simpson’s own long-standing “no excuses” philosophy. “All Means All” and “No Excuses” became districtwide mantras. And over time, his leadership team developed a single-sentence mission statement: “To educate each student to be a successful, productive contributor to society by providing powerful teaching and learning opportunities.” The mission is accompanied by an operating statement: “Norfolk Public Schools will become a ‘world class’ educational system by 2010. 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.”

Shared Accountability for Results

A thoughtfully designed data-based system of accountability is essential to a results-oriented culture. And if it’s a shared accountability system, in which everyone from the school board to the superintendent to central office departments to schools is held publicly accountable for results, accountability can also contribute to a culture of trust and collaboration. Norfolk Public Schools is a case in point.

Norfolk’s accountability system was developed by the district’s Guiding Coalition (described in more detail later in this article)—a team comprising parents, principals, teachers, teacher union leaders,

school board members, community and business leaders, and district cabinet members. The process benefited from technical assistance provided by the Center for Performance Assessment under the leadership of Douglas Reeves.

At the heart of the accountability system is the school board’s goal

 **“It sends a huge message when technology directors and food service directors have to engage in the same introspection and report on their procedures to improve achievement.”**

of “improving the quality of teaching and learning for ALL . . . ALL means ALL,” which is elaborated in three related objectives:

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

The goal and objectives are meant to be a focal point not only for all schools, but also for all central office departments and for the school board itself. And in all cases, progress is assessed using three “tiers” of indicators:

- Tier 1: Indicators at the state and district level that help assess if these expectations are being met.
- Tier 2: Indicators developed by all schools and departments for continuous improvement toward meeting state and district expectations.
- Tier 3: Qualitative indicators that provide a narrative description of the efforts toward continuous progress.

In Norfolk, each school chooses its own Tier 2 indicators based on analyses of its data. This approach, according to Simpson and Denise Schnitzer, who was chief operations officer before becoming interim superintendent in the fall of 2004, has resulted in an accountability system that is “more personalized, localized, and relevant.” Putting schools in charge of this critical piece of the accountability process has also helped to build trust and a sense of ownership at the school level.

Adding greatly to the “we’re all in it together” feeling was the fact that Schnitzer had every central office department writing accountability plans linked to how that department contributed to student learning. “It sends a huge message when technology directors and food service directors have to engage in the same introspection and report on their procedures to improve achievement,” says Reeves. In his view, Schnitzer was the opposite of “the stereotype people have of operations leaders—the stereotype being ‘We’ll keep the books and you take care of the kids.’”

Reeves also believes that the school board played an important role in the district’s cultural transformation to a focus on improving student achievement by supporting “this novel way of doing accountability, including having teachers do board reports on ‘how data is used in my classroom.’” He contrasts this sort of reporting, with its instructional focus, to “the typical two-hour statistician’s drone once a year.”

Reeves also notes that the NPS “‘secret’ is hard work and a moral commitment to accountability. They are one of those rare places where the term ‘accountability’ is not just a list of student test scores, but is rather a comprehensive reflection of what teachers, leaders, and board members are doing.”

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What Should Teaching and Learning Look Like?

Norfolk Public Schools and the Panasonic Foundation agreed to form a partnership in 2001. When the Foundation's senior consultants began asking district leaders about their vision and direction, the language was along the lines of being a "world-class district by 2010." But when pressed to be more specific on what it would mean and what it would look like, the answers varied. It was clear that the system, starting with district leaders and ultimately including principals and teachers, needed a richer picture of what everyone should be striving for, a common philosophy of teaching and learning. And this became the focus of the partnership work with Panasonic during its first year.

Panasonic Foundation consultants spent the better part of a year facilitating group dialogues of district-level and school-level leaders on this task. The process was painfully slow, but it resulted in a full-page statement of the system's Philosophy of Teaching and Learning, including descriptions of responsibilities for administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community members.

Restructured for Learning

Chief Financial Officer Fred Schmitt believes that an important contributor to the cultural change in the Norfolk school system was organizational realignment—downsizing district administration and making it more responsive to the needs of schools. Schmitt indicates that early in Simpson's tenure he cut \$1 million one year and \$2 million the next from district administration and redirected it to classrooms. "That's a powerful message to teachers and principals," says communications manager Rhodes. "And it's a powerful message to central administra-

tors." In the process, Simpson reorganized the central office, eliminating deputy and assistant superintendent positions and replacing them with four chiefs over four divisions: chief academic officer, chief financial officer, chief operations officer, and chief information officer—all reporting directly to the superintendent. The shift was from an oversized, multilayered, hierarchical bureaucracy to a central office team that was flatter and more tightly focused on school support and instructional improvement.

