

VIRGINIA FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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# The Virginia Model for School Improvement: *Profiles and Common Themes*

ROGER E. JONES AND GREGORY A. WHEELER



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Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership  
4909 Cutshaw Avenue • Richmond, VA 23230-3605 • Telephone: 800.249.8001 or 804.355.2777  
Web site: [www.edleader.org](http://www.edleader.org) • [admin@edleader.org](mailto:admin@edleader.org)

Introduction .....	2
School Division Profiles .....	4
Amherst County .....	3
Danville City .....	11
Franklin City .....	20
Portsmouth City .....	23
Smyth County.....	31
Common Themes .....	37
Conclusion .....	43
Appendix.....	44
Resources .....	48



In the fall 2010, the Virginia Department of Education's Office of School Improvement and the Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership undertook a study to examine school improvement efforts underway in the Commonwealth of Virginia. This study involved five school divisions and schools within those divisions that had been identified as schools in improvement. They included a rural school division bounded by a larger city (Amherst County), a small urban school division (Danville), a small city school division (Franklin), a large urban school division (Portsmouth), and a rural school division not bounded by a larger city (Smyth County).

A series of questions provided the framework for the study (Appendix). Onsite interviews were conducted in each division with the superintendent and central office administrators involved in the school improvement process. A second interview was conducted with the building principal and other key leaders identified by the principal. The answers to the interview questions provided the information for the school division profiles that constitute the major part of this study.

Each of these divisions had different levels of resources and different needs. While it was rare for school divisions or individual schools to be doing the same thing, common themes were readily apparent. Collaboration between the school board, central office administration, and the school administration and faculty, critical to the success of any school improvement effort, was evident in each of the five school divisions. In all cases, the central office administration was actively engaged in school improvement and this focus on improvement was reflected in how they worked with all of the schools in their respective divisions, not just the schools that had been identified as schools in improvement. Each division and school came to understand the importance of having a compelling vision to drive the school improvement process. Every student was important, and everyone in the division and school needed to be accountable for the success of all. The Standards of Learning (SOL) were no longer seen as the ceiling, but rather the floor.

Decisions at the division level and the school level were data-driven. Each school established procedures for analyzing the data and used the data to make important decisions regarding the curriculum, pacing guides, and classroom instruction. Teachers using data to make instructional decisions was common practice.

While the role of the superintendent and the central office staff was important, in all schools it was apparent that the principal and the school-based leadership team played a pivotal role in the improvement of student achievement. The principal was the instructional leader and had established procedures for monitoring the curriculum, instruction, and individual student achievement in the school. The principal, however, did not try to do it all. Each principal was surrounded by a leadership team focused on instruction. In each case, the leadership team played a vital role in the school's improvement efforts.

Instructionally, the utilization of research-based instructional strategies was a focus in each school. While the approach differed, the emphasis on using effective teaching strategies was consistent. All teachers were trained in research-based instructional strategies and their use in the classroom was monitored by building administrators during formal, informal, and walk-through observations.

The alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment was a major component of school reform in all divisions and in all schools in improvement. In every situation, division staff noted that when schools went into the improvement process, there was a lack of tight curriculum alignment. While lip service was given to alignment, it really did not exist at the level necessary. A major effort was made to ensure that the written, taught, and tested curriculum were congruent.

Planning, meeting, and training time for teachers was evident in all schools. Schedules were changed in order to provide common planning time for grade level teams or interdisciplinary teams. Agendas were created to ensure that instruction and data were the focus of team meetings. Both horizontal and vertical instructional conversations began to occur. Principals often attended the meetings and reviewed the minutes of all team meetings.

Remediation programs were established in each school. These occurred both after school and during the school day. One common theme was established criteria for student placement in a remediation program. While criteria varied between schools, some included not meeting a set score on benchmark tests or failing one or more SOL tests. Thus, there was an intentional effort to make sure that all students who exhibited similar achievement or behavior were identified for help.

## Introduction

The establishment of “non-negotiables” was another common theme that emerged from this study. These non-negotiables included school division and school-based models, strategies, techniques, and programs. These non-negotiables were monitored on a regular basis to ensure that they were being implemented with fidelity.

Each division and school participating in the study utilized the resources and support of the Office of School Improvement as outlined in The Virginia Model for School Improvement. Each school division and school created a school improvement plan utilizing the rapid improvement indicators established by the Center on Innovation & Improvement. The online plan included the selection of indicators, the development of tasks that would enable the division and school to meet the goal of the indicator, and a monitoring component to ensure that the school improvement plan was a “living and breathing” document. Central office administrators and school leadership teams participated in seven training webinars with faculty being provided by the Office of School Improvement and the Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership. Each school submitted a data analysis report on a quarterly basis to the Office of School Improvement and used the data to modify their school improvement plan, as well as to monitor the progress they were making. Finally, school administrators and lead teachers participated in training that focused on effective teaching practice, formative assessment, and the three areas of Breaking Ranks – Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Personalization; and Collaborative Leadership.

When a school is not accredited or does not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) according to the guidelines set forth in No Child Left Behind, it presents schools with a unique set of challenges. Rather than feeling self-pity, each division and respective school accepted the challenges and saw it as an opportunity for growth. They established a transparent communication structure to ensure that all stakeholders were informed. Ultimately, each school and school division came to realize that school improvement was not going to occur until everyone was on board. As Dr. Sam Redding, director of the Center on Innovation and Improvement, states, “The ultimate goal in school improvement is for the people attached to the school to drive its continuous improvement for the sake of their own children and students.” That was evident in each of the divisions that participated in this study.

## ► Superintendent, Central Office, and School Board Involvement

The school improvement plan was presented formally to the school board and was monitored by the superintendent and members of his staff. Initially, the plan was presented to the school board by the assistant superintendent. Over time, the school board reports were presented by the principal of the school. The reports included a particular emphasis on the benchmark data and the planning process. From a financial standpoint, the superintendent and school board are knowledgeable of how school improvement grant funds are used.

The school improvement process has been expanded from the school in improvement to include all schools within the division. The assistant superintendent is the central office contact for all schools. The central office staff has meetings in all schools concerning the school improvement plan. Each principal then meets with the superintendent and assistant superintendent to further discuss the plan and to monitor progress. While a major purpose is to identify areas of weakness and determine how the central office can help, the superintendent's major goal is to help principals understand the planning process. The principal encourages the improvement process in each school.

The assistant superintendent is the formal link between the school principal and the superintendent. In addition, the supervisor of elementary education, the Title I supervisor, the supervisor for student services, and the state coach are involved in the school improvement process. These four individuals meet quarterly with the principal to discuss progress toward the plan. The Elementary Supervisor also serves on the school-based improvement team which meets monthly. In addition to the elementary supervisor, the school-based team includes unit leaders from each preK-5 grade, the literacy coach, math coach, and principal.

School improvement within the division has been redefined. The superintendent feels connected to all schools and reviews all school improvement plans. Senior staff and cabinet have been involved in discussions about their role in improving student learning. The superintendent noted that "it was critical for all central office staff, but specifically the senior staff, to become more involved." Previously, the focus of the division was to use a checklist and monitor what was occurring in schools. The focus has changed to one of assistance, which required a focus on a new process. The vision and mission statements are living, breathing documents and drive decisions within the division. The assistant superintendent is a key player in this reculturing process. The assistant superintendent stated the following: "Initially, I was not a key player in the state's school improvement process... however, now I am taking a more hands-on approach ... so that I am now more involved." The central office has taken a more consistent "hands on" approach to school improvement and is encouraged by the superintendent to focus on those things that are important to school improvement.

There were no school board policies which needed to be revised. However, there were efforts to keep the school board informed of decisions which could create conflict with other schools. The school in improvement needed additional resources which were provided as needed. For example, the student-teacher ratio was lower for the school in improvement. Staffing decisions were made deliberately and intentionally.

There were transfers and reassignments of staff, including administrators, teachers, and custodians, which were accomplished by design. There was an intentional effort to get professionals in the right assignments based on where they were needed the most. There needed to be a change in school culture and expectations. Some teachers were moved to other grade levels to take advantage of special skills.

## ► Instructional Leadership

While leadership is distributed, the instructional leader is the principal. The principal has worked hard to expand the leadership capacity of others in the building. The literacy and math coaches, as well as unit and team leaders, are expected to provide leadership to school improvement, but the principal is the one who is actively connected to the entire process of school improvement. She does what she says she will do and has a strong commitment to excellence. She is not a messenger from the state or central office: she is creating a process of change to improve student achievement. She has taken ownership of the process. Her continued focus on vision was cited as critical to school improvement. As noted earlier, she makes presentations to the school board on the school improvement process.

While instructional leadership comes from the principal, the principal realizes the importance of expanding the

leadership capacity of others and distributing leadership throughout the school. The reading and instructional coaches provide leadership in their areas. Leadership is provided through direct interaction, not by fiat or by issuing a memo or sending out an email. The principal and coaches model effective leadership. Teachers realize that decisions flow from the vision.

### ► Vision and Mission

The vision and mission statements were collaboratively developed several years ago. They were reviewed at the beginning of the school improvement process. It was determined that the vision and mission statements were fine; however, decisions needed to be made around the vision and mission. The change began to occur at the beginning of the year faculty meetings where the vision and mission were revisited. The principal used a case study from summer training to jumpstart a discussion on vision and mission. Using the case study, she asked faculty to reflect on how vision and mission influence decisions. Conversations ensued around best practices. The vision statement – “Every Child, Every Day” – is the centerpiece of school improvement.

### ► Change

Michael Fullan states there is a difference between “tinkering” with change and “reculturing”, which involves changing norms, values, vision, and relationships. Change in the school is moving toward reculturing, but is not yet there. The assistant superintendent stated the following: “We started with tinkering, but are now in the stage of reculturing.” Several changes demonstrate the move toward reculturing. Previously, teachers in the building cared about the students. All teachers wanted students to be successful, focused on self-concept, and protected; however, the culture was not to challenge students to accept responsibility for their own learning. Students were seen as “good kids” who were dependent on teachers. A change in norms and attitude was important. The culture had to shift to a mindset that every child will achieve higher standards. Students were encouraged to accept responsibility for learning and to broaden their goals. A student leadership program was initiated to target students with leadership potential. The leadership program focused on reading and writing. Students wrote for the student newspaper and learned communication skills. They went to bookstores and read to students. They were exposed to community service experiences. The assistant superintendent summed up the importance of the leadership initiative by stating: “This has opened the eyes of the school community to what their kids can do.”

The school needed to focus on providing an equity framework that maximized learning for all students, one which provided opportunities and expected achievement regardless of race, disability, or socio-economic status. Change had to be intentional around the vision. Teachers were expected to be decision makers, while at the same time setting high expectations for themselves. One teacher stated: “I feel like I always have to be on my game. There is no time to be less than 100%.”

The incentive for change in the school was driven through both external and internal pressure. Pressure to be fully accredited and to make AYP provided external pressure from both the state and school division. At the same time, teachers in the school were frustrated at not being able to demonstrate significant improvement in student achievement. Teachers were struggling with comparisons to other schools. There was little time during the day to reflect on student achievement. While there was a written vision statement, there was no implementation of the vision that drove curriculum, instruction, and assessment decisions. Teachers were “babying” their students, and while they enjoyed and felt safe in the school, the students were not being challenged. Many of the teachers in the school knew there was a need to change the attitude of teachers. Thus, when the external pressure arrived, teachers in the building were ready to make the change.

The attitude change, critical for school improvement, was supported internally. Conversations in the school began to change from discussion of why students cannot succeed to how we help them succeed and overcome barriers. Simply put, the attitude changed from “can’t do” to “will do.” Conversations occurred around expectations, professional learning communities, and academic rigor. The principal noted that engaging the faculty in a conversation about academic rigor was the initial activity that crystallized the need to change. This activity, taken from the Breaking Ranks training, required teachers to develop their own definition of academic rigor, then go through a structured activity that required smaller then larger groups to develop an agreement on what academic rigor meant in the school. After the definition was agreed to, teachers were asked to develop ideas on what curriculum, instruction, and assessment should look like based on their definition of academic rigor. The principal

also noted that the “Quick Wins” activity in Breaking Ranks was also helpful. In this activity, teachers identify changes which could be made quickly and with little money to improve student achievement. As changes were made, attitudes changed and student achievement improved. The principal and the leadership team celebrated the increase in achievement. The principal noted that these celebrations were critical to maintaining the energy of the faculty.

### ► Building and Maintaining Relationships

Relationships are important when focusing on school improvement. There is always the danger that some people will believe that change is a repudiation of their work or their commitment. They may view change efforts as an attempt to discredit them professionally. Thus, change has to come with a focus on maintaining and building relationships. When change occurs, those people affected by the change need to know why the change is occurring and how it affects them, both personally and professionally.

A critical piece of building relationships is the ability to listen. The principal is credited with being an empathic listener. She understands both sides of the discussion, but is able to make and explain decisions. There was a general consensus that when people know you have listened to them, they are more willing to accept the decision.

There also is an intentional effort to communicate what is important. In this case, what is most important is student learning. This focus has to be communicated to parents, teachers, staff, students, and the community. Communication about the importance of student achievement comes from both the school and the central office. Parents have communicated to faculty that they have seen a difference in focus at the school. Teachers now focus on and communicate the importance of academic achievement for all students.

Parents have been kept informed of the school improvement plan, and the parent advisory committee plays an important role by reacting to school initiatives. Parent involvement in the school has increased, and parents are more likely to help with efforts to recognize teachers and staff, as well as volunteering with school events like field day, SOL family night, 19<sup>th</sup> century day, and FAST (Families and Schools Together).

### ► Data Analysis and Use

Prior to the school improvement focus, data was routinely available for administrators and teachers. This data included SOL disaggregated scores, Phonemic and Literary Screening (PALS) scores, reading assessments, running records, and nine-week benchmark data. However, the data was not presented in a useable format, nor did teachers and administrators analyze the data to the depth necessary to impact curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The school division provided nine-week benchmark data, but there was little focus on how to use the data. It was also noted that the questions used in the nine-week benchmark tests did not always match the standards being taught during the nine weeks.

