



VSBA

Virginia School Boards Association

Leadership • Advocacy • Support

**REPORT OF THE VSBA
TASK FORCE ON SCHOOLS
IN CHALLENGING
ENVIRONMENTS**

OCTOBER 2014

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In the “Target Group Recommendations”,
suggested priorities are noted with an arrow.

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The Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA) Task Force on Schools in Challenging Environments was created by the VSBA Board of Directors at its June 6, 2013 meeting to make recommendations to the Virginia Board of Education and the Virginia Department of Education on ways to help challenged schools in Virginia. The task force was created as a result of requests for assistance and concerns among VSBA member boards related to school divisions struggling to reach their most challenged student populations. This coincided with legislation related to the grading of public schools on an A-F scale and the creation of the Opportunity Educational Institution (OEI). Since its creation, task force highlights include:

- Hosting members of the Virginia Board of Education and the incoming state superintendent of public instruction at a task force meeting
- Presenting to the Virginia Board of Education
- Holding a September 2013 roundtable discussion session with school board members, superintendents, and Virginia Board of Education members to discuss challenged schools
- Conducting a webinar, “Real Numbers, Real Challenges” with Virginia legislators
- Presenting at the VSBA Annual Convention
- Having a “Schools in Challenging Environments” track at the VSBA Annual Convention
- Holding a joint meeting with the VSBA Task Force on Virtual Learning
- Hosting “The School Board’s Role in School Improvement and Turnaround Conference”
- Initiating the “Practices of Promise for Schools in Challenging Environments” summit schedule for December 11, 2014
- The creation of this document, which was created to highlight initial steps and suggestions and is intended to be a functional and ever-evolving report

Following the Numbers

Through a review of statewide data, the task force discovered that schools which fail to achieve accreditation over multiple years contain segregated populations comprised mostly of low income children and children of color. Specifically, in 2013-14 the 37 identified Priority Schools in Virginia have student populations averaging 84.5 percent free and reduced lunch and 86 percent minority students. Further, nearly every identified “challenged school” (50% free/reduced lunch with special attention to free lunch students [hyperpoverty]; Priority Schools) is in a neighborhood of both high unemployment and high poverty.

Educators and politicians across the Commonwealth have repeatedly called for reform in schools where there is a continual failure to meet state and federal accountability standards. Interestingly, when looking at even the most rudimentary data, we continue to see vast gaps in achievement between minority and economically disadvantaged students compared to white and affluent students throughout the Commonwealth. These gaps in achievement continue to exist in spite of a decade of interventions that have almost solely been based on addressing achievement through high stakes tests. The chart on the following page demonstrates the staggering disparity.

While the focus of the Commonwealth’s accountability movement has focused on schools labeled as “failing”, the true challenge lies in specific groups of students who continue to struggle regardless of their geographical location. The task force believes that the much documented “achievement gaps” extend into every school division in Virginia. However, the geographic concentration of these children clearly exacerbates the learning environment challenges.

State Pass Rates				
Subject Area	Group	School Year		
		2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
English/Reading	All	88.81%	74.63%	74.40%
	Black	80.40%	58.56%	58.86%
	Hispanic	84.20%	65.17%	64.59%
	White	92.60%	81.98%	81.63%
	Economically Disadvantaged	80.73%	59.25%	59.27%
Mathematics	All	68.47%	71.07%	74.28%
	Black	51.78%	55.26%	59.56%
	Hispanic	61.00%	63.52%	66.65%
	White	75.06%	77.40%	80.39%
	Economically Disadvantaged	53.73%	56.76%	61.09%

Statewide there remains a 23 percent gap in reading between African-American and white children. In addition, a 22 percent reading gap occurs between students in poverty and white students. The gap in mathematics is almost equally pronounced. Unfortunately, there remains a strong correlation in Virginia between students of color and poverty.

It is clear that the primary result of the current assessment structure has been to punish schools with a high percentage of students who are both impoverished and of color. Regardless of zip code, minorities and students in poverty struggle to attain benchmarks even at the most affluent schools in the Commonwealth. For instance, economically disadvantaged students in one of Virginia's most affluent divisions had a 61 percent pass rate on the 2014 end-of-course English Reading test—just 2 percent above the state average—and those scores fall a whopping 35 percent behind white students in the same division. This would lead even a novice researcher to conclude that this seemingly “successful” division educates economically disadvantaged at only a slightly better rate than some of Virginia's most embattled districts that are regularly labeled as “failing”.

The VSBA Task Force on Schools in Challenging Environments maintains that the limited manner in which we evaluate and label schools punishes “challenged schools” in large measure due to their high-poverty, racially isolated makeup. The task force members believe that a number of specific actions must occur in order to not only help schools in challenging environments, but to assist children across the Commonwealth who come from the most challenging situations.

