

Prepared Statement

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Roundtable: "NCLB Reauthorization: Strategies that Promote School Improvement"

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Good Morning. I would like to thank Chairman Kennedy, Senator Enzi and members of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee for the opportunity to testify on No Child Left Behind Reauthorization: Strategies that Promote School Improvement. I am Yvonne Wallace Brandon. I am the Associate Superintendent for Instruction and Accountability of Richmond City Public Schools in Richmond, Virginia and I am accompanied by Superintendent Dr. Deborah Jewell- Sherman.

The goal of Richmond City Public Schools is to provide students with a world-class education. The vision is for Richmond Public Schools to be the premier learning community that is the first choice for ALL in Richmond and is recognized nationally for student excellence. For that reason, student achievement is the focus for every initiative, program and partnership undertaken by the Richmond City School Board and the district community.

Approximately 25,000 students attend public schools in Richmond. Of that number, 89.19 percent are African American. We also provide a variety of educational services for the 19 percent of our student population who have disabilities. In the past few years, we have seen a steady increase in our ESL student population, with Hispanic students representing the fastest growing segment of that population. Additionally, nearly 70 percent of our students qualify for free and/or reduced lunch. And, a significant number of our students come from single-parent homes and reside in low-income housing. In other words, Richmond Public Schools includes all of the characteristics of urban school districts across this nation.

What is not so typical is that the Commonwealth of Virginia implemented its Standards of Learning (SOL) initiative in 1999, a high-stakes testing program that required every local school district to meet achievement benchmarks in all four core academic subject areas. To become fully accredited, 70 percent of a school's student population must pass the tests. In year one, only two of Richmond's schools earned full accreditation. In 2002, that number reached ten. The progress was neither expedient nor acceptable.

A change in culture of the entire district was necessary. Under the leadership of our new superintendent, Dr. Deborah Jewell-Sherman, we started charting our course to excellence. We had to create a culture of continuous commitment to student success. The vision provided the foundation for excuse free education and high expectations for

all. We committed being on board, on purpose, and on message. We also vowed to show that our students would excel not in spite of who they were or where they lived but because of who we are.

Our journey was multi-faceted expanding from Governor Mark Warner's PASS (Partnership for Achieving Successful Schools) Initiative to the local governance arm down to each classroom. We took a critical view of ourselves and in the words of Jim Collins; we faced our "brutal facts." Our district was suffering from low student self-confidence, sinking staff morale, school board frustration and parent and community dissatisfaction. We were reverberating from site based management -- multiple reading programs, textbooks, supplemental materials and other resources within the district. This alone proved to be disastrous for students in a district that experienced an estimated 40% mobility.

We embraced Jim Collins' work from *Good To Great*, applying business principles to our work. Realizing that our profitability was measured by student achievement, we embraced a managed instruction theory of action. We developed a district-wide curriculum that was aligned to state standards and assessments and a district-wide instructional model. We created instructional tools for the classroom teachers called the RPS Treasure Chest. This resource included a pacing guide, lesson plans for each standard, sample activities, technology integration, essential knowledge, vocabulary, and sample assessments.

Another facet of our work was to blend the art of teaching with the science of teaching. We developed benchmark and other formative measures to collect data, analyze it and utilize the information to drive all of our decisions. The application of the data was used to deploy central office assistance to schools and classrooms, to develop remediation and intervention plans, for professional development, to select textbooks and supplemental materials, to develop school improvement plans and finally to allocate fiscal and human resources.

The belief that consistent and thorough monitoring is necessary to assure fidelity to implementation was the guiding principle behind the development of our internal accountability system called "Charting the Course". This process requires that central office administrators and instructional staff make monthly visits to schools. The initial visits are conducted to review trend data, set yearly targets, observe teachers and provide immediate feedback and recommendations to principals. The frequency of subsequent visits was determined by the schools ability to reach AYP and accreditation for multiple years.

Lastly, we infused another business model, "The Balanced Scorecard", into our work to provide transparent accountability and to guide us. The BSC provides feedback on internal instructional and business processes and external outcomes (i.e., student achievement and customer satisfaction) in order to continuously improve results.

Our progress has been noted in local, state and national publications. Richmond Public Schools is no longer the second lowest performing school district in Virginia. In 2003, we more than doubled our number of fully accredited schools, moving from 10 to 23 or 44%; in 2004, 39 or 76% schools; in 2005, 45 or 90% schools; and in 2006, 44 or 88% . In meeting the Federal benchmark, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), our students have shown a similar pattern of progress. In 2003, 12 or 23% of our schools made AYP; in 2004, 27 or 53% schools; 2005 41 or 82% and in 2006, 40 or 88% of our schools. In fall 2006, one our schools was named a Blue Ribbon School, our first.

While the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act provided a springboard for our school district to take a bold look at our instructional program, it must also be noted that Richmond Public Schools did not shy away from the challenges that accompanied the implementation of the NCLB Act. We know that our greatest asset is our teachers. They make the difference between a successful and memorable educational experience and one that is forgettable. The concentration of efforts at the classroom level is an investment in the future of every child who walks into our doors. The commitment to fidelity of implementation is critical to the success of any program or strategy and requires the allocation of time, effort and support at the classroom level.

Are we there, yet? No. We face many challenges as we progress. The investment in professional development is an on going process. We sometimes lose our investment as surrounding school districts, without urban challenges, become more attractive. When teachers leave us, they leave with experience and a tool box of strategies and resources. Our quest to change the culture is not complete. As we progress, we have the challenge of balancing flexibility and accountability. In the past we have focused on the upper elementary grades in our assessment and accountability system. By analyzing data, we know that pre-school – second grade education is extremely important to the success of students as well as necessary to close achievement gaps. The balance of developmental instructional strategies with academic strategies is also a challenge. These aforementioned challenges may impact our ability to build and maintain the capacity for excellence in each school, but they do not impact our resolve. For us, failure was not, is not and never shall be an option for Richmond Public Schools.