To address this issue, professional development was initiated. Through professional learning communities, teachers began a conscious and intentional effort to link assessment questions with standards taught. This effort identified the need to change from a nine-week assessment to a three week assessment. In addition, teachers recognized the need to develop more classroom assessments; however, the software being used did not lend itself to accomplishing these changes. With support from the central office, the assessment system was changed to Interactive Achievement, which accommodates the need for additional reports and the development of a test bank. With a better understanding on how to use assessment data more effectively to identify student needs, the training focused on how to deliver an effective instructional and remediation program.

### ► Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

One of the most glaring issues that needed to be addressed was instruction, particularly in reading. Instruction was being driven by the textbook, not the standards of learning. Rather than using SOL pacing guides, some teachers were relying on the instructional guides from the textbooks. As a result, the benchmark assessment data was not always in alignment with what was being taught. With division support, the textbook guides were replaced with SOL pacing guides. The textbook guides were not discarded: they became a resource rather than the guide. Instruction and differentiation would now be based on the standards curriculum framework and individual student needs, not the text.

To monitor change, observations, including numerous walk-throughs, were conducted by the principal, coaches, and central office staff. The principal followed up with teachers. Some central office staff provided feedback to the principal, while the assistant superintendent provided feedback directly to teachers.

Analysis of writing data led teachers to recognize the need for a consistent K-5 writing program. The school decided to implement the *Being a Writer* curriculum which uses literature as a model for good writing. The curriculum also encourages student conversations about writing and includes student conferences with each other and student conferences with the teacher around writing.

During the 2010-11 school year, there will be a renewed division-wide focus on county-wide literacy. Driven by the superintendent and division senior staff, teachers from each division school met frequently over the past year to define county-wide expectations for literacy and to define what good literacy instruction looks like.

In addition to curriculum changes, there were changes to instruction as a result of data analysis and classroom observations. Professional development from the literacy coach focused on differentiated instruction in reading. While there is still room for improvement, the principal and literacy coach are seeing teachers provide different levels of instruction. They have seen a shift from scripted instruction based on the textbook guide to instruction based on student needs. A Model for Reading is beginning to emerge. Teachers are providing whole group instruction, small group instruction, and literacy workstations. The whole group instruction focuses on an anchor text, introduction of new material, vocabulary, and common assessments. Students are broken into small group instruction based on instructional strengths and weaknesses. Literacy workstations provide students an opportunity to work at an independent level and to practice specific reading skills.

Teachers utilize common unit lesson plans and assessments that focus on standards. Daily lesson plans may vary, but unit plans and assessments are shared. This assists the principal and coaches in monitoring the implementation of the standards and facilitates team planning around intervention and enrichment. Administrator and coach walk-throughs occur on a regular basis. Walk-throughs generally last no more than five minutes but give the observer a glimpse of instruction in the classroom and whether the instruction is connected to the standards. The observation data is compiled and shared with teachers either verbally or in an email. If there are patterns that occur across observations, those issues may be addressed in a faculty meeting, a school-based leadership team meeting, or through professional development.

The use of student assessments is also changing. As the school moves into Strand III of the state's school improvement model, they will work with Teach First to use formative assessments. Teachers will have an intentional focus on monitoring student learning and making necessary adjustments.

As teachers become more comfortable using the Interactive Achievement software, they will be encouraged to develop assessment questions that reinforce the SOL by using question stems, while at the same time developing assessments that move beyond the SOL. As teachers develop their assessments, the items will be placed in a shared location where other teachers can review and use those items. This will provide more choices for teachers to use in assessing student progress.

### ► Professional Development

Teachers at the school in improvement were involved in a variety of professional development activities. A few of these activities were division-wide for all teachers, particularly those related to literacy; however, the majority of staff development was individualized for the school-based on identified needs. For example, Dr. Rick DuFour and his wife Becky provided assistance to the staff on the essential work of teams involved in professional learning communities. Additional school-based training was provided on team building, academic rigor, and data analysis. The master schedule was revised to create planning time for teachers in the school in improvement. An intentional effort was made to create a balance and to allow teachers to focus on those things that were critically important to student achievement. The superintendent stated that "professional development is a balancing act between what the state expects, what the division expects, and the specific needs of the school. Our concern is that our teachers are not overwhelmed."

The superintendent noted that all staff are important to student achievement. What everyone does each day affects the culture and environment of a school. It was important to focus on creating a mindset around the

vision of “Every Child, Every Day.” There is an intentional and deliberate effort to involve staff in professional development. Teacher assistants are involved in training provided to teachers, even though these assistants have to be paid for work beyond contract hours. The assistants participate in the embedded professional development, as well as having access to technology academies. Bus drivers have been trained on providing positive discipline on school buses and are encouraged to ask students how they are doing in school and if they have completed their homework.

As noted earlier, Interactive Achievement has been selected to manage school data as it relates to assessment. Training and support is being provided to teachers. Professional development in technology is ongoing and includes training related to webquest, thinking maps, integration of technology, and smart boards.

### ► Time to Meet, Plan, and Train

Creating time for teachers to meet was a critical need for the school. The school division calendar has built-in professional development days. These days provide large blocks of time for meetings, but a critical change needed to occur to provide planning time for teachers during the day and to create a block of time on a regular basis where teachers could work together, both horizontally across grade level, and vertically with teachers in other grades. Working with Dr. Rick and Becky DuFour, the master schedule was changed. Using resource teachers in art, music, movement, technology, and library in a different way, the master schedule was changed to provide a 45-minute block of common planning time for each grade level each day. In addition, a 90-minute block of time for Professional Learning Communities (PLC) was established once a week.

Use of the daily common planning time is left to the professional judgment of grade level unit leaders and teachers. It can be used for individual teacher planning time or provide time to make parent contacts or to meet as a grade level. PLC time is used for professional development, unit planning, and/or common assessment planning. PLC time encourages professional conversations around student learning. One day during the year, the schedule was modified for a half-day to allow vertical planning to occur.

Professional development also included teams of teachers using a reading walkthrough observation form to observe reading implementation in other grade levels. This helped increase teacher understanding of effective reading instruction across grade levels. Feedback was provided to teachers. During common planning time, grade level teachers reviewed the observation data and discussed differentiated reading practices.

### ► Remediation Efforts

In the past, teachers relied on their professional judgment to identify students for remediation. After training on the effective use of data, teachers now have a process to identify students who need assistance based on benchmark data. This included SOL scores, SOL response by question data, nine-week data, reading assessments, and PALS data.

The principal established one non-negotiable rule regarding remediation: students could never be pulled from new instruction to receive any type of extra assistance. Remediation was delivered in a variety of ways. With the change to the master schedule, a 30-minute intervention period was established daily. Remedial assistance based on individual student need was provided during this time. During March and April, the math extension teacher did targeted grouping and regrouping in math where students worked in need-based groups for mastery. Additional assistance was provided before and after school, and identified students were pulled from resource classes during the month before SOL testing. Sixteen Saturday math sessions were provided through a partnership with Sylvan Learning. Twenty-four students in grades three – five participated in the program. Nineteen of these students completed the program. Of those 19, 14 passed the math SOL test.

Providing acceleration programs for students meeting or exceeding the standards was identified as a weakness of the school. There is a gifted resource teacher who works with these students once a week. During regular classroom instruction, students should be taught above grade level through differentiated instruction. During 2010-11, greater emphasis is being placed on students who need to be challenged above grade level.

**► Non-Core Subjects**

While accreditation and AYP is based on SOL test scores, faculty recognize that there is more to an education than just reading, writing, math, science, and social studies. The SOL, to this extent, are considered to be the floor, not the ceiling, of student achievement. No time has been taken from the other disciplines of art, music, movement, technology, and library. However, delivery of instruction in the non-SOL disciplines has been restructured so that planning time for classroom teachers can be provided. All non-SOL teachers are included in professional development, and they are integrated into various grade levels for the training.

**► Recognizing Student Achievement**

Previously, there had been a recognition program that included the traditional Honor Roll and Perfect Attendance recognition. Teachers recognized students for good behavior and made a positive referral to the principal. Students were recognized for positive character traits with the Tree of Goodness program when they demonstrated one of the traits. Additional student recognition programs were added. Awards assemblies were held quarterly during which grade levels would demonstrate something they learned. For example, kindergarten students may recite their ABC's and hold up their letters. Fifth graders may act out the rock cycle. Parents were invited to these assemblies. Morning announcements included additional recognitions for students for their work with clubs or winning contests. An incentive program was added where students earned raffle tickets for good effort, academic improvement, improving grades, perfect attendance, or maintaining good grades. Prize drawings were held every three weeks for books and other rewards. At the end of the year, five bikes and an MP3 player were raffled off on the last day of school.

► **Superintendent, Central Office, and School Board Involvement**

The superintendent, central office staff, and the school board were and are actively involved in the school improvement process. While two schools were identified for visits, all schools in the division are considered by the superintendent and staff to be in school improvement. The process of school improvement began with the central office. The superintendent and her immediate staff began the process by examining data and looking for what was going well in the schools. They consciously looked for common themes and strategies that were working and whether or not those themes and strategies could be implemented in other schools. This effort was driven by several questions: What is working? Why is it working? What is not working? Why is it not working?

The superintendent and staff realized that each school was unique, and that individual issues did not necessarily need to be addressed in the same way in each school. However, the central office also realized there were effective research-based strategies that needed to be consistently implemented across the division. In essence, there was the recognition that non-negotiables needed to be identified and implemented consistently across schools. Once these non-negotiables were implemented, each school needed to be examined to determine additional assistance needed.

The first non-negotiable was to focus on school culture and to drill down to the individual student. Based on the most recent data, Danville City has the second highest poverty rate in the Commonwealth. It was critically important for everyone in the division to recognize that poverty does not cause low achievement. Teacher expectations for student achievement had to be high. Poverty could not be an excuse. In some cases, this meant challenging prevailing attitudes. The superintendent noted this required a “mind shift” for some teachers and administrators.

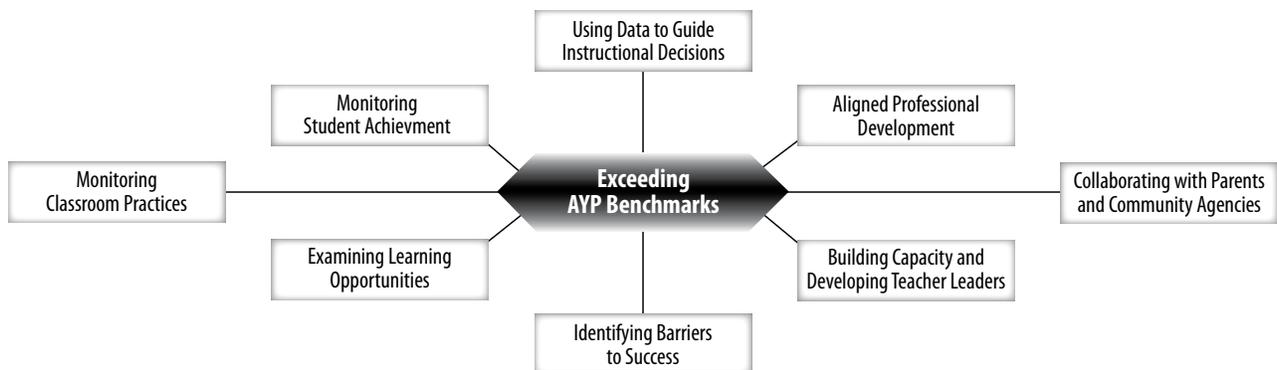
Differentiation of instruction is also a non-negotiable, and teachers are expected to focus on quality student questioning and student engagement. In addition, the big picture non-negotiable is following the School Reform Model which is highlighted below, although there is flexibility in how the model is implemented at the school site.

Since all schools are now considered to be in school improvement, the central office staff used what they learned through the state school improvement process to create their own School Reform Model. With school board approval, the model was formalized division-wide. Just meeting the SOL standards was not enough. The SOL was considered as the floor, not the ceiling. The division set a goal to exceed AYP benchmarks by focusing on a 95% success rate on the SOL assessments. This goal forced everyone to begin looking at the individual student.

The model was developed through a grant writing initiative that focused on the successes of the initial schools in improvement. While the division did not receive funding, the central office and school board realized that the identified model could be implemented without grant funding.

The model was expanded to become a part of the administrative evaluation process. Principals and assistant principals establish annual school-based goals and objectives around the model. The School Reform Model is noted below.

**Danville City School Reform Model**



The superintendent holds a monthly meeting with all principals and assistant principals. While goals and objectives developed around the model are included as part of the superintendent's agenda during the monthly meetings, the goals and objectives are more formally assessed on a quarterly basis. The quarterly meetings are conversational meetings with administrators in each school. This one-on-one, face-to-face meeting ensures that the superintendent and central office staff know what is happening in each school, and that school administrators know what is happening in their school. This is also a meeting where the superintendent and staff can examine the individual needs of the schools. While separate meetings occur with each school administration, the same set of questions drive the conversation. Questions for each of the tenets of the model are noted below.

### Exceeding AYP benchmarks:

- ▶ Has the target of 95% been set and communicated?
- ▶ How was the target communicated?
- ▶ Is the target included as part of the weekly instructional discussions?
- ▶ What percent of the staff have bought into the process?

### Using Data to Guide Instructional Decisions:

- ▶ How is data used to create the master schedule?
- ▶ How is data used to create the school improvement plan?
- ▶ How is data used to monitor student achievement?
- ▶ What instructional strategies are included in the School Improvement Plan?
- ▶ Based on the data, what instructional changes have been implemented?
- ▶ How often is the Indistar website updated?

### Aligned Professional Development:

- ▶ Have common planning periods been established to discuss student progress?
- ▶ Have peer coaching and modeling been implemented?
- ▶ What professional development opportunities have been provided?
- ▶ How do you celebrate student success at faculty meetings?
- ▶ Do teachers regularly present research-based instructional strategies that work?

### Collaboration with Parents and Community Agencies:

- ▶ Have community and parental involvement frameworks been established with meeting dates?
- ▶ Is there an on-going parent involvement plan?
- ▶ What community partnerships have been established?

### Building Capacity and Developing Teacher Leaders:

- ▶ How are instructional coaches utilized?
- ▶ What external providers have been used?
- ▶ How are external providers being used?

### Identifying Barriers to Success:

- ▶ What were the top three barriers identified?
- ▶ What was the process for identifying the barriers?
- ▶ Of the top three, how many have been removed?
- ▶ What are the emerging barriers?

