District
Management
Group

Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VA): A Strategy for the 21ˢᵗ Century

by James C. Merrill

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VIRGINIA BEACH CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS:

A Strategy for the
21st Century

| JAMES G. MERRILL

It's an increasingly popular refrain: our children need skills that include creativity, innovation, critical thinking, and problem-solving. They will also need to know how to collaborate and communicate effectively. Other life skills such as global awareness and technology literacy are perhaps equally important. Such "21st Century Student Outcomes" are noble, but is it really possible to align an entire (large) school district around such objectives? In Virginia Beach, we are transforming the leadership and management of the district precisely along those lines.

Our strategic plan in the Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS), known as *Compass to 2015: A Strategic Plan for Student Success*, grew out of a School Board Program of Work articulated by the Board in fall 2007. Goal one of the program

stipulated that staff and administration would "Develop a new strategic plan that will guide Virginia Beach City Public Schools from 2009-2015." Most importantly, the program grew out of an acknowledgement and sense of urgency that our schools were not adequately preparing graduates for college, work, and citizenship.

Compass to 2015 represents a bold move beyond the minimum competencies of success on state tests. This is its aim:

> Recognizing that the long range goal of the VBCPS is the successful preparation and graduation of every student, the near term goal is that by 2015, 95 percent or more of VBCPS students will graduate having mastered the skills they need to succeed as 21st-century learners, workers and citizens.

Notably, our strategic plan is not aimed at success on the Virginia "Standards of Learning" (SOL) state standards. Our aim is to develop students who are critical and creative thinkers, problem solvers, innovators, academically proficient, effective communicators and collaborators, globally aware, and independent and responsible learners and citizens. We know that if we foster that kind of learning, SOL success will assuredly follow. As many might be thinking, this is not easy work to pursue. You need to live in two worlds at once: first, the world of state and federal accountability systems we all operate within, and second, a complementary world of what many of our stakeholders feel matters more than standardized test success. This is, of course, easier to accomplish when you're already successfully meeting state standards.

We have reinvented and re-organized our work toward that end. We have identified the 21st-century skills we believe students must have, and this summer we required all teachers to attend training on how to foster these skills. And, we are changing our assessment system to include more activity and performance-based tasks that help measure those attributes in ways that multiple choice tests cannot.

When we began this work, we had the guidance of Dr. Tony Wagner of the Harvard Change Leadership Group and author of *The Global Achievement Gap*. Dr. Wagner identified the characteristics today's employers are seeking in their employees: critical thinking and problem-solving; collaborating across networks and leading by influence; agility and adaptability; initiative and entrepreneurialism; effective oral and written communication; accessing and analyzing information; and curiosity and imagination.

As Dr. Wagner notes in *Rigor Redefined*, "To teach and test the skills that our students need, we must first redefine excellent instruction. It is not a checklist of teacher behaviors and a model lesson that covers content standards. It is working with colleagues to ensure that all students master the skills they need to succeed as lifelong learners, workers, and citizens." In Virginia Beach, we are reengineering: moving from a stance of test-taking success to one of cultivation of these skills in children. We have taken real steps to accomplish this, from making changes to assessment to working harder to partner with families.

What began as a straightforward program to create a strategic plan morphed in two years into ▷

Virginia Beach City Public Schools
Fast Facts

○ **VBCPS Mission**

The Virginia Beach City Public Schools, in partnership with the entire community, will empower every student to become a life-long learner who is a responsible, productive, and engaged citizen within the global community.

○ **VBCPS Vision**

Every student is achieving at his or her maximum potential in an engaging, inspiring, and challenging learning environment.

○ **District Overview**

Virginia Beach City Public Schools is the largest school division in Hampton Roads—southeastern Virginia—serving approximately 69,500 students in grades K-12. The split is roughly 55.4% Caucasian, 27.1% African American, 6.1% Hispanic, 5.8% Asian, 0.9% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 0.4% Native American, and 4.2% of Unspecified Ethnicity. The Per Pupil Expenditure is $11,020 for the 2009-10 school year.