Perhaps one of Simpson's boldest moves was the creation of a new central office department called Leadership and Capacity Development (LCD) by merging two departments: Curriculum and Instruction and Staff Development. In the process the Staff Development department was essentially dismantled, and people who had worked in the Curriculum and Instruction department found their job had been redefined, so that they became staff developers in their curriculum areas.

The two departments had operated in isolation from each other; but with LCD, according to Lassiter, its senior director, "philosophically, the idea was that there would be no disconnect. Curriculum content people would be required to spend 70 percent of their time in schools." She says that her staff spent more than 29,000 hours in schools last year, and in the process conducted 416 workshops for nearly 10,000 participants. (The district has about 3,000 teachers.)

"The LCD department has been a tremendous help," says Sharon Byrdson, principal of Azalea Gardens Middle School. "My school has been struggling with reading and math, and I've been on the phone with the content coordinators, and they're in your building instantly. They come in and support the teacher by modeling and providing feedback."

Leadership and Planning Council

Traditionally, and during John Simpson's tenure, the district had a superintendent's cabinet, which met Monday mornings and came to be called the Policy and Planning Board (PPB). In addition to the superintendent, this team included division chiefs, executive directors, and senior managers. "Nobody, including Dr. Simpson, could explain what the Policy and Planning Board was," according to Rhodes. "Periodically he would say, 'What is PPB? What do we do?'"

A book and an article that district leaders read and discussed together ended up contributing to the re-formation of the PPB into the Leadership and Planning Council (LPC). Significantly, this reconceptualization of a key leadership team took place during the year (2004–05) when the district was operating under the leadership of an interim superintendent.

In the book *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, NPS leaders read about corporations that broke into a period of sustained greatness—averaging cumulative stock returns 6.9 times above the general market in 15 years following their point of breakthrough. Collins and a team of researchers spent five years figuring out what distinguishes these organizations from comparison companies that did not make the leap to "greatness." One finding was that good-to-great companies had what Collins calls "councils." This concept appealed to Norfolk's PPB.

Meanwhile, the group had also read and discussed an article from the September 2004 issue of the *Harvard Business Review* entitled "Stop Wasting Valuable Time," by Michael C. Mankins. The author's critique struck a powerful chord. "We looked up and said, 'We see each other for what—four hours a month?'" says Rhodes. "Do we have our priorities right? Are we letting all the opera-

Leadership and Planning Council Roles

Minding the gaps:

- Between students
- Between schools
- Between central office departments
- Between NPS's current state and desired "to-be" state

Monitoring and analyzing:

- The progress of all schools with regard to accreditation and AYP

- Achievement gaps between and among different groups of students
- Equity gaps in the ways that practices and policies (special education, access to rigorous coursework, access to highly qualified teachers, experiences with discipline and suspension, etc.) impact different groups of students and different schools
- The understanding, commitment, and morale of internal stakeholders with regard to school and district goals
- The commitment and engagement of external stakeholders with regard to school and district goals

Applying pressure and support:

- To schools
- To central office departments
- To each other

Developing, promoting, reviewing, and revising practices and policies

Making recommendations to the board with regard to needed board-level decisions and policies

tional fires get in the way of having a firm idea of where we are going? We came to consensus that we want this group [PPB] to be the council. . . . The 'council' came from Collins's book, but it was 'leadership' and it was 'planning.' Those were the two keys."

The first of Mankins's seven recommendations is to "deal with operations separately from strategy." Norfolk now has LPC-V (Leadership and Planning Council, Vision) and LPC-O (Leadership and Planning Council, Operations). It's the same team of 11 senior district leaders, but they have separate monthly meetings with entirely dissimilar agendas. The LPC-V meetings take place over a two-day period, with a four-hour meeting one morning at either the Norfolk Zoo (where, according to Lockamy, "we can get our 'elephants' on the table!") or the Chrysler Museum of Art, and another two-hour meeting the following morning back at the district office. LPC-O's monthly meetings last from two to four hours, as needed.