### Examining Learning Opportunities:

- ▶ How are students identified for intervention?
- ▶ How are extended learning plans utilized?
- ▶ What remediation and intervention plans have been incorporated?
- ▶ Are intervention or remediation plans discussed with teachers on a weekly basis?
- ▶ Have identified students been served and how have they been affected over the past nine weeks?

**Monitoring Classroom Practices:**

- ▶ What are the top three instructional non-negotiables?
- ▶ What percent of the staff are incorporating the non-negotiables on a daily basis?
- ▶ What are the next non-negotiables?
- ▶ How many walk-throughs do administrators conduct each day? Each week?
- ▶ How do teachers receive feedback from the walk-throughs?
- ▶ Is there a school-wide discipline plan?
- ▶ How are expectations for behavior communicated to students?
- ▶ Is there consistency among the faculty in implementing student behavior expectations?

**Monitoring Individual Student Achievement:**

- ▶ What is the schedule for weekly team meetings to discuss action data?
- ▶ How often does the administration meet with teams?
- ▶ What is the process utilized in team meetings?
- ▶ How are team meetings led?
- ▶ How do you ensure that team meetings focus on student achievement?
- ▶ What do the results from the nine-week benchmark assessments tell you?
- ▶ What instructional changes have been made based on benchmark assessments?
- ▶ How is instruction individualized?
- ▶ How are implementation of the curriculum framework and pacing guides monitored?
- ▶ What is being done differently for students not mastering the material?

Obviously, it is incumbent on building administrators to use these questions to drive conversations within their schools. This increases the probability that meaningful conversations about teaching and learning occur within schools.

As the school improvement process has emerged, the central office has changed its role. Five years ago the central office was seen as helping schools do what they need to do, as being a resource to the schools. The central office was seen as providing a service to the schools. That mindset has changed over the past five years. The central office has emerged from being service-oriented to being more involved in leading the process around defined parameters. The superintendent and staff lead through discussions, example, visibility, and support. The superintendent noted that the central office is now “much more intrusive in the school improvement process.” They no longer wait for a school to ask for assistance. Instead, the focus is on leading and accountability.

One major school board policy has changed as a result of the school improvement process – the Reduction-in-Force (RIF) policy. While most of the RIF policy is based on seniority under the revision, the superintendent is able to protect 15 teachers from being reduced. This allows the superintendent to ensure that young, enthusiastic, motivated teachers are not lost. The change also helps to ensure that the division does not lose young teachers who play a significant role in the improvement process.

**▶ Instructional Leadership**

While the principal is expected to be the instructional leader of the school, a team approach is used to generate support for student learning. In addition, support for instruction and support for principals is provided in a variety of ways.

As referenced earlier, the superintendent and assistant superintendent, through the School Reform Model, have developed, with school board support, instructional non-negotiables. The non-negotiables include following individual students, using data to make decisions, weekly conversations about individual students, weekly planning meetings, and differentiated instruction.

While these non-negotiables are division-wide expectations, principals, working with their faculties, develop school-based non-negotiables as well. These non-negotiables differ from school to school, but examples include lesson plans, using bell ringers, and bi-weekly planning meetings.

The official central office contact for the school improvement process is the assistant superintendent. However, central office staff realizes the importance of providing assistance as needed to individual schools and the need for the central office to be connected to the school. Thus, central office staff is embedded in the schools. While these individuals still provide division-wide assistance, they have offices in the schools providing principals with a central office point of contact. For example, the division supervisor for professional development assumes responsibility for professional development at the division level but has an office at a school site. This embedded central office staff member attends school-based leadership team meetings and plays an integral role in connecting the central office and the school.

Principals are also assisted by instructional coaches in reading and math. These coaches assist faculty and administration in developing school-based instructional goals which evolve from SOL and benchmark data analysis. Coaches have the responsibility to expand the teaching capacity of staff. A Train-the-Trainer Model allows the coaches to receive training and then coach and train other teachers in the building.

### ► Vision and Mission

The superintendent, central office staff, and principals recognized the importance of the vision and mission statement. Both the vision and mission statement were tweaked. However, upon review, all agreed that the wording of both documents was fine. The problem was not what was written but what was being manifested within the division and the schools. In spite of a vision and mission that supported the learning of all students, the reality was that there was a climate of low expectations for students. Serious conversations about the vision and mission occurred, not to change the wording but to change the mindset for implementation.

Central office and building administrators engaged staff in conversations around “why are we here?” There was a realization that teachers can be very independent and without a deliberate and intentional focus on the vision and mission, it is easy to lose sight of the destination. Thus, there was an intentional focus on getting faculty and staff to move in the same direction around high standards. In essence, as a division and as schools, “we have to believe what we say, and we have to act on what we believe.” There was a need to return to the simple realization that “we are here for students.”

### ► Change

When the initial school improvement process began, the elementary school was identified as a Passport for Achieving Success School (PASS) school, one of the lowest achieving schools in the Commonwealth. According to central office staff, there was high teacher turnover, low expectations, and a negative community perception of the school. When the middle school went into school improvement, there were significant issues that needed to be addressed.

The initial impetus for change was external. When the schools were designated as PASS schools or Conditionally Accredited, the majority of teachers did not want their schools categorized in this manner. Some teachers and administrators were moved around or assumed other responsibilities. While driven externally, administrators and faculty realized they must assume responsibility for student achievement.

In both schools, discussion about change had occurred, and there had been some tinkering with change. However, the superintendent noted that the tinkering changes were not being taken seriously and what was needed was what Michael Fullan describes as reculturing. New leadership in the schools focused on changing the culture. They focused on vision, high expectations, and shaping the path for the future. The superintendent summed up what happened with the following statement: “Teachers are looking for someone to set the path and to lead them down the path.”

The superintendent, assistant superintendent, and division data director described the process in the division as transformational leadership – leadership which changes individuals and systems. Leadership focused on changing teachers and developing teachers as leaders.

Thus, after the initial external pressure, teachers embraced the changes as they began to see a few quick wins and improved student achievement. Years later, more than 90% of the staff has been at the schools for more than three years. They have bought into the school reform process, and the drive for continued improvement is internal.

## ► Building and Maintaining Relationships

School improvement is about “Relationships, Relationships, and Relationships.” Changing the culture and achievement in schools occurs when the school board, central office, school administration, faculty, parents, students, and the community build and develop relationships around a vision focused on the importance of each individual child. Thus, one of the critical elements is transparency. It is important for everyone to know what changes are occurring and why. It is important to involve everyone in the school reform process. While everyone may not agree with each decision, everyone should know why the decision was made.

Both schools in improvement had high poverty rates. As noted, there was initial resistance to change. Teachers were encouraged to focus on those things they could change, not on things they could not change. There were courageous conversations with faculty and parents about what needed to happen. In some cases, teachers who did not embrace the vision left the schools.

Faculty who remained committed to the process played an integral role in school improvement. Issues were addressed by the entire faculty. Faculty began to utilize data in decision-making. Gradually, faculty buy-in to change occurred and was important to improving student learning.

Partnerships were developed including ones with Averett University and local churches. Information about school improvement was shared with the media and with parents. School and division staff took opportunities in the community to share what was happening to improve student learning. School websites were upgraded and improved. Every PTA meeting included information about school improvement. Tips and strategies for helping their children were shared with parents.

## ► Data Analysis and Use

Data is used in a very real way in the school division to make decisions. The superintendent clearly noted the importance of data with the following statement: “Data collection pushed people out of their comfort zone and forced us to look at instruction. Once we know what a child can’t do, the game is over – we are the professionals, we should be able to solve the instructional problem once the problem is identified. There can be no excuses.”

The division has a “data guru” who monitors the use of data, generates reports, and provides assistance to principals and staff. While administrators and teachers have access to data, not all have developed the skill set to effectively use the data. Central office staff clearly noted that building administration and faculty were at different levels of knowledge and implementation. Central office staff noted that school-based staff were good at collecting data, but “tiered at using it.” Thus, professional development in the use of data was critically important.

Interactive Achievement is the software program used for data collection within the division, and this is a nonnegotiable. This program allows teachers to add their own questions to division-wide benchmark assessments, and it also assists with the development of flexible groups for instruction.

As with most schools and divisions, SOL data is analyzed at the division and school levels. Historical SOL data is developed for each teacher. Individual strengths and weaknesses are identified. A meeting is held with each teacher to review historical data where teachers reflect on how content can be covered more effectively.

The division data expert has completed correlation studies to provide a better look at division-wide data. For example, within the school division, there is a very high correlation between 4<sup>th</sup> grade SOL scores and 6<sup>th</sup> grade SOL scores. Thus, 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers are encouraged to review 4<sup>th</sup> grade SOL scores as carefully as they review 5<sup>th</sup> grade scores for their students.

Division research also indicates that students who score between 400 and 425 are at-risk of not passing future tests. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to provide extra support for these students. Thus, historical SOL data is not only developed for teachers, it is developed for each student and provided to teachers.

The division has developed benchmark assessments to measure the SOL as they are taught. These assessments are administered in each content area every 4.5 weeks in the elementary school. In the middle school, math benchmark assessments are provided every three weeks, while benchmark assessments in other disciplines are administered every nine weeks. At the high school, benchmark assessments occur every six weeks.

In addition, the Otis-Lenon test is given in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. An Algebra Readiness Test (ARDT) is utilized in the middle schools. SuccessMaker and I-station reports provide additional data around student learning.

Obviously, a lot of data is gathered. The key, however, becomes how the gathering of data is translated into helping students achieve at higher levels. As noted earlier, some teachers are very skilled at data analysis, while others would benefit from assistance. The division provides funds for school leadership teams to meet during the summer to analyze school data. Strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and instructional program are identified and shared with teachers at the beginning of the school year. Curriculum and instructional patterns are adjusted based on the analysis.

During common planning times, teacher teams are required to examine the data carefully. Data is drilled down to every individual student. Through this combined division and school process, conversations about individual students are required – this is a division nonnegotiable.

Data analysis is also used to identify barriers to success. The structure which had been in place was not working effectively. For example, achievement of students with disabilities has been a major issue for the division and individual schools. While some teachers are still uncomfortable with the decision, full inclusion was implemented division-wide in an attempt to raise achievement levels of students with disabilities. The decision, however, was data driven.

Even development of the master schedule is driven by data. Using available data, principals determine which grade levels/subjects teachers teach. Emphasis is placed on getting the right teachers paired with the right students and teaching the right content. Data drives whether teachers teach in self-contained classrooms, team teach, or departmentalize.

### ► **Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**

When the first school was identified by the state as needing improvement (PASS school), there was no curriculum framework, pacing guide, or alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Over the years, improvement in these areas has been enormous. Not only do all of these now exist, they are reviewed and revised annually based on division and/or school data.

The process to overhaul the system started with curriculum frameworks, pacing guides, and assessments. For several years, these resources were in constant revision. Teachers were encouraged to make notes on the pacing guides so changes could be made.

This evolving process has led to the creation of Ursula, an online grade level repository of resources for teachers. The repository includes the curriculum framework, pacing guides, and all division-developed resources and materials available in a central online location.

While having a central online repository is a major step for the division, the need continues for teachers to examine the continued effectiveness of the resources. Horizontal alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment is important, but so is vertical alignment across grade levels. After SOL testing, the division provides substitutes for identified teachers who meet in vertical teams to discuss curricular patterns and alignment issues.

From an instructional focus, the schools emphasize the use of research-based instructional strategies. Instructional coaches in English and math provide both school-based and individual assistance in the use of instructional strategies. At every faculty meeting, teachers present instructional strategies that have been effectively implemented.

While assessment methods were referenced in a previous section, a few additional strategies will be noted. Quarterly reports of student achievement are required. These quarterly reports include the name of every student in the school who is not being successful and a description of what is being done to assist the student. This emphasizes again the need for conversations about individual students.

STAR reading assessment gives a quick 10-15 minute assessment of instructional reading level. This diagnostic data allows teachers to measure reading progress. The SRA reading lab provides assistance for upper elementary grade students. Interactive SuccessMaker software provides diagnostic data in reading and math.

The use of data has assisted administration and faculty in making curriculum and instructional decisions. A math software program was removed because data showed that students were making little progress. Read 180 and I Can Learn programs have been implemented as part of a daily remediation program, and these programs are being evaluated to determine their impact on student learning. Analysis of assessment data has also identified a need for the division to develop benchmark assessments for 2nd grade.

Curriculum implementation is monitored through a variety of methods. School-based instructional coaches in English and math monitor implementation at each grade level. Grade level, unit, and/or departmental meetings include curriculum discussions with minutes provided to the principal. Some principals require lesson plans that include SOL references, while another requires “bell ringers” at the beginning of the class. These bell ringers utilize released test items from the state.

Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are also monitored through lesson plans. At the middle school, lesson plans are a school-based non-negotiable and are due on Fridays. Teachers use the same template which provides for SOL strand, teaching strategies, pacing, number of days, materials, and technology.

Administrators also monitor through formal observations, informal observations, and classroom walk-throughs. The division requires a formal full period observation of each faculty member. A conference is held with the teacher after each formal observation.

An informal observation lasts for about 15-20 minutes. There is a lot of scripting in an informal observation, and, at the middle school, there is an observation sheet with expectations. Teachers were involved in developing the expectations so they know what administrators are looking for. The form is shared with the teacher after the observation.

The principal does at least three walk-through observations a day. The division has provided a template for informal observations. Classroom walk-throughs are between 3-5 minutes. Administrators look for certain things during a walk-through, including word walls, displays of student work, vocabulary use, learning centers, SOL strands posted or known by students, interactive classroom, technology, and active student engagement.

In addition to classroom observations, teachers at the middle school must complete three peer observations – two inside their discipline and one outside their discipline.

## ► Professional Development

There is both division-wide professional development as well as school-based professional development. For example, the division utilizes the Four-Block<sup>®</sup> reading framework which includes a daily focus on guided reading, self-selected reading, writings, and words. Each block is multi-leveled, with both support and acceleration provided to students as needed. Each school is at a different place in the implementation of the initiative, either Tier 1, 2, or 3. Principals identify what resources they need to implement the program, and it is the responsibility of the central office to provide those resources.

Instructional and special education paraprofessionals attend the training. They also go through all site-based training provided to teachers.