Currently, the school system includes 56 elementary schools, 14 middle schools, 11 high schools, and a number of secondary/post-secondary specialty centers. The district employs over 5,700 teachers.

a division-wide multifaceted campaign of gathering research and community input to determine how VBCPS could best educate our students. Our campaign has included parents, students, teachers, administrators, the military, the business community, faith-based and non-profit organizations, education entities, municipal representatives, and community members at large. We also worked closely with a futurist and nationally known education authors and speakers such as Daniel Pink and Tony Wagner. The result? A forward thinking, even visionary, document that will serve VBCPS as a blueprint for educating its students through 2015. As Joe Burnsworth, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction and a 33-year veteran of the district, notes, "I've seen many strategic plans come and go. This is the first I've seen that truly excited people."

Using Our Strategic Plan as Our Guide

If excitement about a strategic plan is rare, then it's no wonder that in many districts plans gather dust on shelves rather than being used to guide real change. Our strategic plan outlines five key objectives, shown in Figure 1 below. In shorthand, they are: 1) engaging students in meaningful work; 2) developing a balanced assessment system; 3) improving student academic achievement and closing achievement gaps; 4) engaging the community; and 5) optimizing all resources—human and capital—to ensure our desired outcomes for student success.

The major solution developed out of this initiative is focus. There will always be emergencies and course corrections in public education, but this living document is guiding our priorities. The work we are focusing on is tied back to these five objectives, helping remove much of the politics of special interest. Also, the five objectives are mutually reinforcing, which helps drive engagement. We ask ourselves this key question when faced with a new project: Does this support our strategic plan? If it does, we address it through the objective action teams. If the answer is "no," it is thrown off the cart.
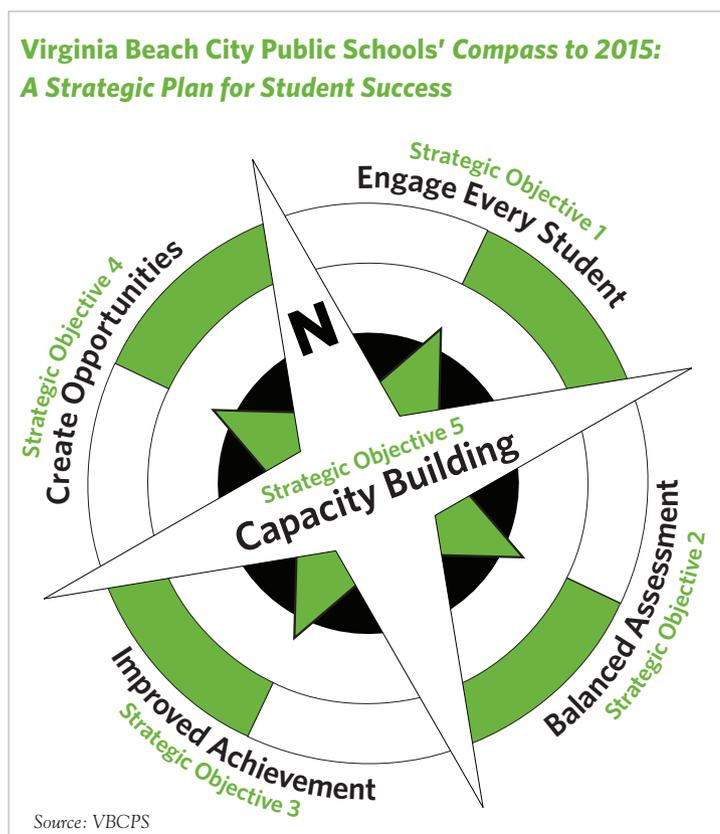
Implementation Process and Insights

What we did *not* have, both in the creation of the plan and subsequent stages of implementation, was a list of benchmark districts whose experiences we could leverage as we ventured into some unfamiliar territory. We relied on our formative conversations with Dr. Wagner and perspectives on discrete initiatives in select districts, but none with the scale or complexity of Virginia Beach. Listening to our stakeholders was the first significant process step as we sought to define the outcomes we wanted to pursue. The communications challenge was paramount: would the process be known as tackling the "scary or unknown" or were we selling the "exciting and innovative"? Our stakeholder engagement process showed us that we could focus on the latter paradigm.