LPC vowed to take on challenges that nobody else could resolve. "If it had to be cross-functional, if it had to be a global thing," says Rhodes, "then we [on LPC]

were the ones who had to be doing that strategically and doing the long-range visioning."

Panasonic Foundation consultants who attended LPC meetings as outside facilitators and coaches encouraged the team to consider the question, "What is the splinter in everybody's foot?" A key focus the team came up with was special education. Despite the district's significant overall academic improvement, it failed to make AYP in the 2003–04 school year, and a principal reason was the lagging performance of students in special education.

In sessions facilitated by Panasonic Foundation consultants, LPC-V began to scrutinize the "brutal facts" concerning special education resourcing and performance and to explore such questions as "What should special education's role be in the district? What should the rest of the district be doing to support special education?"

The special education director made a presentation to the LPC group that included "this very telling chart," according to Rhodes, that exposed gaping disparities between the large number of special education teachers requested from year to year and the minuscule number of

hires in this area. The department could not single-handedly solve that problem. Nor could finance, HR, or instruction. But LPC, as the district's senior leadership team, has the collective responsibility to move the system forward and to address systemic problems that interfere with that forward movement.

In the aftermath of LPC's review and study of these issues, LPC member Melinda Boone, who was an executive director for elementary schools until being appointed chief academic officer in the fall of 2005, has begun working with Joan Sprately, special education director, to improve teaching and learning for students with disabilities. They are reorganizing the Special Education Department—moving away from a heavy emphasis on compliance to a balance between compliance and instructional support. This shift has significant implications for capacity building among special education coordinators, and that will be a key focus going forward.

Guiding Coalition

The Guiding Coalition (GC) is another key leadership team. Like

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Walk-Throughs

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Interim superintendent Denise Schnitzer says that Norfolk's custom-designed "walk-through" program is a perfect example of the shift the system has experienced from a culture of fear and isolation to a culture of trust and collaboration. The program's development and refinement is both illustrative of and a contributing factor in Norfolk's cultural transformation.

The system's walk-through program grew out of NPS leaders' participation in the Panasonic Foundation's Leadership Associates Program, or LAP (see box on page 6 for more information about LAP). Having developed a philosophy of teaching and learning, the team decided, with encouragement from the Panasonic Foundation consultants, to develop criteria on what to look for in classrooms. What emerged was a program through which teachers visit one another's classrooms and provide feedback to the school's leadership team.

Norfolk's LAP team comprised senior district administrators, school board members, school-level leaders, and the leaders of the system's two main teacher associations—the Norfolk Federation of Teachers (NFT) and the Education Association of Norfolk (EAN). Inclusion of the association

leadership proved crucial. "We really made an effort to make sure the administration stayed true to what they promised," says NFT president Marian Flickinger. "What they promised was that it would be voluntary and would be used to promote professional growth, and that it would not be used to 'get' anybody and would not show up on anybody's summative evaluation. We had some bumps in the road, but pretty much they kept their word. That did a lot to build trust amongst us."

The program was piloted, refined, and rolled out across the system in Phase 1, and then further refined in Phase 2. In Phase 1, which lasted two years beginning in 2002, the central office grouped schools into triads, with each group including an elementary, a middle, and a high school. The expectation was that each school would have two walk-throughs during the year. EAN president Julia Cameron believes that the experience of visiting teachers at other levels of the system (elementary teachers visiting high school classrooms, for example) resulted in "a sense of respect on a lot of fronts." It punctured assumptions that had grown up in isolation.

Phase 2 builds in more options. Schools can continue in their triad groupings, a school can pair up with

another school at the same level to visit each other, or a school that is struggling with student performance in math, for example, might visit a school that is showing particularly strong results in math. Phase 2 also includes internal walk-throughs, in which 5th grade teachers might visit 4th grade classrooms, for example, or the school's data team might walk through classes at a particular grade level or with a particular content focus. From the outset, walk-throughs have included "look-fors"—particular attributes, items, or behaviors that might be observed during the class (for example, "Do you see evidence of writing across the curriculum?"). In Phase 2, the number of look-fors was reduced from a general list of 45 items to no more than 5 specifics.