While principals reported that the division provided common professional development, each principal emphasized that schools have the flexibility to add to this training by creating their own initiatives. The principals were clear, however, that for them to receive support for their own training, their initiatives must be connected to school data and/or the School Improvement Plan. Principals interviewed noted there was support for professional development “from the superintendent down.”

The division has a New Teacher Academy which meets at regular intervals during the first three years of teaching. All non-tenured teachers are included in this staff development effort.

Every new teacher has a mentor, either in-house or through a program called “Coaches Caring and Responding to Ensure Success” (CCARES). The mission of this initiative is to use the experience and expertise of a cadre of retired teachers to assist selected new teachers in becoming grounded in the teaching profession. Each coach has two-three teachers. This initiative has increased the retention rate of new teachers, provided collegial support outside

the evaluation process, and helped new teachers become more effective. The coaches visit each assigned teacher twice a month, provide monthly training, and assist with instructional strategies and classroom management. The CCARES program started with local funding, but is now funded through Title I and II.

In years two and three of the New Teacher Academy, non-tenured teachers begin the development of a portfolio which they must complete before tenure is granted. During regular meetings, teachers share examples and get feedback around artifacts connected to the portfolio. While there is no common template for the portfolio, non-tenured teachers must provide evidence of what occurs in the classroom, including student work, data gathered over three years, and what they do to help individual students be successful.

### ► Time to Meet, Plan, and Train

Common planning time is provided daily at both the elementary and middle schools. At the elementary level, teachers meet in grade level teams at least two times a week. Minutes of the meetings are provided to the principal.

At the middle school level, teacher teams of four (English, math, science, and social studies) have common planning time every day. Once a week, the four team members meet in the data room to discuss individual student achievement and concerns. Students are grouped instructionally and are often moved from one group to another based on need. All four content teachers must agree before a student can be re-grouped. Minutes are provided.

### ► Remediation Efforts

Remediation is generally provided during the day. While there have been options for after school remediation programs, transportation costs consumed much of the remediation budget. A decision was made to put the resources into technology which could be used during the day, rather than spending resources on transportation. I-stations have been provided for remedial help. Middle schools have Read 180 labs and I Can Learn labs. Pearson's SuccessMaker is utilized in the elementary schools for reading and math. The advantage of these programs is that they provide diagnostic information on student achievement and individualize remedial learning activities for students.

Principals realize that more time is needed to provide remedial assistance. However, principals support use of technology to provide assistance in lieu of after school programs.

Intervention specialists provide assistance to students before school. Additional assistance is also provided to students by teachers before school and during lunch. Faculties at both schools take pride in working with students and in utilizing time whenever time is available.

While teachers can recommend students for remedial assistance, there is a process in place that provides data on student achievement. This data triggers student referrals to remediation. All students who failed a SOL assessment the previous year automatically begin the school year in a remedial program. Data from division benchmark assessments provided at regular intervals during the year is also used to identify students for additional assistance.

Information on individual students is provided in a data room at the middle school, and teacher teams discuss student learning on a weekly basis.

Needs of students who are gifted are met through differentiated instruction. Learning stations and projects provide accelerated opportunities. Once a week at the elementary school, a division gifted education teacher provides pullout activities for about twenty minutes for gifted students. These activities may be for individuals or small groups. At the middle school, acceleration is provided through offering advanced classes or through grouping.

### ► Non-Core Subjects

The non-core subjects are important within the school division. Even though the school division has lost \$13 million over the past two years to budget cuts, the school board remains committed to the arts. The superintendent noted that except for a 20% cut in instructional supplies, the budget cuts "have not affected the arts, academics, or athletics."

Teachers of the arts are supportive of efforts to improve student achievement in the core academic areas. Arts teachers get lesson plans from classroom teachers and make efforts to formally support academic concepts in their classes.

In the middle school, the arts are celebrated. Art is posted throughout the building. Numerous music programs allow students to showcase their talents. Band, orchestra, and chorus are important to the total development of the student.

### ► Recognizing Student Achievement

Students within the visited schools and across the division are recognized in traditional ways. Academic recognition is provided through an Honor Roll. Each teacher selects one student each week to be the Student of the Week. Teachers assist in identifying students to represent the schools in functions such as safety patrols, hosts for visitors, or other initiatives.

More generic recognition may be provided through rewards for students who pass all of the SOL tests. Rewards could include bookbags and field trips. For schools with dress codes, students may be rewarded for good behavior by not having to follow the dress code for a day. Students of the week may be able to go to lunch five minutes early. Businesses provide coupons for students who meet identified criteria.

## School Division Profiles —Franklin City

### ► Superintendent, Central Office, and School Board Involvement

Franklin City is a unique school division with only three schools, one elementary, one middle, and one high school. While all three schools are not in school improvement, all three schools utilize the school improvement process. All use Indistar as the foundation for developing the school plan. Rather than having two separate models for improvement, one for schools in improvement and one for the division, the superintendent approved the use of the Virginia Model for all schools. This simplifies the planning and improvement process. Since the Virginia Model revolves around more than 80 rapid school improvement indicators, there is little chance that a school will identify a need that is not addressed through the Indistar planning tool.

The superintendent noted the importance of keeping people informed. Constant and consistent communication is critical to school improvement. The Associate Director of Instruction is the central office contact for the principals. She meets with principals on a monthly basis and spends the day collectively examining data. School board members are provided instructional updates at every meeting.

During the summer, school and division staff “really dig” into the data. Each school conducts a data day when the data is analyzed and disaggregated so improvement plans can be developed. Information about the school-based data day is posted on the website. School board members are invited to sit in during the data days, and some school board members do attend. School board members do not meet for their board retreat until data from all schools has been analyzed. This allows the school board to utilize the data as part of its own planning process.

Central office staff and building principals have a close working relationship. They developed a consensus around several issues which the superintendent labels as “non-negotiables.” While the superintendent has identified specific individuals who are responsible for each non-negotiable, all staff in the division are held accountable for them. The non-negotiables for the division include the following:

- Subgroup/Subject Performance Goals – including target improvement scores for each NCLB subgroup and for each subject tested;
- Math Improvement Plan – a jointly developed plan to improve math scores in schools that did not make AYP in math;
- Indistar – online tool provided as part of the Virginia School Improvement Process which is the foundation for developing school improvement plans;
- K-8 Reading Block – a structured reading block for the elementary and middle school utilizing a research-based reading framework and a lesson plan template;
- E-Walks – a walk-through observation tool, customized by Edvantia and placed on a PDA, which is used by administrators, central office, reading specialists, and lead teachers;
- Student Triage – a system designed to provide intervention to students based on attendance, discipline, and academic data (more detail provided in the remediation section);
- Lesson Plans – a lesson plan template based on Bloom’s Taxonomy and common strategies that teachers provide weekly and principals monitor the plans and provide written feedback to the teachers;
- Common Strategies – research-based strategies that have been shared with all teachers through professional development and which are addressed through the lesson plans (jigsaw, think/pair/share, graphic organizers, word walls/sorts, manipulatives, graffiti, cubing, give one/get one, exit cards, interactive notebooks, inside/outside circle, and foldables); and
- Meeting Agendas/Minutes – a schedule of all meetings related to school improvement is shared with all staff, along with agendas and meeting minutes.

A monthly checklist on the non-negotiables is provided to the superintendent. As noted, the above items are the fundamental core of the division improvement process. Additional information on some of the non-negotiables is provided below.

As noted, meeting agendas and minutes are important since these are connected to the rapid school improvement indicators. They are important to all school improvement meetings. All grade level, department, school

improvement team, and faculty meetings are noted on the calendar and published. The central office contact attends all of the school improvement team meetings, and she or other central office staff may attend any of the other school-based meetings.

All meetings have agendas. The focus of the agendas is how to fix an identified problem. Meetings include both formal and informal reporting.

Lesson plans were noted as one of the division's non-negotiables. During one of the monthly principals meetings, which assistant principals also attend, principals bring teacher lesson plans to the meeting. A peer review of the lesson plans occurs. The administrative belief in the school division is that some students do not achieve because of ineffective planning; thus, the need for the lesson plan focus. The revised lesson plans follow the Learning Plan Grid detailed in *The Mega System* (Redding, 2006). The grid calls for student objectives at three levels: target (on grade level), prerequisite (below grade level), and enhanced (above grade level).

The school improvement effort led division staff to review the school day. As a result, the school day was extended 15 minutes. The elementary school operates from 8:15 – 3:20, while the middle school and high school are in session from 7:40 – 2:45.

As a result of the school improvement process, one additional school board policy was reviewed and changed. The promotion and retention policy, which was tied directly to reading level, was changed to reflect a more global review of student achievement. Students now must meet an identified number of criteria centered around content.

With the development of the Triage system for intervention, the administration is currently reviewing the remediation policy and the homework policy. In addition, with the state plan being discussed to link teacher evaluation to student achievement, the superintendent has started a division review of evaluation policies.

One principal summed up the role of the superintendent and central office with the following statement: We get "huge support from the central office."

### ► Instructional Leadership

Because of the focus on the "non-negotiables," instructional expectations are clearly defined, creating a consistent instructional focus. Both central office staff and principals believe one of their major roles is to provide resources and assistance to teachers so that students learn. All schools exhibit an attitude of consistent improvement, and all schools use Indistar as their planning tool. Instructional leadership is evident at the central office level, and there is a system of accountability of central office staff to the superintendent. The central office staff sees its role as providing service to schools. They are constantly visible in the schools, and their visits generally focus on instruction.

Principals realize they are accountable for student learning and so are assistant principals. In fact, the assistant principals are expected to attend division-wide principal meetings so there is a consistency of focus. School administrators are visible in classrooms and utilize a walkthrough observation tool to focus on instructional issues. While commercial walk-through tools are available, the division has developed its own tool which includes indicators and "look and listen for" examples. There are 18 effective instructional strategies listed on the form. These strategies parallel the research-based Rapid School Improvement indicators contained in the Indistar program.

The school administrative team understands the importance of relationships. The use of teams that focus on planning and instructional delivery is evident. Professional development focuses on building teams within the division and within the schools.

The use of data, examined more carefully in another section, is central to the instructional process. Teachers utilize data days, staff development days, and planning time to analyze data and to make instructional decisions.

### ► Vision and Mission

When the current superintendent arrived, she began discussions with the school board and principals about the vision and mission statements. Her belief is that all decisions need to be driven by the vision and mission statements: both the vision and mission statements should be living, breathing documents that drive decisions.

The first and last question which should be asked is “based on the vision and mission, is this decision in the best interest of children?”

To that end, schools review their vision and mission statements on an annual basis. The review keeps the school community focused on being student centered. The vision and mission provide a sense of direction for the school. An effort is made to make both friendly to all stakeholders.

When decisions need to be made, the school leadership team connects the decisions to the vision and mission by asking the following question: “does this decision help us reach our vision of what we want the students in our school to be able to do?” For example, during teacher leader training, there was a consistent effort to connect the training to the vision and mission statements.

### ► Change

Initially, the pressure to change came from the state through the required school improvement process. While initial change was pushed by an external source, school leadership recognized that building faculty had to accept responsibility and accountability for student learning. As the improvement process continued, an internal pressure to change emerged from the leadership team and faculty. While some tinkering with change had been occurring over time, central office staff and principals came to the conclusion that while “schools were tinkering to survive, schools needed to reculture to succeed.”

The reculturing began by challenging the belief systems of professionals that may have been driven in the past by caring so much about student’s backgrounds and where they came from that expectations for learning were low. This belief system required a number of “courageous conversations.” While labels may inform, they cannot be used as an excuse. As a result, a new belief system emerged: no matter the student’s background or past experience, the student deserves our best effort every day around high expectations for learning. A “no blame, no excuses” mentality gradually replaced the old belief system as teachers were challenged to focus on the things they could control and to eliminate defensive responses to achievement data. Administrators, faculty, and students were encouraged to think around the concept of “I can” or “I will” rather than “I can’t.”

Change was accelerated by the development through consensus of the school division non-negotiables which were identified earlier. Change must become institutionalized and a part of the school culture. Kurt Lewin states that you must “unfreeze” school culture long enough to make changes, then “refreeze” the culture so that the change becomes a part of the culture. The non-negotiables are now “refrozen” and are a part of the school culture.

### ► Building and Maintaining Relationships

In any type of improvement effort, relationships and communication are keys. Schools must focus on “parents as partners.” Efforts have been made to make the school improvement process focused and transparent. The Parent Advisory Council has school improvement as a major focus. Through a portal, parents have access to student grades. High school teachers post assignments, and emails are important communication tools.

Schools provide information through a newsletter that is provided to the community in hard copy and through the school’s webpage. Family Reading Nights are held every Tuesday night at the elementary school with 5-7 children working with an adult reading Accelerated Reader (AR) books and students taking the AR tests for points. Community members serve as book buddies with a child two times a week so that personalized attention to reading can be provided. The schools pride themselves on being open to the community. The Camp Family Foundation is very supportive of the schools and provides cultural and enrichment activities for students.

### ► Data Analysis and Use

As previously noted, the use and analysis of data is important to school improvement. The division provides a variety of resource tools to track and inform. SOL Tracker has been used for many years. This allows instructional leaders to track trend data and helps determine if there are historical trends. This is critical for curriculum revision.

The division also uses data tools provided through Pearson. These tools include Limelight as the location for division benchmark data and Inform which is an analytical tool. Data is entered by school division staff, but

analysis of the data is the responsibility of the teachers. By looking at school and specific teacher data, there is a greater likelihood that curriculum, instruction, and assessment changes will be made.

Benchmark tests have been developed by the school division. In addition, teachers can create question banks which are available to all teachers.

The use of data permeates the division and all three schools. In addition to the data days, numerous examples exist of how data is used as the data analysis is done both horizontally and vertically. Grade level and same subject teachers analyze data across their grade or discipline. However, there is a vertical data focus as data is spiraled between pre-k and grade 12. Pre-k – grade 2 teachers need to know how their students do when they get to higher grade levels. Middle school teachers review elementary results. This articulated focus assists in identifying gaps in the curriculum and instruction.

Because of the “triage” focus (explained in the remediation section) on academics, discipline, and attendance, there is much emphasis on the examination and use of attendance and discipline data. Efforts are made to look for patterns of behavior, as well as for any individual student trends.