In addition to the district leadership team, the School Board was the prime mover for the program. Its original Program of Work mandated that staff and administration create a strategic plan that reflected community priorities while meeting all students' learning needs. A Board-appointed Strategic Plan Steering Committee, which

FIGURE 1

Virginia Beach City Public Schools' *Compass to 2015: A Strategic Plan for Student Success*

Strategic Objective 1
Engage Every Student

Strategic Objective 4
Create Opportunities

Strategic Objective 5
Capacity Building

Strategic Objective 2
Balanced Assessment

Improved Achievement
Strategic Objective 3

Source: VBCPS

time'—there is value in jumping into the water." Nevertheless, as we roll out the new plan, we have identified 24 schools as "early adopters" of key strategic plan initiatives in the areas of technology, balanced assessment, and responsiveness to student needs. These early adopters will help mentor and coach the next wave of schools. As we reflect on the initial phases of implementation, we are ready to share some honest insights about our process for each strategic objective.

Objective One: Engage Every Student

Objective One focuses on 21st-century curriculum and instruction. This objective was originally led by Christine Caskey, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction (now with Katy ISD in Texas); Don Robertson, principal of Salem High School; and Joe Burnsworth, then director of secondary education. Burnsworth, now assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, will move into Dr. Caskey's leadership role on this objective. This team led the realignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment with *Compass to 2015*, especially as it relates to the identified 21st-century skills.

included three Board members, managed the plan's development. Members also were active in the community forums, surveys, discussions, town hall meetings, etc., used to garner information and data. Board members spent many hours talking to constituents about the program. In addition, numerous Board workshops were devoted to the program as the Steering Committee worked to reflect the community's mandate that students need learning skills, not testing skills. After months of gathering and synthesizing data, the Committee created the compact, comprehensive document that is *Compass to 2015*, a strategic plan that articulates community values while stipulating academic outcomes that prepare students for 21st-century challenges.

Many have asked us, "Where do you start?" Or, "How do you sequence the implementation?" Our answer is: "Do it all." We believe that sequencing the rollout, from a content perspective, does not work. As our Deputy Superintendent Sheila Magula has noted, "You can't wait until a 'right

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In some regards, our second objective (developing a balanced assessment system) preceded the first, and nowhere is the close collaboration and overlap between objectives as apparent as here. We have followed the philosophy that we need to figure out our student achievement goals, design the assessment structure to measure success, and then create the curriculum to get us there. This involved a definition and grouping of the desired outcomes. Both objectives one and two are critical in developing a continuum of skill development ▷

to map activities to span a child's engagement with the district over time. The continuum itself has been a point of success in the program to-date. Teachers in particular have shown high levels of interest and excitement. The best news of all to me was witnessing that the excitement was in fact contagious!

Of significant importance at this stage was how together as a district we developed a common understanding for what we were trying to accomplish. We needed to answer "What does this actually look like?" for the teacher, the principal, and the students. An important understanding grew throughout our community: we will never be done with this process. Curriculum is forever changing, and "It's OK" to move away from what is well-known and comfortable.

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Once a common taxonomy was articulated, we completed a thorough audit of existing curriculum and instruction and focused on a rigorous gap analysis. What did we have already that would help get us where we needed to go? What legacy curriculum could we discontinue? Our team also developed a matrix to track the alignment of existing curriculum and the addition of exemplary learning plans and assessments. Ongoing challenges included helping key staff, including directors and coordinators, address the time challenges inherent in their work, yet simultaneously manage to encourage their ownership and commitment. Managerial practices that we have found especially useful in pursuing the objective are a network of teacher leaders who helped us develop and review the exemplars and to teach

the mandatory staff development. We also had teachers who did field testing of learning plans and assessments. Also, mandatory summer training for all teachers helped address nervousness and build a library of "exemplars"—practitioners that can serve as models for other teachers.