The willingness of teachers to open up their classrooms in this way is evidence of a shift in culture from fear to trust, but it was also an accelerator contributing to that shift. "As soon as you have people open up their classrooms in a new way and find that any concerns about being inappropriately evaluated or punished do not happen," says Panasonic consultant Andrew Gelber, teachers let their colleagues know. The word spreads, and new expectations and norms begin taking root. ◀

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LPC, GC includes senior district leaders, but unlike LPC it also includes representatives from businesses, community groups, universities, the district's two largest teacher associations, the principal association, the school board, schools, and parents.

The Guiding Coalition replaced a state-required team that in Norfolk had been known as the Quality Improvement Council. Its charge from the state was to develop a six-year improvement plan (required of

all Virginia school districts). In addition to strategic planning, the 32 members of the GC monitor district progress and make recommendations when things get off course. As mentioned earlier, the GC, with expert assistance from Douglas Reeves, created Norfolk's accountability plan. The team also monitors progress on the district's Achievable Results (ARs): year-long goals related to the district's long-range overarching goal of All Means All, or World Class by 2010. The Achievable Results for the 2004–05 school year

centered around making substantial progress in the following areas: closing the achievement gap, comprehensive high school improvement, central system support for schools, and walk-throughs (see the sidebar on *Walk-Throughs*). The ARs, and the GC itself, resulted from Norfolk's participation in the Leadership Associates Program of the Panasonic Foundation (see the sidebar on *The Panasonic Foundation and Its Leadership Associates Program* on page 6 to learn more about the program and Achievable Results).

“The Guiding Coalition filters,” that is, makes sure that objectives and goals reflect the perceptions of all the stakeholders, says GC member Bill Davis, who is the principal of Norfolk Technical Vocational Center, or NTVC. GC member and elementary school teacher Sandra Masterman sees it as a “double-ended arrow, where many things come into the GC” and information flows back out via representatives to their stakeholder groups. It thus becomes a means for multiplying stakeholder engagement in core district programs.

The GC played an important role in the development and refinement of the district’s philosophy of teaching and learning, says Julia Cameron, president of the Education Association of Norfolk. The GC would talk through issues and develop drafts of the philosophy of teaching and learning. “The parents and community leaders would look at the draft and say, ‘I’m not sure what this means. What are you really trying to say?’ It made us fine tune and fine tune.”

The full group meets monthly for two hours, and various GC subcommittees, which include some stakeholders who are not on the GC itself, generally meet each month as well. The GC plays an essential role by substantively engaging a range of stakeholders in the core work of district reculturing and restructuring.

Engaging the Business Community

Schmitt indicates that prior to Simpson’s move to Norfolk, there had been an “arm’s-length relationship” between the district and the local business community. Simpson made it an early priority to connect with business leaders and to work to change the nature of that relationship. He had a seat on Greater Norfolk Corporation (GNC), a local alliance of 120 business executives with a full-time president and vice

president. GNC’s purpose is to advance regional economic stability and viability. Lassiter says that Simpson worked to help them recognize that great schools would contribute to GNC’s own interests and stated purpose.

Meetings between Simpson, members of his leadership team, and GNC members led to a partnership between GNC and the district and to the birth of the Leadership Academy, a program through which aspiring and practicing school leaders receive in-depth training from corporate participants in GNC. These are the Academy goals:

- Create a cohort group of capable leaders who learn, grow, and support one another as they face common challenges in school leadership.
- Support school leaders in developing the essential skills critical to their success.
- Develop a strong partnership with the business community and tap their expertise in leadership development.
- Provide training to school leaders using a unique perspective not common in university programs for administrators.

The initial selection process focuses on principals and assistant principals with obvious leadership potential. They must be recommended by the district’s Division of Academic Affairs and be approved by the superintendent.

The program is designed to help school leaders develop effective interpersonal skills, confidence in their sense of leadership, a better understanding of individual strengths and developmental needs, and behaviors consistent with that of a change agent.

For participants, the Academy experience begins at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) in Greensboro, North Carolina, where the Skill Scope Assessment is administered and scored for each partici-

pant. Through the Skill Scope Assessment, data are collected on about 90 leadership characteristics in 360-degree fashion—including the participant’s self-assessment, the assessments of seven or eight subordinates, and the assessment of the participant’s boss. These results are then combined with the results of a Myers Briggs Type Indicator and a number of other assessments. These combined results then become the basis of a one-on-one coaching session conducted by CCL staff. The individual results of these assessments are shared only with the individual, but the district does receive a summary report for the cohort as a whole. Before leaving Greensboro, program participants also engage in small- and whole-group sessions focused on nine leadership competencies.