Analysis of data has led to changes within the schools. Examples of changes resulting from data analysis include more effective use of questioning strategies, and a greater focus on planning, tutoring, and remediation efforts.

### ► Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

The alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment are critical to school improvement. The division provides a blueprint with SOL, curriculum framework, and pacing guides. Professional development and required lesson plans ensure that these documents are followed in the planning process.

Changes to the reading curriculum occurred as a result of data analysis and alignment review. The entire K-12 reading structure was changed with assistance provided by consultants from the University of Virginia. A separate lesson plan format was developed for reading. The new structure created an organization and sequence for reading instruction within defined time intervals. The reading framework includes blocks of time for read alouds, guided reading, independent reading, word study, guided writing, and independent writing.

Differentiation of instruction is required. The lesson plan guide requires teachers to identify the three levels of classroom instruction and to note what is being done differently for each level. Teachers are asked to identify at least two questions that require higher level thinking: the intent here is to create an intentional focus on higher level thinking.

Teachers rely on the use of pretests to determine previous learning and to create differentiated lesson plans. Student placement in groups is not fixed, but fluid. Students can move in and out of instructional groups based on need.

Division student assessment is frequent. Elementary and middle schools have six-week benchmark testing, while high schools test every 4.5 weeks.

### ► Professional Development

Professional development is provided around the non-negotiables identified in the school division. For example, every teacher receives training on the research-based common teaching strategies. Within the schools, professional development is determined through data analysis.

Teachers maintain data notebooks and, as noted earlier, each school has a data day. There is a division-wide professional development calendar. The school calendar includes one professional development day each month. Some of these days are full days, while some are partial days.

The school calendar also includes early closing days which can be used for professional development or planning. Often these days are used to help teachers plan for implementing training provided. Teachers note in their lesson plans when they develop these activities.

Each principal also conducts faculty meetings. Each faculty meeting includes an instructional focus as part of the agenda. For the most part, professional development is provided for teachers and not for other staff members. The one exception is that some teacher assistants may be involved in the training provided for teachers.

### ► Time to Meet, Plan, and Train

Common planning time is provided for elementary teachers within the building. Teachers are required to meet as a team focusing on instructional issues two times a week. Agendas and minutes are provided for these meetings. The remainder of the time is for individual planning. Vertical planning across levels occurs on the school data days. Middle school teachers also have a common planning period each day. The middle school teachers meet as a team at least once a week with agendas and minutes also required. These meetings always start with an analysis of data.

### ► Remediation Efforts

Remediation efforts are driven by the locally developed Triage concept – a system designed to provide intervention to students based on attendance, discipline, and academic data. There is an identified trigger for each area that requires intervention. Triggers for each area are:

- Attendance: 4<sup>th</sup> absence;
- Discipline: 4<sup>th</sup> referral for in-school suspension (ISS) or 2<sup>nd</sup> for out-of-school suspension (OSS); and
- Academics: D or F for grading period or one or more failing grades on the division benchmark assessment.

When a student meets all three triggers, his/her name is placed on the Triage list. This list goes to the superintendent, along with an individual intervention plan developed by the school for each student on the list. The list and individual plans (without individual names) are then shared with members of the school board.

The goal is to keep students off the Triage list. Principals monitor attendance, discipline, and academic achievement of all students on a regular basis. When they identify a student who needs assistance, a first-level intervention is provided: this could be a conference, parent interaction, or counselor intervention.

The high school has incorporated an extended study period into the master schedule. The extended study period occurs Monday – Thursday and last approximately 40 minutes. During this time, students work with their own core content teachers since those teachers know the individual student's strengths and weaknesses. Students who do not need remediation attend a study hall manned by non-core teachers.

At the elementary school, an after-school remediation program is held in which 10-12 students work with a teacher, and individualized remediation plans are developed for each student.

### ► Non-Core Subjects

While the focus of the school improvement effort is in the core subjects, non-core subjects remain important to the division. Students have opportunities to take art, music, physical education, and technology-related courses at the middle and high school. Students in the elementary schools rotate through these activities on a structured schedule. Core and non-core teachers work together. For example, at the middle school the art teacher and social studies teachers developed cross-curriculum lessons.

### ► Recognizing Student Achievement

Recognition of student achievement follows a fairly traditional plan that includes student of the week, student of the month (recognized at school board meetings), good citizenship, honor roll, principal's honor roll, and awards assemblies. There is also an elementary honor society and a year-ending honors banquet. At the secondary level, Mustang Success Day is held each six weeks, and National Honor Society has been revived.

► **Superintendent, Central Office, and School Board Involvement**

School improvement is an important focus in the school division. While two schools are in improvement, all schools develop annual school improvement plans. At the beginning of the year, schools are placed into one of three tiers based on their state accreditation and Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) status. Schools that have met accreditation and AYP goals are assigned to Tier I, while schools that are fully accredited but did not meet one or more AYP goals are assigned to Tier II. The Tier III schools are schools that are either not accredited or are in Title I school improvement. For the 2010-11 school year, Brighton Elementary and Churchland Academy are in Tier III because they are in Title I school improvement.

The following chart describes the expectations for each of the three tiers:

Tier I	Tier II	Tier III
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold quarterly School Improvement Team meetings/discussions</li> <li>• Monthly building-level data analysis meetings</li> <li>• Hold content academies (staff development)</li> <li>• Routine deployment of central office instructional support staff to model lessons, work with small groups of students, and provide-content specific staff development</li> <li>• Nine-week benchmark assessments</li> <li>• Continuous implementation of the Curriculum Management Plan</li> <li>• Quarterly progress reports</li> <li>• Continuous implementation of the Professional Growth Cooperative Model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All expectations of Tier I schools</li> <li>• Bi-monthly deployment of content specialists to schools</li> <li>• Conduct monthly roundtable discussions within their Professional Learning Communities</li> <li>• Conduct internal academic reviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All expectations of Tier I and Tier II schools</li> <li>• Weekly deployment of content specialists to work with teachers, using data from multiple assessments to improve instruction in the classroom</li> <li>• Benchmark assessments conducted every 4.5 weeks vs. quarterly</li> <li>• Data review of benchmark assessments in PLC</li> <li>• Assignment of school coaches</li> <li>• Weekly visits from the Principal on Special Assignment</li> <li>• PPS Governance meeting each month with school and division leaders</li> </ul>

The superintendent, central office administration, and school board are actively involved in the school improvement process. Quarterly school improvement reviews are conducted with the principal and key instructional leaders in each school. The superintendent, along with members of the department of curriculum and instruction and the instructional subcommittee of the school board participate in School Improvement Plan reviews. The reviews focus on the status of the school improvement plan, professional development training, data (including, but not limited to, assessment and attendance data), and remediation plans at each school. Schools in Tiers II and III meet more frequently with the superintendent and the central office administration. The directors focus on leveraging resources and when possible, resources are reallocated to assist individual schools. In addition, principals participate in the monthly division webinars, and central office administrators participate in the school webinars. This is important so that all of the key leaders involved in the school improvement process are receiving the same message, and there is a connection between the schools and the central office.

The academic review process has been beneficial. Following the Virginia model for academic review, a review is conducted at all Tier II and Tier III schools biannually. The review is conducted by the assistant superintendent, content directors, and the director of research. The reviews typically are conducted over two days and focus on how data is being used, professional development, time and scheduling, and curriculum alignment. Strengths and weaknesses are identified, as well as areas that need additional support. The division focus is on the monitoring of curriculum and assessment because, as the superintendent stated, “What is monitored, gets done.”

The school board is kept informed through monthly reports presented by the directors in the department of curriculum and instruction. Schools in improvement also present monthly updates to the school board following their monthly governance meetings. Since school board meetings are broadcast on a local television channel, the community has access to the information.

With graduation rate being added as a reporting category for AYP, two school board policies were modified. The requirement that all students graduating from Portsmouth Public Schools have a 2.0 GPA and at least six additional credits above the state requirement were eliminated effective with the 2010-11 school year.

When asked if the central office has redefined its role in recent years, the superintendent responded “absolutely.” Prior to his arrival eight years ago, the role of the central office was to tell the schools what to do. The department of curriculum and instruction was redesigned and directors are now responsible for curriculum from kindergarten through grade 12. For example, the director of mathematics is responsible for the K-12 math curriculum. Each director has specialists assigned to them who spend the majority of their time in the schools working with teachers and students. This has created an environment in which the schools and the central office working collegially for the betterment of all students. “The principals want the specialists in the schools. We now consider the central office to be a service provider,” according to the superintendent. Overall, the division has become “more student-oriented in terms of our focus,” stated the assistant superintendent.

While the superintendent and directors in the department of curriculum and instruction are active participants in the school improvement process, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction is the primary central office contact for the schools in improvement.

### ► Instructional Leadership

Robert Marzano has identified leadership as the most important aspect of school reform. In Portsmouth, instructional leadership begins with the principal of each school. While the department of curriculum and instruction plays a major role in instructional leadership within the division, the ultimate responsibility for instructional leadership resides with the building principal.

The expectation that the principal is the instructional leader of the school is embedded in the principal’s annual evaluation conducted by the superintendent. The evaluation addresses a number of areas focusing on instructional leadership, including how data is being used in the school to inform instructional decisions, how the principal monitors curriculum and instruction in the classroom as well as the implementation of strategies gleaned from professional development activities, and how professional development is planned based on the focus areas identified by the data.

Shared leadership is embedded in both schools and the leadership teams are an integral part of the decision-making process. As one principal stated, “it is critical to identify key leaders in the building and make them a part of the leadership team.” Another principal stated that it is important to “expand the leadership capacity of the teachers and to build a culture where everyone has a say in the decision-making process.” According to Todd Whitaker, shared leadership contributes to teacher buy-in and teacher buy-in begins with the critical few in the school buying-in. As one principal stated, “you must be strategic – the leadership team becomes the voice for what we are doing and it is critical that the leadership team is the first to buy-in to what we are doing.” “I am the cheerleader – pushing and driving the focus.”

Both principals stated, however, that the principal is the one who is ultimately accountable for what happens in the school. The school improvement specialist added that “listening has created dialogue and our administrators are modeling this, which has created an open conversation.”

## ► Vision and Mission

Both schools in improvement have focused the revision of their mission and vision on student learning and the monitoring of student learning. This focus on the students and student learning has played a major role in the schools', as well as the division's, improvement efforts. While, the vision and mission statements tend to be broad in nature, the superintendent identifies specific, measureable goals each year. For example, last year the superintendent set a goal of an 88% pass rate on all SOL assessments. This goal was communicated to the students at each school, and their buy-in to the goal is further evidence that the schools are keeping their focus on student learning and involving all of the stakeholders in the improvement effort.

## ► Change

Both schools in improvement stated that "reculturing" has been occurring in their schools. It began with challenging the belief system of the teachers and administrators in the building. Schools were in a losing culture and did not see how they could win. Cultural awareness was seen as critical to the closing of the achievement gap, not only within the two schools, but throughout the division. Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA) and the work of Ruby Payne played key roles in changing the culture of expectations. While new teachers were hired and salaries increased, it was not until schools throughout the division began to see victories (schools earning accreditation, increasing student achievement) that the culture began to change. According to the superintendent, "once they get there, they don't want to go back." Also, having key people in the right positions has made the change initiatives easier and the processes go more smoothly.

Data has been the driving force behind the change in culture. Courageous discussions have been held with some teachers about the urgency for doing something different in order to help students succeed. Change continues to evolve and is a work in progress.

Finally, school improvement incentives were created for schools – going above and beyond by meeting goals established by the division. As previously stated, individual goals were set for SOL scores. Financial incentives were given for making improvements and to schools that made accreditation and met AYP. Principals and the building leadership team determined how the money would be used. The one condition was that the money had to be used for improving student achievement.

## ► Building and Maintaining Relationships

Research indicates that relationships are important in reform efforts. In Portsmouth, and specifically the two schools in improvement, intentional decisions have been made to build and maintain relationships. For example, at one school vertical teams were established to improve communication between grade levels and to enhance instructional planning. Team building activities have taken place in the schools and teacher input was solicited concerning what was working well and what areas need to improve. This promoted teacher buy-in to the change process that was necessary for the schools to move forward. Recognition programs were established to celebrate teacher accomplishments and sharing of what is working in the classrooms has helped build better working relationships between teachers.

A focus at both schools, as well as the division, has been on improving relationships with the entire school community, especially parents. For example, one school is conducting a program (PESA: Parent Expectations, Student Achievement) to help train parents and strengthen the family role in their child's education. Another school has initiated a similar program aimed at grandparents, since a number of students in their school are being raised by grandparents.

## ► Data Analysis and Use

As previously stated, data is a focus and the driving force behind the decision-making process throughout the school division. When teachers return to work in August, they receive disaggregated SOL data from the previous spring which is used to develop a 30-day model of corrective instruction to strengthen the knowledge and skills of students as they begin a new school year. Included in the disaggregated data is the Student Performance by Question (SPBQ) that is used to identify the specific skills and knowledge that need to be addressed with individual students. SOL conferences are held with students to make them aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses.

Schools in Tier I and II administer nine-week benchmark assessments, while schools in Tier III administer benchmark assessments every 4.5 weeks. This data is analyzed during grade level and cross grade level meetings and used to make instructional and remediation decisions. In addition, all teachers have been trained in using data software (Pearson) and analyzing data.

In the classroom, teachers color-code the names of students for easier identification and for assignment into one of three groups: prerequisite, targeted, and enhanced. One significant change in the culture of the schools is that teachers now want data and use it in the planning and delivery of instruction.

As previously stated, data is a critical component of the principal evaluation process. In addition, principals use data in the evaluation of teachers. Areas such as teacher attendance data, student achievement data, classroom management, planning and preparation, remediation planning, utilization of a variety of instruction strategies, and parent communication are all part of the teacher evaluation process.

### ► **Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**

To ensure curriculum alignment, content specialists from the department of curriculum and instruction have been assigned to the schools. This focus is ensuring that the “curriculum is being taught the way it was intended to be taught and that it is being taught with fidelity.” At the beginning of the year, each teacher receives a CD with all of the curriculum and pacing guides, as well as the test blueprints. The content specialists and building administrators monitor the implementation of the curriculum in the classroom.

At the building level, a number of practices are in place to ensure curriculum alignment. These practices include, but are not limited to, checking lesson plans, instituting common planning time, providing monthly core area staff development, weekly grade level team meetings, and time for cross-curricular planning.