Objective Two: Balanced Assessment

Objective Two focuses on a balanced assessment system. This effort has been chaired by Jared Cotton, assistant superintendent of research evaluation and assessment, with support from Pat Griffin, who recently retired as the principal of one of our high schools. In order to pursue the objective, division-wide rubrics to measure outcomes for student success had to be developed. The first step was to develop and/or align high-quality assessments that measured 21st-century skills.

These desired outcomes ensure that students are academically proficient, effective communicators and collaborators, globally aware, independent, responsible learners and citizens, critical and creative thinkers, innovators, and problem-solvers. The team investigated methods to report student progress and explore measures to compare progress with those in other school divisions and districts throughout the state and nation. Additionally, part of Jared Cotton's responsibility was to focus on quality control to ensure student performance tasks are meaningful opportunities. Most challenging in this dialogue were some formative discussions around how to measure success in select outcomes areas. We needed to retain a focus on measuring outcomes, not the process to get there.

Ultimately, assessments had to be created for myriad areas, and we were able to leverage the College and Work Readiness Assessment (CWRA) effectively. We were also able to create similar problem-based assessments in-house by developing assessments for grades four and seven that assess the same skills as the CWRA. Our longer-term objective is to move students to be evaluated by digital portfolios, assembled over time and organized by outcomes areas. Mimicking work patterns in business, the military, and elsewhere, students will work on projects that will selectively be added to their portfolios, and we are working on assess-

ment protocols for this aspect of our strategy. Finally, we are developing a supplementary report card for families to foster broader engagement and support.

Objective Three: Improved Achievement

This objective addresses the need to improve student achievement for all students while closing gaps for identified student groups, particularly African American males. Objective Three is led by Jobynia Caldwell, assistant superintendent of high school education, Esther Monclova-Johnson, director of equity affairs, and Lavern Chatman, principal of Newtown Elementary. Using a metaphor, Caldwell and Monclova-Johnson view Objective Three as "providing the glue" for the strategic plan: instruction and student engagement are the answers to long-term success.

The team's role is to create a cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic process for pursuing equity objectives in the district. Given the significant scope, the team credits a process of "funneling down" whereby the district refined broad objectives down to specific work. An example initiative is called Candid Conversations about Race that will eventually result in training for school administrators on how to host productive conversations in their buildings. This team will also develop a Response to Intervention Plan (RTI) and supporting training plan. Response to Intervention is a tiered approach to providing students with needed interventions and support in the areas of academics and/or behavior. Reflecting on what has worked well, the overall strategic planning effort drove unprecedented clarity in both vision and messaging, which has successfully reduced anxiety and allowed change to occur more smoothly.

Objective Four: Create Opportunities

This objective addresses community engagement. Led by Kathy O'Hara, assistant superintendent for media and communications development, with support from Larry Ames, principal of Seatack Elementary, and Melissa McQuarrie, director of community relations, the team focuses on opportunities for parents, communities, and business leaders to become more actively engaged partners in supporting student achievement. ▷

This school year the Objective Four action team will be developing a plan to enhance and expand the division's mentorship program. Also on the work plan for the next school year is further collaboration with city and community agencies to improve support to families, particularly the underserved parent population; develop materials for Board members to use as they encourage involvement of the community in the schools; investigate the feasibility of expanding the use of computer labs after hours in Title I schools; and develop a plan to host breakfast dialogue meetings in the community with Cabinet members serving as guest speakers.

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According to O'Hara, the district has undergone a "philosophical shift" due to the engagement and input from parents, the School Board, and underserved stakeholders. Overall, the district mindset to external stakeholders went from dispensing information to delivering service. One of the flagship initiatives—Parent Connection—is a thoughtful combination of face-to-face parent training and electronic resources. The district regularly hosts parent seminars on topics of interest (for example, positive discipline, parenting the strong-willed child, helping children transition to middle school, etc.). Among the online resources offered is a parent portal that gives parents access to their children's grades and academic records.