Back in Norfolk, leadership development sessions conducted by members of GNC are customized according to cohort summary data provided by CCL and interest surveys from Academy participants. And LCD senior director Lassiter attends the training to ensure continued skill development and application once participants are back on the job. As follow-up, Lassiter will sponsor whole-cohort participation in conferences that seem well suited to the particular interests and needs of a given cohort. Additionally, cohort members meet over an occasional breakfast to discuss their ongoing learning and development. Lassiter believes that this networking is the most valuable aspect of the program, because new principals are even more willing to bring their real issues and concerns to a member of their network than to the executive director who supervises and evaluates their work.

USAA, a corporate member of GNC, designed one of the follow-up sessions, entitled “Creating a

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Closing Gaps at Northside Middle School

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At Northside Middle School in Norfolk, Virginia, achievement gaps are closing fast. In one year, the gap between African American and white students in reading was more than cut in half, from 32.5 to 15.1 percentage points. In that same year, the gap in writing narrowed by nearly 9 percentage points; the gap in math shrank by 15.4 percentage points; the gap in science was reduced by a whopping 22.1 percentage points, and history/social studies saw a 5.7 percentage-point decline in the achievement gap.

The school serves about 1,170 students, nearly half of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The students are almost evenly split between African American and white, with about 1 percent Hispanic. Both students and staff report that the feeder neighborhoods experience a fair amount of gang activity.

"There's no secret about how to close the gap," says Northside principal Andrea Tottossy. "You close the gap by teaching every kid. We talk about individual students. How the data shakes out is how it shakes out."

Laying the Foundation

Before becoming Northside's principal, Tottossy had been assistant principal at a Norfolk high school. She says her first year as principal of Northside (2002–03) was "tough." She was following in the wake of an effective and respected principal. It took some time to establish herself as the school's new leader.

During that first year, Tottossy realized that the class schedule needed redesigning. It did not allow for certain kinds of teacher-teacher and teacher-student interaction that

she felt were critical. She had seen block scheduling work, but she had also been a teacher and understood how scary those larger chunks of instructional time can look to a secondary teacher. So she conducted focus groups with faculty members to identify their issues, needs, and priorities. She asked questions such as "Do you have adequate planning time? What's more important—planning as a cluster or departmental planning?"

After the focus groups, Tottossy made a presentation to the staff, including direct quotations from teachers, saying, essentially, "We need a new schedule—something that will give us collaborative planning time, more time with students," and that will mean students spend less time in crowded hallways between classes.

She then developed three or four schedules and brought them back to the faculty. In this meeting, staff members broke into smaller groups to discuss the pros and cons of the various schedule options. "Over time I convinced them that they were convincing me" to go with the A/B 90-minute block schedule, Tottossy says. "I had to get buy-in."

She provided professional development on teaching in blocks during the summer between her first and second year and initiated the new schedule that fall. Most of the school's faculty attended these summer institutes and were compensated for their time. At the end of the process, the school had more than a new schedule; it had a high level of teacher ownership of a new schedule that reflected their articulated needs.

The amount of time students spend changing classes, for example, was reduced from about 42 minutes a day to about 12 minutes. Under the old schedule, collaborative work among teachers happened on early release days or during occasional faculty meetings. With the block schedule, teachers have time to work collaboratively during the regular school day.

A Double Dose of Literacy Instruction

The new schedule paved the way for an unusually high concentration of time devoted to literacy instruction. For example, about 50 percent of the schedule for 8th graders is devoted to some form of language support. This is achieved through double-blocking 8th grade English—direct writing and direct reading—and through writing and reading in content areas via a program called Double Dose. Sixth and 7th graders spend only slightly less time on literacy.

A Double Dose committee made up of one representative from each department develops lesson plans for content-area teachers based on skill deficits identified in student data. The committee provides content teachers with reading materials as well as lesson plans, and because the committee represents all the content areas, they are able to design a program in which a given student will receive reinforcement of the same key reading skills in seven content areas.

Tottossy developed an anonymous survey of teachers on Double Dose that was conducted at the con-

clusion of the 2003–04 school year, and it revealed the following:

- 26 percent of teachers disagreed that lesson plans presented for the block were beneficial;
- 31 percent disagreed that they were able to easily locate non-fiction reading materials;
- 24 percent did not feel they were supported with instructional suggestions and materials to support the Double Dose block.