The focus at one of the schools in improvement is on the development of common assessments and lesson plans that address guided and independent practice. Teachers are expected to group students into teacher-directed groups, teacher assistant-directed groups, and technology-driven groups. The other school in improvement is emphasizing formative assessment. Teachers have been provided with a checklist that helps them incorporate various formative assessment strategies into their lessons.

Benchmark testing and the Pearson testing programs are used to measure student learning against the standards. The data from these tests is then used by the teachers to inform their instructional decisions.

Several new initiatives have been implemented in the schools to address student needs in reading and math. One of the programs, My Sidewalks (Pearson), is an intervention used by reading specialists and special education teachers to assist struggling readers. Another program that has been used is Classworks, a technology intervention program for reading and math. Additional programs that are in use in the schools are I Can Learn and Fast Math. While the programs have met with mixed results, both central office administrators and the principals noted that teacher quality was still the key to helping students achieve in the classroom.

In order to monitor curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the classroom, building administrators use a combination of formal classroom observations and classroom walk-throughs. Cumulative data from the observations is shared with the faculty and used to make decisions regarding professional development.

### ► **Professional Development**

Portsmouth City Schools has a comprehensive staff development program for all teachers and administrators. Division-wide professional development activities are planned during the summer. During the fall and spring semesters, a Professional Growth Cooperative Model has been developed, and teachers can choose which trainings they would like to attend. The training is provided by the city’s teachers and central office staff. A website has been developed to communicate information regarding professional development activities to teachers and administrators. All teachers in Portsmouth are required to participate in a minimum of twelve hours of professional development annually; however, new teachers and teachers identified as needing additional assistance receive more than twelve hours of professional development training during the year. Also, principals have the autonomy to plan activities to meet needs that are unique to their building. Principals are responsible for ensuring that

teachers are implementing the strategies gleaned from the trainings in their classrooms.

While professional development plans are based on nine-week benchmark tests data, the schools in improvement can request specific training for their identified needs. This training might come from the content specialists or from outside speakers and trainers and might occur after school or during the school day. For example, Title I schools participated in training dealing with the development of a master schedule to help the schools find common planning time for their teachers. As the superintendent stated, "If it is good for the two schools (in improvement), we do it for all schools. The difference is the intensity of staff development at the two schools (in improvement)."

While the focus of professional development is on the instructional staff (teachers and teacher assistants), non-professional employees do receive training throughout the year based on their specific assignments. For example, the operations department has started an in-house GED program for its employees.

### ► Time to Meet, Plan, and Train

Portsmouth City Schools has made a concerted effort to provide teachers with time to meet, plan, and train. As stated previously, a consultant was brought in to work with all Title I schools in an effort to find time during the school day for teachers to meet and plan. While some of the schools now have common planning, others do not; however, for the schools without common planning, time has been built into the schedule that allows grade level teams to meet at least twice a week during the school day. In addition, professional planning days (approximately one per nine weeks) have been incorporated into the division calendar. Early release days during the high school exam period are also used for professional development activities. To every extent possible, the division tries to keep teacher workdays as teacher workdays, but in some instances these are used for professional development.

### ► Remediation

Remediation in all schools is data-driven. At the beginning of the year, a 30-Day Corrective Instructional Program is developed based on the previous spring's SOL test data, including the Student Performance by Question. Based on this data, an instructional plan is developed. For example, if number and number sense were identified weaknesses on the previous spring's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Math SOL test, then this is incorporated into the 30-Day Plan for 4<sup>th</sup> graders at the beginning of the school year. Instruction is provided to all students and incorporated into their math class. Throughout the year weekly classroom assessments, 4.5 week benchmark data, and nine-week benchmark data are used by teachers to develop corrective instruction/remediation strategies for all students falling below the 80% threshold.

Both schools in improvement have a daily 45-minute intervention block where instruction is delivered by the classroom teacher, content specialist, or encore teachers. During this time, "non-intervention" students receive enrichment/enhancement opportunities. In addition, both schools have an after school remediation program for students.

The schools also work with several community agencies to provide intervention on issues involving attendance and discipline.

### ► Non-Core Subjects

The research indicates that school reform models reduce the variables in a school to focus on an identified core, specifically the core academic subjects of reading, math, science and social studies. In Portsmouth City Schools, a concerted effort has been made to maintain the non-core subjects (art, music, physical education, etc.) as an integral part of the overall instructional program. Known as encore teachers, these teachers are involved with the core subject teachers in the analysis of data and become part of the instructional team. In order to support the core subject teachers and to reinforce what the students are learning in those classes, the encore teachers become a part of the instructional team by integrating key skills and knowledge from those classes into their program. For example, the art teacher works with students on developing nonlinguistic representations in order to support instruction in the social studies and science classrooms.

**► Recognizing Student Achievement**

A critical component of effective schools is the recognition of student achievement. A number of programs are in place to recognize student achievement throughout the school division. These programs include the National Elementary Honor Society, Principal Stars, Superintendent Stars, and Student of the Month. The BUGS (Bring Up Grades Program) recognizes students who have improved their grades from the previous grading period. Some schools have initiated a Hall of Fame, where pictures of all students meeting the benchmark goal of 88 on all four benchmark assessments are hung on a wall in the school. There is a 600 Club for all students who score a 600 on any SOL test. The recognition of student achievement is emphasized in all schools throughout the division.

## ► Superintendent, Central Office, and School Board Involvement

School improvement is an important focus in the school division. While primary school (K-2) and the intermediate school (3-6) are in school improvement, all seven elementary schools develop school improvement plans. As part of the process, each principal meets with the school board to share the plan. The attitude of the superintendent was cited as critically important to creating an attitude of improvement across the division. There is a school division team that is connected to each of the schools. All principals in the division meet monthly; however, all seven elementary principals meet for an hour before the general principal's meeting. The focus of that meeting is instruction and student achievement. This regular meeting promotes a sense of shared responsibility and an increased level of collaboration. As a result of these meetings, the principals agreed to standardize some practices being implemented in the school in improvement. These practices were labeled by the superintendent as being non-negotiable. Each school was required to develop a Literacy Plan. Part of that plan included Words their Way and Making Meaning, which were implemented in all schools. In addition, all curriculum maps were revised to identify gaps in the implementation of the standards. According to the superintendent, "we got to where we are because of the work of our principals."

As part of the school improvement process, the assistant superintendent and the director of federal programs attend all school improvement team meetings at the two schools in improvement, with the superintendent joining them whenever his schedule allows. The assistant superintendent stated that "the schools do not see us as intruders, but rather as part of the team. I think this has been a critical piece of the process." He added that the school improvement process has involved "mutual respect" and that "the collaboration in our division would make the state envious."

While the assistant superintendent and the director of federal programs are active participants in the school improvement process, the director of federal programs is the primary central office contact for the schools in improvement. They have been pleased with the way "the school staff has bought into what we are trying to do in the school improvement process. Discussions have been really open with the faculties which have helped us in the change process because they were able to air their concerns."

School board communication has been on an "as needed" basis. The school board has been more interested in the perceptions of the two schools in improvement than the overall school improvement process. Each principal has presented their school improvement plan to the school board and the board has been particularly impressed with the cooperation between the two principals. As the superintendent stated, however, "we are tackling this as an elementary issue, not just as an issue at these two schools." He added, "Our board trusts us to make decisions. There is a mutual respect between the board and the superintendent and the superintendent and the principals."

When asked if the central office redefined its role in the school improvement process, the superintendent commented that "we provide the mechanisms for conversations to happen." According to the central office administrators, "we are out in the buildings all of the time." This philosophy was not prevalent until the current superintendent came on board. Finally, the central office administrators stated that it was "intentional" that they were in the two schools in improvement last year on a regular basis, but this year it has become more "natural."

## ► Instructional Leadership

The expectation of the school division is that the principal is the instructional leader of the school; however, a shared leadership approach is now emerging, with the school leadership team assuming a greater role in instructional leadership. While the school leadership team has been a part of the culture of the primary school, it was not until 2009-2010 that a school leadership team was formed at the intermediate School. According to the director of federal programs, it was "the school improvement process that pushed the intermediate school to form a school leadership team." An emerging theme at the two schools in improvement was a more collaborative style of instructional leadership.

Both principals agreed that instructional leadership begins with the principal and the assistant principal. The principal of the intermediate school stated that he is "trying to institute a spirit of team work where the teachers take more responsibility – my philosophy is to empower people and to develop shared leadership." He is in the process of identifying ways to expand the core teacher leaders and thus build leadership capacity. At the intermediate school, the leadership team consists of grade level representatives, the administration, and representatives

from special education, resource teachers, and a guidance counselor. The formation of the leadership team has provided organization to the school.

At the primary school, a strong school leadership team has been in place for many years and includes grade level chairs and committee chairs. Because grade level chairs rotate on an annual basis, the composition of the leadership team changes each year, thus building more leadership capacity within the school. This has resulted in more teachers being trained in the school improvement process and “helps more people assume a part in school leadership.” The principal added that while there are times where the administration has to make decisions, she tries to use the leadership team, which meets on a monthly basis, as much as possible.

With the exception of the “non-negotiables”, identified earlier, both principals try to solicit input from others when making decision. It has been the development of a shared vision and shared ownership that has helped both schools move forward in the school improvement process.

### ► Vision and Mission

According to the superintendent, “You must get teacher belief systems right in order to move our students forward – getting them on the right seat on the bus heading in the right direction.” Following the Summer Institute, required as part of the Virginia School Improvement Process, both schools revisited their vision and mission statements. At the primary school, the goal is to have all segments of the school community working together for the students. As primary school staff reexamined their vision and mission statements a common theme emerged – “striving for academic excellence” was embedded in both their vision and mission statements. Teachers were now expected to model this on a daily basis.

At the intermediate school, a new principal was hired and began work in July 2010. With a focus on team building and creating a positive school culture, the school is working to improve communication with all members of the school community. A formal review of the school’s mission and vision statements is underway. Each day during the morning announcements, the principal tells the students to “be kind, be safe, and do your best.” As he reminds the students, “the choice is yours.”

Both schools are in the process of developing a set of belief statements around their vision and mission. This was driven in part by the first Teacher Leader Training by the Virginia School Improvement Model which focused on team building. As the principal at the primary stated, it is important to see if “my staff believes what I believe.” Rigor, relevance, and relationships” are the emerging themes in the belief statements at both schools. According to the school improvement coach, “we also began to realize that we needed to focus on all students and not just those with deficits.” Because of the focus on all students, teachers are beginning to identify their prerequisite, target, and enhanced students. As the focus is now on all students, there is a need in both schools to build differentiation into the instructional program. The school improvement coach concluded by stating that “every child can learn given the strengths they bring to the table.”

### ► Change

“Because of school improvement, the two schools have revisited their values and their cultures and have begun to make changes,” stated the director of federal programs. Reculturing has occurred. According to the superintendent, “one school feels completely different than it used to feel.”

Change has been occurring for two reasons – internally, because it is the right thing to do and externally, because of pressure from the school improvement process. While some teachers have been resistant to change, they have accepted the non-negotiable initiatives of the school division. They had the opportunity to be a part of the conversation of school improvement. Because more than 70% of students are on the free lunch program, the faculty had to challenge its belief system concerning student achievement. Teachers discussed high expectations for students and high expectations for themselves in holding students accountable for learning. Through the use of data, teachers examined how their students were doing and realized the students were capable of higher achievement. The superintendent was strong in his view that “you have to examine the belief structure of all staff to make sure you are holding students to high standards.” There are times when “challenging the belief system of faculty comes from the analysis of data and times when a discussion of the belief system must be forced.”

The principal at the primary school noted that reculturing began four years ago and the school is now at a point where they are “tinkering” with making changes to improve achievement. The principal added that “we did not wait until we were in improvement” to begin the change process. An assistant principal was hired who had experience as a reading specialist and had been a Reading First coach with the Virginia Department of Education. Reading First was implemented and the advances that are occurring are a result of the implementation of the program beginning in kindergarten. In addition, four years ago, the school board funded a reading specialist position for the school.

At the intermediate school, “reculturing” has begun under the leadership of the new principal. As he stated, “we are building positive relationships and creating a warm, welcoming environment.” They are reviewing the vision and mission statements, implementing the non-negotiable curriculum and instructional changes, utilizing an administrative walkthrough observation plan, and examining student data on a more thorough basis – all examples of reculturing.

### ► Building and Maintaining Relationships

Research indicates that relationships are important in any reform effort. Both schools in improvement have made a concerted effort to develop and maintain positive relationships with the faculty, students, parents, and the community while initiating the school improvement process. Both schools send folders home on a weekly basis which provide communication from the teacher to the parent about their child as well as the opportunity to communicate school-wide information. Each school has an active, involved Parent-Teacher Organization.

In order to support their efforts in developing positive relationships with parents, the teachers at the intermediate school are required to document a minimum of two positive contacts per classroom per month. By the end of first semester, the principal planned to have surveyed all parents to ascertain their thoughts about the school. At the primary school, the administration has made a concerted effort to involve parents on committees and in the school improvement process. Part of the agenda at each PTO meeting is a discussion of their school improvement efforts. Both schools reported that volunteers play a critical role in their school. Also, Community Nights are held as part of their Title I efforts.

According to the school improvement coach and the ICT facilitator, the administration at both schools has done an excellent job of building positive relationships within their school and with the entire school community. It was noted that the principal at Marion Primary, who has been an administrator at the school for nine years, knows the names of all students and knows something about each one of them. This has gone a long way in developing positive relationships with all students. Finally, the school improvement coach stated that teachers at both schools now refer to the students as “our students” not “my students.”

### ► Data Analysis and Use

Benchmark testing is done in grades 1-6 and is done three times a year. Teachers take the data, analyze it, and make instructional decisions. Both schools in improvement have data days where the teachers analyze formal and informal assessments, benchmark data, PALS, iStation data, and AIMS. In addition, the intermediate school analyzes the SOL Student Performance by Question data. As a result of the data analysis, good conversations have been held in both schools about how the material was taught and not just the fact that teachers had covered all of the material. Upon reflection, teachers have begun to realize that since the students did not master the material the way it was originally taught, different instruction needs to occur to help all students master the material. Grade level teams are now having instructional conversations about the data and planning their interventions (both school-wide interventions as well as interventions for individual students). While the majority of the data analysis has been done at the school level, the assistant superintendent and the director of federal programs have become more involved in the data analysis at the two schools in improvement.