Objective Five: Capacity Building

Objective Five focuses on professional development, building the capacity of our school division's leaders, teachers, and staff, and maximizing resources in order to achieve the division's outcomes for students. Objective Five is co-chaired by Sheila Magula, deputy superintendent, and James Pohl, now principal of Princess Anne High School, and Shirann Lewis, director of elementary education.

Our initial training focus began with our 86 school principals because it is their leadership that will make or break the desired cultural shift. We approached training through monthly collaborative sessions hosted by school level at which time we examined such instructional areas as identification of 21st century skills and the attendant "look fors" in classroom learning walks. Other topics included implementation of *Understanding by Design* (Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe) in the Virginia Beach curriculum; performance-based assessments; and integration of technology into instructional practices.

Building on these leadership discussions is the expressed expectation that each school leadership team will do its part to foster learning cultures in their building. As a result, most of our principals have strategically deployed Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs are at the crux of much of the work to be done in the schools this school year. As the planning was being formulated, principals' top choice of strategy was clear: allow the existing PLC process to drive both professional development and the school improvement plan (SIP) structures. Other plans include the establishment of a video library of best practices with a document index and additional information on other supporting professional development outreaches.

Overall, the district has a "rapid response" mentality regarding professional development: What are you going *to do* with this? Contrary to many districts, Virginia Beach does not have a history of demanding greater and greater quantities of professional development. Since 2001, we have had the same time requirements in place and our professional development has largely focused on the needs represented by particular points in time. What we are wrestling with now, however, is the imperative to move to the kind of professional development that supports our cultural shift—from success on state standards to student acquisition of 21st-century skills. We are in the beginning stages

now of establishing a Center for Teacher Leadership, which will be staffed by teacher leaders who will help us design the appropriate professional development. In the meantime, ongoing work includes increasing the amount of job-embedded professional development. Fundamentally, we accept that capacity building is a non-linear process, but we are giving the process some order.

Overall management and measurement of the strategic objectives is a public process, with continuous progress tracking tools used to discuss and communicate milestones. All stakeholders are welcome to click through our website to view these documents at all times.

Our Early Results

Compass to 2015 already has posted some impressive results:

- School leaders and some teachers are doing learning walks to identify instructional best practices aligned with the district's strategic objectives.

- A new assessment, the College Work Readiness Assessment (CWRA), is in use.

- Courageous Conversations About Race, an equity initiative, is helping staff discuss causes and solutions for teacher-student behaviors contributing to inequities in the classroom.

- A dynamic video library of best teaching practices with an accompanying facilitators' guide appropriate to each school level has been developed.

- Learning Culture framework has been developed with an online link to resources that support the strategic objectives. These resources are also designed to address the four critical questions related to student learning: 1) What do we want students to learn? 2) How will we know when each student has learned it? 3) How will we respond when students don't learn it and when they already know it? 4) How will we involve parents and the community to support student learning?

- A strategic plan web page has been developed that is designed to foster community understanding of our objectives. Resources include a summary of 21st-century skills and video progress reports.

- The Parent Connection initiative has held ten parent workshops and one half-day conference. Approximately 1,600 parents have attended.

- Online access to student grades and records has been provided to parents.

- Helping underserved parents is a major goal. Accomplishments include: working with the local food bank to provide food over weekends to needy children in Title I schools; opening computer labs after-hours in some schools; and providing computers to needy families.

We are proud of our accomplishments in transforming our district operations around 21st-century skills outcomes. We are still early in the overall process, but to make real progress we need to push forward through areas of uncertainty. As Deputy Superintendent Sheila Magula says, "Perfectionists need to let go." We look forward to serving our students and community to meet their future needs, not just today's.

Those who want more information on the *Compass to 2015* should visit the strategic plan page at http://www.vbschools.com/compass/index.asp. There are videos on four of the five objectives, a list of the identified 21st-century skills for Virginia Beach City Public Schools, a master glossary, and additional resources such as books and web sites on 21st-century learning.

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