The committee met over the summer to address these concerns. It obtained a variety of fictional and nonfictional readings based on teacher input. The committee also developed easy-to-follow lesson plans for each content area’s grade level that incorporated a range of reading strategies, graphic organizers, and suggested activities.

As for writing in the content areas, each department develops one content writing prompt per quarter. This means that each department has students writing in response to 4 prompts per year, and so each student receives and responds to 7 prompts per quarter and 28 by year’s end. The same model—the Thomas Model—for writing is used at all grade levels and in all content areas throughout the school. As a result, when students go to social studies class, they do not encounter a different pre-writing tool from what is used in English or science.

Data-Based Instructional Leadership

Dawn Eibel is Northside’s dean of students, but she is also the de facto data wonk. Equipped with district quarterly test results, mid-quarter school-generated assessment results, test-participation rates, demographic data disaggregated by ethnicity and socioeconomic status, student referrals, and quarterly grades, Eibel crunches and recrunches the data, generating quarterly individual teacher reports with charts and graphs.

Teachers receive the reports each quarter in an individually addressed envelop with a letter signed by Tottossy. That is the beginning, not the end, of their principal’s data-based instructional leadership.

Tottossy visits classrooms after analyzing the data. She reports that in post-observation conferences she says, “Your data tell me that X number of kids are not performing at the proficient level in this subject. How are you addressing this in your plans? And tell me the next time I can come in and see it. Why are your colleague’s students scoring much higher? Can you go observe and find out why?”

Second-quarter benchmark assessments during the 2004–05 school year revealed a performance

 **“Why are your colleague’s students scoring much higher? Can you go observe and find out why?”**

dip in math, science, and social studies. Tottossy wanted to know why, and, more important, “What support can we provide?” She noted that the year’s writing test had already been taken and so asked English teachers to devote a portion of their instructional time to reinforcing key concepts from math, science, and social studies. To do this effectively, she had English and content teachers team up and develop instructional lesson packets. These sessions started off with the science department, which laid the foundation for what took place in subsequent meetings with the social studies and math teams. The science department identified three priorities for reinforcement: (1) elements of vocabulary—specifically, prefixes and suffixes; (2) question analysis as a test-taking strategy; (3) data tables and graphs.

English Department Chair Caitlin Scott indicates that the teachers in her department at first grumbled about giving up research and poetry to reinforce concepts in content areas, but she says they are now enjoying it and are still teaching research and poetry, though in somewhat abbreviated form.

Math teachers initially expressed concern that the math curriculum would be mistaught. Their fears were alleviated, however, when they learned that English teachers would not be teaching surface, area, and volume, but how to read a test question and how to connect those math terms with everyday language. As for the other departments, because the guidelines were so detailed—“foolproof”—initial resistance never surfaced.

Tottossy sees this effort as a specific solution to a specific problem that arose. “But I also know that we have a plan that we’ll hopefully show works,” she says. “We can use it again if needed.”

District Support

The district’s Leadership and Capacity Development (LCD) department takes each school’s accountability plan—a data-rich document that each school must produce annually—and figures out what kind of assistance the schools need. The LCD professional development offerings each year reflect that data analysis.

Members of the LCD team also provide direct support to schools. During her first year at Northside, for example, Tottossy arranged for Mark Tavernier, a language arts specialist with LCD, to observe classes with her because she had not been a writing teacher and wanted to learn how to observe and coach the teaching of writing. In the process, Tottossy learned about different kinds of writing prompts and what to look for during observations. She says

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that LCD staff have also arranged for Northside teachers to visit classrooms in other schools and for teachers from other schools to visit Northside classes. These intervisitation are based on the identification of deficits and corresponding best practices.

Northside is one of many examples of Norfolk schools where Superintendent John Simpson's reading list filtered down to classroom teachers. Cathy Lassiter, the senior director of LCD, would purchase books for principals, and at Northside, Tottossy would sometimes purchase additional copies for the whole staff. In other cases, a more limited number of books would be read by staff one grade level at a time. At Northside, teachers led book discussions.