Since the primary school is involved in the Response to Intervention (RTI) model through a separate grant, teachers have been trained in how to deliver different instructional strategies. As a result, they believe they are getting better at providing instruction that meets the needs of the students.

This year, both schools have begun using Interactive Achievement. The school improvement coach has taken the lead role in the training for teachers and the implementation of Interactive Achievement. One of the noted advantages of this program is developing and maintaining a bank of formative assessment test items for teacher use.

Finally, the primary school realized that the PALS data they were using was not providing enough information for instructional decisions. Thus, they developed a skills-based assessment to provide additional information for grades K-2. This data will follow the students to the intermediate school and will be used for placement in grade 3.

### ► Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Under the leadership of the central office administration, a division-wide literacy plan has been developed and a great deal of time and effort has gone into enhancing the division's curriculum maps. According to the assistant superintendent, "one of our quick wins was initiating a reading comprehension plan and instituting 30 minutes of reading into the school day." This was one of the non-negotiables.

In addition, the development of weekly pacing guides that focus on particular skills has been a focus of the schools. While the division had six-week curriculum maps, the teachers believed they needed a weekly focus. The weekly pacing guides were further broken down to include the individual components of the lesson. The focus at the intermediate school has been on math, while the primary school has focused on reading and math. Included in their efforts have been the development of pre-tests and the use of the learning plan grid from the Teacher Leader Training. The learning plan grid references target, prerequisite, and enhanced objectives. The utilization of pre- and post-tests will assist teachers in this effort.

Another area of focus at the primary school has been on getting all students exposed to a grade level text. The teachers at the school received a flash key with all of the SOL resources, and they are now required to include the essential knowledge and skills on their lesson plans. Teachers are currently developing common grade-level assessments aligned with the SOLs. Interactive Achievement, a new initiative this year, is greatly helping this endeavor. The administration also conducts classroom walk-throughs as they monitor curriculum and instruction. A particular focus this year is on the level of student engagement and getting away from the widespread use of worksheets.

At the intermediate schools, lesson plans are checked on a weekly basis to ensure alignment with the curriculum. Also, the "Power Walk-Through" is used to conduct classroom walk-throughs. The data is downloaded and the information is shared with individual teachers. The focus is to identify patterns of instruction. Once the data is compiled, trends are shared with the entire faculty. The data is also used by the leadership team to develop instructional plans. The use of "Power Walk-Through" is new this year and was initiated by the principal who is new to the building.

According to the central office administration, "the division-wide benchmark data have made the curriculum maps living and breathing documents."

### ► Professional Development

In Smyth County, professional development has been a combination of division-wide training and schools identifying their own needs and providing the necessary training to their staffs. While some teachers and administrators attend conferences and workshops, the bulk of the professional development training is now brought directly to the schools. According to the superintendent, "we are getting to the point where professional development is not a single event, but an ongoing process." A lot of dialogue has occurred between the schools and the central office about the specific needs of each school and what is the best way to provide that training to the faculty and staff.

Recent professional development training has focused on how to group students for instruction and how to teach students in the different groups. It was noted that the learning plan grid which was part of the teacher leader training for the schools in improvement last year has been helping the teachers plan for instructing students in the various groups. Teachers have also received training in how to manage data, how to use post-test data to make additional instructional decisions, and how to create literacy stations. Additional training was provided to teachers

with the purchase of iStation and Interactive Achievement. Some of the training has involved instructional aides, but this has not occurred on each occasion.

The schools in improvement have received training in how to use the PALS data to make instructional decisions. This training was provided by TTAC. Support from the central office has included making monies available for training within individual schools.

### ► Time to Meet, Plan, and Train

Both schools in improvement have formal processes for analyzing data and grade level teams now have extended time to meet. This was accomplished through the hiring of substitutes, using aides to cover classes, meeting during professional development days, and making some changes to the master schedule. The teachers are seeing the value of looking at data and having instructional conversations. At the intermediate school, teachers have 45 minutes of planning time, four days a week. One day is for common planning, while the other days are flexible and can be used to meet with their grade level teams or for individual planning. In addition, teachers have 30 minutes of daily planning while their students are in their physical education class. At Marion Primary, the teachers have 40 minutes of planning, three days a week, in addition to a daily 30-minute block while their students are in physical education classes.

Vertical articulation meetings are taking place in both the primary and intermediate school, as well as between all elementary schools. Teachers recognize the need to understand how the standards connect and how curriculum scaffolds the learning.

### ► Remediation Efforts

The intermediate school piloted iStation during the 2009-10 school year. During 2010-11, fourth and fifth grade students who have not passed the reading SOL are being targeted and are receiving instruction through iStation on a weekly basis. Another program being used for remediation is Soaring to Success.

At the primary school, pocket charts have been developed where teachers place students into one of three tiers (prerequisite, targeted, and enhanced) and develop strategies for remediation. During the last week of each marking period, enhanced and targeted students receive enrichment instruction, while prerequisite students receive more intense instruction/remediation. As the principal stated, "We want to make sure our students are getting corrective intervention." In addition, a "mountain math" program has been instituted that focuses on a daily, cumulative review of key math concepts. This supports the research that distributed practice assists in retention of information.

Another program that has been initiated is Powerup, an after school pullout program associated with RTI. This program, based on student needs, provides descriptive instruction to identified students and is delivered by Title I, reading, special education teachers, and two instructional aides. Research-based instructional strategies are an integral part of the program. Finally, teachers are using information from iStations to assist them in identifying the skills that each student needs to work on.

At both schools, AIMSware is being used to determine if the intervention is working and if the students are making the necessary gains. The identification of students and the monitoring of how interventions are working are two major changes that have taken place this year.

### ► Non-Core Subjects

While the focus of the two schools in improvement has been on the core subject areas, especially reading and math, the non-core subjects remain an integral part of the instructional program. In addition, non-core teachers support the school improvement process by covering classes, going into the classrooms, supporting the core teachers when students need to be pulled for additional assistance, as well as incorporating key concepts from the core subjects into their lessons.

**► Recognizing Student Achievement**

The primary school has instituted a Character Education Discipline Program for the 2010-11 school year. Student recognitions include birthdays, six-week achievement, and students meeting their Accelerated Reader goals.

At the intermediate school, similar programs are in place. In addition, a Manners Club was started this year, and the school is focusing on a school-wide discipline program that focuses on positive discipline.

This study involved schools across a variety of geographic regions within the Commonwealth of Virginia. They included a rural school division bounded by a larger city (Amherst County), a small urban school division (Danville), a small city school division (Franklin), a large urban school division (Portsmouth), and a rural school division not bounded by a larger city (Smyth County).

Each of these divisions had different levels of resources and different needs. While it was rare for school divisions or individual schools to be doing the same thing, there were sixteen common themes that were readily apparent. Each of these themes will be briefly explored. The common themes included:

- ▶ School Board Knowledge and Support
- ▶ Importance of Vision
- ▶ Recognizing the DNA of the School
- ▶ Intentionality
- ▶ Focused, Involved Central Office
- ▶ Data, Data, and More Data
- ▶ Attitude Challenge and Change
- ▶ School-Based Administrative Leadership
- ▶ Expanding Leadership Capacity in the School
- ▶ Communication Structure with Transparency
- ▶ Research-Based Instructional Strategies
- ▶ Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
- ▶ Planning, Meeting, and Training Time for Teachers
- ▶ SOL are the Floor, Not the Ceiling
- ▶ Remediation Program Based on Identified Criteria
- ▶ Non-Negotiables

### ▶ School Board Knowledge and Support

In every division, the school board was aware of the school improvement process. In some divisions, board members were more actively involved. For example, board members attended school-based data days to learn more about student achievement in individual schools. For the most part, however, school board knowledge was provided through formal school board presentations by the superintendent, central office staff, or individual principals from the schools in improvement.

In every division, school boards understood that the schools in improvement had individual needs to address. They were supportive of providing additional resources in the form of personnel, material, or equipment within their budget constraints.

In no division was there a school board that attempted to place blame for a school in improvement. Each superintendent was appreciative of the school board focus on improvement and the board's willingness to help identify and support an improvement model that would increase student learning.

### ▶ Importance of Vision

The Breaking Ranks research indicates that one of the major reasons for school failure is the lack of a compelling vision. In each division and in each school, there was a realization that vision was not driving the schools in improvement. There was recognition that vision was critically important.

In some divisions and schools, school staff started over and reconstituted the vision statement from the ground up. They used data and a process to look at where they wanted to be and how to get there. They involved faculty

## Common Themes

in developing the vision statement and to determine what needed to be done for the vision to become a reality. The vision became a driving force.

In some divisions and schools, the determination was made that the vision statement itself was fine. The problem was that the vision, while good on paper, was not the centerpiece around which decisions were made. Faculty often did not know the vision or how decisions around the vision were made. In these divisions and schools, the challenge became one of motivating teachers to take the vision seriously. Conversations with faculty about the vision, its meaning, and its implementation forced a needed refocus on what was important.

Whether the vision was reconstituted or reenergized, there was evidence that the focus of the vision was drilled down to the individual student. Each student was important, and everyone in the division and school needed to be accountable for the success of all.

### ► Recognizing the DNA of the School

Every school has its own DNA – every school is unique and different. What works in one school may or may not be successfully replicated in another school. While each of the divisions implemented division-wide initiatives in which all schools participated, each of the superintendents recognized that each of the schools in improvement had special needs and issues. In each division, the schools in improvement were treated uniquely. Each of the schools had the opportunity to create a professional development plan based on school data. Each of the schools had remediation programs that were developed around school-based needs. The schools in improvement were not expected to be like other schools, but to analyze their data and to make decisions around that data.

### ► Intentionality

Superintendents, central office staff, and principals were very intentional about what they did. They utilized what could be referred to as conscious intentionality. After identifying what was important to do within the school, they created a system that focused on those issues. Few things were left to chance or were done randomly.

In many cases, the intentionality was reinforced through monitoring. Such monitoring might be through lesson plans, meeting agendas, meeting minutes, interviews, and observations. There was little doubt about what was important in the schools.

### ► Focused, Involved Central Office

In all of the school divisions, the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, and the director of instruction were extremely knowledgeable of school reform efforts. In some divisions, the superintendent was more directly involved than in others. In some cases, the superintendent was very visible in the schools in improvement, even attending some of the school-based leadership team meetings. In others, the superintendent met on a regular basis with the principal for a discussion of the reform efforts. In every division, it was obvious that the superintendent was able to share details about the individual school improvement efforts.

In addition to the superintendent, there was at least one other person on the superintendent's staff who was directly connected to the school improvement process. In four of the school divisions, that person was an assistant superintendent. In the remaining division which was small, there was no assistant superintendent and a very small central office. In this case, the individual was a director of instruction who performed the duties of an assistant superintendent.

In all of the divisions, it was evident there was a great deal of trust and respect between the superintendent and the assistant superintendent/director. A process was developed and followed that clearly connected the central office to the schools in improvement.

In all cases, school-based data was the driving force for what occurred in the schools in improvement. The central office staff made an effort to get the right people in the right roles to initiate change and to provide assistance to the schools.

## ► Data, Data, and More Data

All of the schools in improvement were data driven. Some schools had data days. Some hired teachers in the summer to analyze data and share with other teachers at the beginning of the year. Some schools had literal data walls with data on each student. Some schools had data notebooks with historical SOL data for each student. All schools utilized benchmark assessments to measure student achievement around the standards. Schools used PALS data, data from instructional software, reading assessment data, attendance data, discipline data, and observation data to determine intervention strategies for students as well, as intervention programs for teachers. All principals were evaluated in some capacity based on the data.

All schools had a process for examining the data. Results from the data analysis led to curriculum changes in pacing guides. Students were grouped and re-grouped or placed in intervention programs based on the data. Data was used to generate conversations among teachers around each individual student.

## ► Attitude Challenge and Change

In all schools, there were challenges when the school was first identified as needing improvement. The blame game appeared in all of the schools. The division superintendent and immediate staff handled these issues following their board policy, but in every case, the issue of attitude was challenged and eventually changed.

In most of the schools, there was no prevailing attitude that students cannot learn. Instead, since most of the schools had a high percentage of students who were identified as “at risk,” teachers took a very protective view of their students. In some cases, teachers even attempted to shelter students from many of the day-do-day problems they faced.

This often led to lowering expectations for students. “How can students learn when they come to us so far behind? Why should we assign homework when no one is at home to help them?” It was almost as though some teachers saw the home environment as the cause of low achievement. This was the attitude that had to be challenged and changed.

There were several consistent approaches to dealing with this problem. One was the renewed focus on vision and forcing conversations about individual students and the importance of each student. A second was faculty discussions around topics like “why are we here, what is our responsibility?” A third was a hard, close examination of individual school data. A fourth was a hard look at instructional strategies. Finally, when one of these four approaches did not work, the principal had to have a “courageous conversation” with the faculty member about what was acceptable and unacceptable professional behavior. While these conversations occurred to some degree in all schools, the majority of faculty members recognized the need to increase expectations and to expect more from their students. The faculty never lost the caring aspect: they simply added increased expectations for student learning.

Ultimately, each school and school division came to realize that school improvement was not going to occur until everyone was on board. As Dr. Redding states, “The ultimate goal in school improvement is for the people attached to the school to drive its continuous improvement for the sake of their own children and students.”

## ► School-Based Administrative Leadership

While the role of the superintendent and the central office staff was important, in all schools it was apparent that the principal and the school-based leadership team played a pivotal role in the improvement of student achievement. All of the principals were seen as instructional leaders by the superintendent. The superintendent had high expectations for the building level leaders. Generally, the process of school improvement was linked to the principal evaluation process. Principals met regularly with the superintendent and staff to discuss school issues.

In all schools, the principal had a process in place to monitor school initiatives. While there was no consistent monitoring plan across all schools, examples included requirements for unit/department meeting agendas and minutes, lesson plans, data walls, weekly instructional meetings, and classroom observations.

## Common Themes

It was also evident, however, that the principal had developed a strong school-based leadership team. This leadership team was generally composed of unit leaders, department heads, resource staff, and a central office representative. In some cases, but not all, parents and community representatives were involved. The team met on a regular basis, had an agenda, and provided minutes for the meetings.

### ► Expanding Leadership Capacity in the School

While leadership teams were an important part of the school improvement process, there was recognition that additional leaders needed to be developed within the school. How school divisions and schools accomplished this task differed, but expanding leadership capacity was an important component of school improvement.

In a few divisions, the superintendent played a key role by involving assistant principals in division meetings. The superintendents saw the need to prepare assistant principals to be future principals. The expectation of assistant principals in these meetings was that they would be actively involved in the improvement process. In other divisions and schools, the principal was responsible for expanding leadership capacity by using unit leaders, department chairs, and school-based coaches to accept responsibility for certain aspects of the improvement process.

### ► Communication Structure with Transparency

In each of the school divisions, there was a clearly defined communication structure that was transparent from the school board down to the individual teacher and to parents. School board members were kept informed, and principals often made presentations to the school board. Principals communicated directly with the superintendent and staff and were engaged in two-way conversations around school improvement. Principals established both formal and informal communication channels within the schools by creating common planning time for teachers that resulted in regular meetings with agendas and minutes. Faculty meetings provided teachers with opportunities to share teaching strategies that worked. Web sites were restructured to include more information about what was happening at the school and how the school was doing. PTA meetings included information about school improvement.

There was no effort to hide the fact that a school was in an improvement cycle. Quite the contrary appeared to be the case – the schools were proud of the efforts they were making and willingly shared the plan and strategies within the division and community.

### ► Research-Based Instructional Strategies

All school divisions and schools in improvement emphasized the need to focus on research-based instructional strategies. While the approach differed, the emphasis on using effective teaching strategies was consistent. Some divisions/schools had identified only a few research-based strategies which all teachers were expected to use on a regular basis, while others identified a large number of strategies. Regardless of the case, training was provided to all teachers in the use of the strategies. Some divisions/schools had the strategies posted throughout the division, and, in one case, posted in the school board meeting room. Principals looked for evidence that the strategies were being used during observations including walk-throughs.

All schools in improvement identified a research-based reading program which was being implemented. While the programs differed from division to division, all provided training on program implementation.

### ► Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

The alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment was a major component of school reform in all divisions and in all schools in improvement. In every situation, division staff noted that when schools went into the improvement process, there was a lack of tight curriculum alignment. While lip service was given to alignment, it really did not exist at the level necessary. A major effort was made to ensure that the written, taught, and tested curriculum were congruent.

Curriculum guides, curriculum maps, and pacing guides were developed or rewritten for each of the schools. Central office staff and teachers, with assistance from the State Department Web site, did the bulk of the work. As noted earlier, research-based instructional strategies were identified, and teachers were taught how to utilize these strategies.

Formative assessments to measure the SOL were developed. While the timing of assessments differed from every three weeks in one division to every nine weeks in another division, the assessments were consistently administered. Data from the assessments were provided to teachers who were expected to use the data to re-teach concepts and skills or to place struggling students into a remediation program.

A monitoring process was implemented in all schools to ensure that all three components were implemented with fidelity. In all divisions, the superintendents and central office staffs noted the importance of ensuring true curriculum alignment.

### ► **Planning, Meeting, and Training Time for Teachers**

All schools in improvement revised their daily schedule to provide common planning time for teachers which allowed both horizontal and vertical curriculum discussions. While there was no consistent schedule, a common planning time existed in all the schools. Some teachers met weekly to discuss curriculum and instructional issues. Some met weekly to discuss individual students. Some met weekly in the data room to determine grouping patterns. Some groups of teachers met more than once a week. In each case, agendas and minutes were provided to principals and often, principals or coaches met with a team of teachers.

### ► **SOL are the Floor, Not the Ceiling**

In each school division and in each school in improvement, the Standards of Learning were the primary emphasis for instruction. Administrators, principals, and teachers were well aware that student achievement on the SOL assessments would determine accreditation and AYP status. However, in all the divisions and schools, a mindset had been established that the SOL were the floor, not the ceiling. Programs such as art, music, and movement education were an important and integral part of the school. The resource teachers in these areas often reinforced academic standards during their instructional time, but all schools continued to offer arts and movement programs because they valued the contribution these programs made to the development of the whole child.

### ► **Remediation Program Based on Identified Criteria**

All schools in improvement had a remediation program. Some were provided after school, while some schools changed their schedule to provide remediation during the day. Some schools offered both during school and after school remediation. Some schools provided assistance by hiring teachers in the afternoon to provide assistance, while some provided assistance during the day or after school with the use of remediation software. Some of the intervention programs focused only on academics, while some used a combination of academics, behavior, and attendance.

There were two common ingredients in all the remediation programs. The first was that the intervention was provided in addition to regular classroom instruction. The second was that there was some type of trigger which identified students for the remedial program. Participation in remediation was not left to individual teacher decision. There was an intentional effort to make sure that all students who exhibited similar achievement or behavior were identified for help. In all cases, students who failed one or more SOL tests the previous year were placed in remediation programs early in the year. In addition, students who did not meet established criteria for the benchmark assessments were also placed in remediation.

## Common Themes

### ▶ Non-Negotiables

One of the most interesting common themes in all schools was the use of non-negotiables. These non-negotiables included school division and school-based models, strategies, techniques, or programs that had to be implemented with fidelity. Examples of non-negotiables include:

- ▶ A specific reading or literacy program
- ▶ Inclusion as a strategy for working with students with disabilities
- ▶ Research-based instructional strategies around which all teachers have been trained
- ▶ Lesson plans or “bell ringers”
- ▶ Division-developed model for school improvement
- ▶ Content specialists sent into the schools each week by the Department of Curriculum and Instruction
- ▶ Benchmark assessments
- ▶ Coaches assigned to each school
- ▶ Remediation plan each nine weeks
- ▶ Professional Learning Communities following the guidelines established by Rick and Becky DuFour
- ▶ Ideas from *Megasystems*, as well as training documents from the Office of School Improvement
- ▶ Professional growth plan for each nine weeks – teacher’s develop their own in conjunction with the principal

In most cases, the non-negotiables were implemented at the division level, but there were examples of school-based non-negotiables. There were instances where principals were given the authority, working with their faculty, to determine that certain programs or initiatives would be followed or implemented in their schools.

The non-negotiables provided structure in the school division and in the schools. In all cases, they were either research-based strategies or models, or they were developed at the division level to provide assistance to principals and teachers.

While none of the schools studied were where they wanted to be in terms of student achievement, all have made progress after being identified as a school in improvement. In all of the schools and divisions, there was a sense of accountability and a commitment to helping students learn. There were no excuses. All recognized and addressed the challenges with a positive attitude and a renewed sense of pride.

The common themes that emerged from the study may provide guidance for other schools in improvement. While each school addressed the common themes in different ways, they all addressed them.

Perhaps the best definition of a teacher is reflected in the following anonymous quote: "You are not a teacher until you can reach inside the minds of your students and convince them they can do something they did not believe they could do. Until then, you are simply a placeholder." Challenging students to create and meet new goals is exciting. Moving from placeholder to teacher is hard work and requires the assistance of many people. The effort to get there, however, is rewarding for all involved. Hopefully, this research will help principals and teachers begin that journey.

## Appendix



The Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership – a PK through grade 16 nonprofit organization – has been given a grant to study five school divisions in the Commonwealth who have made progress in the area of school improvement. The study is designed to determine how each of the school systems were successful in their school improvement endeavors, and document the research for use in a Web-based decision-brief book that illustrates what has worked in the five school divisions.

### Questions for the Research Study

#### ► Central Office Questions

1. How were the superintendent and school board kept informed of the progress of the school?  
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2. What types of regular reports were provided to the superintendent and school board?  
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3. Did central office staff designate a central office contact person for the school? If so, describe the process used by that person to maintain close communication with the school. If not, what process was used to maintain close communication with the school?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Were any school board policies identified as being barriers to continuous school improvement? If so, give examples.  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. How often did central office staff meet with school staff to discuss the school's progress?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What steps did the division take to ensure curriculum alignment?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. How did the central office approach professional development within the school(s) in improvement? Did staff participate in division activities or was a unique professional development plan developed for the school(s)?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. What professional development was provided for staff – teacher assistants, secretaries, custodians, cafeteria staff, bus drivers, etc.?  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. What technology, training, and support were provided to facilitate the school's data management needs?  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. Michael Fullan argues there is a difference between “tinkering” with change and “reculturing”, which involves changing norms, values, vision, relationships, etc. Would you describe the change in the school(s) as tinkering or reculturing? Give examples.  
\_\_\_\_\_

11. While team leadership may exist in a school, WHO is the instructional leader in the school? Give examples.

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12. Were any surveys used to measure teacher, parent, community, and/or student perceptions of the school?

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13. How did the central office redefine its role in the school improvement process?

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14. Did any staff members have to be removed or demoted? If so, how was it handled?

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### ► School-Based Questions

15. Was there a need to review your vision/mission statements? If so, how was this accomplished?

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16. How did the vision affect your school improvement effort?

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17. What was the incentive for the school improvement initiative: external influence, internal influence, or a combination? Give examples.

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18. Robert Marzano identifies leadership as the most important aspect of school reform. Where does leadership reside in your school, i.e., principal, team leaders, committee chairs, central office staff, leadership team? If your answer is not an individual, who comprised the team?

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19. Describe the decision-making structure within your school. How was the central office connected and how were teachers, parents, and the community connected to the structure?

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20. What data was used and how did the use of data drive the development of the school improvement plan? How were teachers trained in the use of the data?

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21. What specific changes were made to the curriculum, instruction, and/or assessment as a result of data analysis?

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22. Give examples of how you created time for teachers to meet, plan, and train.

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**Appendix**

23. Research indicates that relationships are important in reform efforts. How did you maintain and build positive relationships with faculty, students, parents, and the community while initiating the school improvement process?

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24. How were parents involved in the school improvement effort? Give examples.

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25. The research indicates that school reform models reduce the variables in a school to focus on an identified core. How would you define the core? If the core was defined as academic (reading, math, science, social studies), how did you handle concerns about the focus being too narrow?

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26. How did you address concerns related to or provide instruction in art, music, movement, etc.?

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27. How was academic leadership provided? By the principal? Teacher leaders? Teachers? Give examples.

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28. What process was used to ensure curriculum alignment (written, taught, and tested curriculum)?

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29. What observation strategies and tools were utilized to make sure that classroom instruction focused on SOL?

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30. How was observation data shared with teachers? What types of conversations occurred around the data?

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31. Describe the process used to measure student learning against the standards.

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32. What new initiatives were implemented in the school (reading program, math manipulatives, software program, etc.)? How did you ensure fidelity of implementation? What data did you gather to measure the success of the initiative? What did you learn?

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33. Did your school staff have the same professional development as other schools in the division or did your school develop its own professional development around identified needs? Give examples.

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34. Michael Fullan argues there is a difference between “tinkering” with change and “reculturing”, which involves changing norms, values, vision, relationships, etc. Would you describe the change in the school(s) as tinkering or reculturing? Give examples.

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35. What was implemented to recognize student accomplishments?

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36. When students struggled academically, was it up to individual teachers to identify students who needed remediation or extra help or was there a mechanism in place that identified students for extra help that was independent of teachers? Describe the process of identifying students for extra help or remediation.

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37. Describe the remediation program. When was remediation delivered? Who delivered it? What resources were needed?

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38. Describe the acceleration program for students meeting or exceeding the standards.

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39. While team leadership may exist in a school, who is the instructional leader in the school? Give examples.

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40. Were any surveys used to measure teacher, parent, community, and/or student perceptions of the school?

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41. How did the central office redefine its role in the school improvement process?

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42. Some teachers, including experienced ones, use teaching approaches they believe work even when evidence suggests otherwise. If this occurred, how were more prescriptive approaches implemented and monitored?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### ► Roger E. Jones

*Brevard College, A.A., Western Carolina University, B.S.E.,  
Arkansas State University, M.S.E., University of Virginia, Ed.D.*

Dr. Jones is Professor and Chair of Leadership Studies and Director of the VASSP Regional Center for Educational Leadership at Lynchburg College. Before joining the faculty at Lynchburg College, he spent 32 years in public education with Lynchburg City Schools serving as a teacher, coach, middle school principal, high school principal, and assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

Roger also serves as both summer institute and webinar faculty for the Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership's partnership with the Virginia Department of Education working with the Virginia School Improvement Initiative. He has provided both *Breaking Ranks* and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle (BRIM)* training throughout the Commonwealth. He is co-author of the *Legal Handbook for Virginia School Administrators* and author of VASSP's annual *General Assembly Update* in addition to providing workshops and institutes on legal issues from an educational perspective.

Roger has been connected to VASSP since 1979 and has served as federal relations director, regional director, and president. He currently represents NASSP on the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education Board of Examiners.



### ► Gregory A. Wheeler

*Lynchburg College, B.A., College of William and Mary, M.Ed., University of Virginia, Ed.D.*

Dr. Wheeler is a consultant with the Virginia Department of Education's Office of School Improvement, working closely with the Section 1003(g) Title I mentoring and coaching initiative and conducting academic reviews. Prior to his new role, he spent 30 years in public education. His experiences include twelve years as a middle and high school social studies teacher, six years as a middle school assistant principal, and twelve years as a middle school and high school principal in Virginia.

Greg serves on the Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership's faculty for webinars conducted in conjunction with the VDOE. The webinars provide support to division leaders, principals, and school leadership teams of schools in improvement. Topics range from classroom management, effective instructional practices, developing an effective school improvement plan, and formative assessment. An original member of the Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals' state cadre of the *Breaking Ranks* trainers, he has presented training for administrators and teachers in *BRIM* and *Breaking Ranks II* in Virginia and Tennessee. In addition, he has conducted workshops at VASSP's annual state conference on building the leadership capacity of middle high school principals and assistant principals. Also, he currently serves as an adjunct professor at Lynchburg College and Randolph College.

A former member president of VASSP, Greg has also served on the National Association of Secondary School Principals' board of directors and was the board's liaison to the National IDEA Task Force. Prior to joining the national board, he served a three-year term on NASSP's Committee on Middle Level Education. In addition, he served on Governor Mark Warner's Principals' Advisory Committee and the Virginia Department of Education's Committee of Practitioners.