Tottossy says that the book *QBQ: The Question Behind the Question* by John G. Miller was a turning point for the staff in terms of accepting responsibility for children's learning. The book is about shifting from a mentality that blames others for problems and lack of accountability to taking personal initiative for accountable action. At Northside, QBQ has become a verb—as in “Let's see if we can QBQ this”—as well as a core value that combines with the district's “no excuses” philosophy to define “the way we do things around here.” Other influential books at Northside include *Deliberate Success: Turning Purpose & Passion into Performance Results* by Eric Allenbaugh, *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, and *Literacy with an Attitude* by Patrick Finn.

Community Relations

Northside has not generally had the best of relations with its immediate community. For one thing, the school has very limited parking facilities, which has meant that staff

members park in front of people's houses. One team at Northside is focused on improving community relations and, in quiet ways, giving to the community where the need is most pronounced.

This team organizes internal fund-raisers to address community relationship building and family needs. One successful fund-raiser is “denim for dollars.” When Tottossy came to Northside, she came with a new dress code for faculty and staff: professional attire; no jeans. With “denim for dollars,” teachers can purchase tickets permitting them to wear jeans on Fridays.

Much of what the funds support is far from the attention-grabbing publicity of your typical school PR campaign. It involves unheralded



Northside is one of many examples of Norfolk schools where Superintendent John Simpson's reading list filtered down to classroom teachers.

support for families in extreme need. A family with two children attending Northside, for example, lost all of their possessions when their house burned down. The school helped the family pay rent and buy shoes, because they were living in a hotel and had run out of money. Tottossy reports that a couple of weeks later the mother of this family said to her that she had never felt more cared for by someone outside of her family.

The school has also raised money to support a scholarship in the name of a principal's son as a memorial; to help a family whose child, a student at Northside, has been diagnosed with cancer; and to help another family with a child at Northside whose mother died suddenly.

The school's more visible efforts to build community relations include

publicizing a school-sponsored community yard sale, delivering holiday cards and candy canes to all neighbors during the December holidays, and providing coffee and donuts during the St. Patrick's Day parade, which passes in front of the school.

Parent involvement at Northside has been slow to develop. Another fruit of the schedule change that has nudged progress in this direction is that parents can set up a conference with teachers any Wednesday afternoon. The school has also recently initiated a group e-mail to parents that has garnered some favorable responses.

School Climate

The school's support for families in need is a morale builder, as are a range of recognitions for excellent performance by students and by staff. Faculty meetings, for example, invariably include presentations of at least one of the following awards: Employee of the Month, participation-rate certificates for student participation in benchmark assessments; achievement-gap certificates; and certificates for participation rates in writing-across-the-curriculum responses.

Students, meanwhile, can earn the privilege of having breakfast with the principal, be recognized at a whole-school assembly for honor roll or perfect attendance, join the 600 club if they obtain a perfect 600 on Virginia's Standards of Learning tests, or win regional competitions.

The combination of recognition and support in an atmosphere defined by a “no excuses” philosophy and data-based instructional leadership explain, at least in part, why Northside is a place where achievement gaps are heading for elimination and students are heading for success. ◀

Creating a High-Performance Culture continued from page 11

High-Performance Culture,” which included “establishing the infrastructure, building the team, and unleashing the leader—inspiration, perspiration, and transformation.” USAA trainers engaged participating Norfolk school leaders through discussions, presentations, and other interactions. Other corporations providing training include Wachovia Bank, Wilcox & Savage Attorneys, Dollar Tree, Trader Publishing, and Landmark Communications.

The program was evaluated by George Washington University, using focus groups and interviews to assess the level of participant satisfaction. According to Lassiter, the overwhelming majority of participants found the program to be meeting its intended goals. Anecdotally, participants have come out of the program and moved from being assistant principals to being principals of low-performing schools. These schools are now fully accredited, says Lassiter. In 2004–05, 40 percent of the district’s principals were eligible for retirement. In the

last two years, 75 percent of the principals hired in Norfolk came out of the Leadership Academy. Those recently hired principals who did not come out of the program had already been a principal in another school.

The Road Ahead

A school system under the leadership of an interim superintendent with plans to retire once a new superintendent has come aboard is often considered to be doing well if

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NPS’s Leadership Learning Team

On a Wednesday morning in late March 2005, 17 central office administrators who make up the Leadership Learning Team (LLT) of the Norfolk Public Schools came together around a long table in a meeting room in the district’s administration building. The purpose of the LLT is to build the skills and knowledge that district leaders need in order to achieve the district’s mission. In previous school years, the LLT had been a smaller group of senior leaders who read and discussed books in sessions facilitated by Panasonic Foundation consultants. Past books discussed by the team were *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell, *Literacy with an Attitude* by Patrick Finn, and *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan.

The group has evolved in two ways: (1) it grew to the point where the members felt they could self-facilitate; (2) it doubled in size in order to drill deeper into the organization, including not-so-senior administrators in central office, such as directors of transportation, HR, pupil personnel, budget, and compensatory education.

On that morning in late March, CFO Fred Schmitt facilitated the LLT in large- and small-group conversations around a chapter of *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action* by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton. Participants had read Chapter 5, “When Measurement Obstructs Good Judgment.” It was clear from the outset that this was not to be a discussion in the abstract, but one that would constantly connect to the immediacies of the district’s work. Schmitt asked the team to individually consider and address this question: “From your own accountability system, which of the measures that you use best reflects the mission of your department?” He then asked each participant to report out to the full group. From there the team broke into smaller groups to discuss three inter-related questions that Schmitt had identified.

The team is working its way through *The Knowing-Doing Gap*, with a discussion of one chapter at each monthly meeting. At the conclusion of the March meeting, communications manager Vince Rhodes gave an assignment related to Chapter 6—the focus for the April meeting.

Dialogues around particular books have become a part of the Nor-

folk culture, and by providing common language, frameworks, and reference points, this practice has contributed to cultural cohesion. In Norfolk it is not only the LLT that reads and discusses books. The same books have been read and discussed by principals and teachers throughout the system.

This practice is a rare phenomenon. How did it come about? Reading and talking about particular books at all levels and in all corners of the system became “part of the culture, the expected way of working, because Simpson modeled it,” says Panasonic Foundation consultant George Perry. For example, at convocations of all district-level and school-level administrators, Simpson brought to the podium three or four books he’d read over the summer. He held them up and explained why he was reading them. “If you want to be in the loop,” says Executive Director of Elementary Schools Linda O’Konek, “you need to be reading the books.”

In at least one instance, the book-reading phenomenon has spread beyond the district. Rodney Jordan, a local business owner and member of the district’s Guiding Coalition, indicates that he purchased copies of *Literacy with an Attitude* for members of the City Council and the Housing Commission. ◀

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it maintains the status quo without significant slippage. Norfolk did not tread water during the 2004–05 school year, when Denise Schnitzer served as interim superintendent. For example, the Leadership and Planning Council—replacing the less focused and less effective Policy and Planning Board—was born on Schnitzer’s watch. That uninterrupted momentum would appear to bode well for Norfolk’s future.

In July of 2005—about 10 months after Simpson stepped down as superintendent—Stephen Jones arrived in Norfolk to assume the superintendency. He resigned as superintendent in Syracuse, New York, to take on the Norfolk opportunity. Meanwhile, Norfolk’s chief academic officer and the executive director of high schools left to become superintendents of other districts, and two new school board members were recently appointed by the City

Council, replacing long-standing members. This period of transition represents both a test of the durability of the cultural and structural changes that have taken place and an opportunity to extend and deepen the process of transformation.

“I’m glad that Norfolk Public Schools is outperforming most other urban school districts,” says Guiding Coalition member and local business owner Rodney Jordan, “but I want more than that. I still think there’s a lot of shake-up that needs to occur. You don’t want to be negative, but you also don’t want this sense that ‘we’re done.’”

For his part, Stephen Jones agrees with the need for continued urgency but doesn’t think it requires a shake-up. Syracuse saw a major reorganization during Jones’s tenure, “but it was methodical,” he says, based on data and careful analysis. “There’s a lot of low-hanging fruit we’ve been able to capture,” Jones says. “Now we’re ratcheting it up.

I’m bound and determined to be a cheerleader and drum major for reaching World Class by 2010.”

The district is currently developing plans for comprehensive high school reform. This will involve moving many more students into rigorous courses. “Advanced Placement courses have been a method of segregation,” says Schnitzer. District leaders are not only anticipating, but have already experienced, push-back from the affluent white parents who say, “‘You’re holding my kids back because you want ‘those’ kids in the class.’ That’s going to be a challenge. Our principals believe it’s the right thing. I’m not sure all of their teachers have that belief system,” Schnitzer adds.

The road from Norfolk’s current reality to World Class by 2010 is difficult and unpredictable. It’s a journey that many will be closely watching. ◀

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