The Opportunity

As a task force, we devote special attention to the “school effect”—the role of professional educators managed by superintendents operating with strong school board governance. Public school divisions throughout the Commonwealth open their school doors to Virginia's children with all the special gifts, talents, and diversity they bring. However our students come to us, no matter their circumstances, it is our charge and our commitment to prepare our children for college and career and as Virginia's emerging leaders and workforce. Our recommendations do not shy away from or make excuses for that mammoth responsibility. Driven by data and research, the task force also recognizes and appreciates the “community effect” on student achievement. The daily quality of teaching and learning in our classrooms involve students, parents, faculty, and everyone in our communities.

After considerable deliberation and attention to best practices and research, we prioritized five domains, each of which are addressed individually within this report:

- Community & Family Engagement
- Funding & Resources
- Specialized Training
- Student Learning
- Teacher Quality

We also target our recommendations to the following groups:

- School Board / Governance Leadership Teams
- Community Groups
- Internal / External Stakeholders (i.e. faculty, parents, business, community, local government)
- General Assembly, including the governor and state offices
- VSBA

The task force recommendations embrace the current VSBA theme of "We Are One", particularly around the concept that the academic success and achievement of all our students impacts every citizen and every community in Virginia. As an example, consider the costs and savings to the Commonwealth associated with graduation rates. The recent Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) study on Low Performing Schools in Urban High Poverty Communities documented "the 10 percent highest poverty high schools (in Virginia) had an average on-time graduation rate of 81.9% in 2013 compared to 96.5% for the 10 percent lowest poverty schools. Similarly, the dropout rate for the highest poverty high schools was 10 percent in 2013, compared to 1.9 percent in the lowest poverty high schools."

Utilizing research derived from the Alliance on Excellent Education, should our task force recommendations helped to yield a 5% increase in graduation rates for male students, Virginia's annual Crime Related Savings would be \$362,000,000 and Additional Earnings Savings of \$33,000,000 for a Total Annual Benefit to the State Economy of \$395,000,000.

One final note when considering these initial set of recommendations is that the VSBA Task Force on Schools in Challenging Environments holds the belief that our academic expectations must be high for all of our students in all of our divisions be they labeled urban, suburban or rural; or affluent, middle-class or high-poverty. Our goal for "challenged schools" is an established norm of excellence at least on par with other schools in the Commonwealth. We believe our communities cannot accept a lower standard for challenged schools, and it is our hope that we will work together so that no schools in Virginia would meet the definition of being in a challenged environment; in fact, we encourage Virginians to work toward that goal—we must.

Until we arrive there, please consider these words from Dr. Richard Kahlenberg, "In discussing the difficulties of making high-poverty schools work, it is important to draw a distinction between the problems associated with concentrations of school poverty and beliefs about the ability of poor children to learn. Many people confuse the first with the second. Evidence suggests that children from all socioeconomic groups can learn to high levels if given the right environment. High-poverty schools, however, do not normally provide the positive learning environment that children need and deserve."

DOMAIN OVERVIEW

Families are the first and most influential teachers of their children. The academic achievement of all students is sustained and enhanced with quality programs and processes that promote the engagement of families in the academic lives of their children. This overview is designed to allow readers to understand the various roles of school boards, communities, the General Assembly and the VSBA in creating a framework that supports improvement in challenging schools.

Schools in challenged environments often encounter stressors on families (i.e. work hours, neighborhood conditions, and housing quality) that place obstacles on student learning. True family engagement that encourages real partnerships and family efficacy in student learning can assist in overcoming these barriers.

Family engagement is not a sole solution to student achievement woes. As a matter of fact, the best results occur when it works in tandem with fundamentally strong instructional and assessment strategies. Family engagement is a means to an end, a process that results in improved outcomes for students. Families who build strong efficacy in the educational lives of their children can make a huge difference in the degree to which their children are successful in school. The concept of family engagement is simple. Involve families in the learning lives of their children and they become partners and advocates of success.

The VSBA Task Force on Schools in Challenging Environments embraces the notion of family and community engagement as an important pillar of reform in helping all schools succeed. A brief description of each of the task force recommendations follows.

School Board / Governance Leadership

The role of any school board is to ensure that it promotes and creates a strong district commitment to family engagement through policy development and a clearly articulated strategic plan includes specific language regarding the promotion of family engagement as a conduit to improved student achievement. The views of both internal and external stakeholders are necessary to inform an appropriate division direction and vision with regard to this type of engagement.

Community

Through business and community engagement programs, communities can be given every opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments of schools, children and teachers, advocate for high quality enrichment opportunities not dependent upon family contributions, and leverage community events to showcase school events. The degree to which the community works with schools and divisions to create a shared vision of engagement further enhances and develops the concept.

General Assembly

It is imperative that the General Assembly recognize and acknowledge the value of family engagement in education as well as provide the necessary framework and flexibility for all schools and divisions. For example, increasing local flexibility under the SOQs and conducting listening tours (modeled after VSBA) of challenged schools will go a long way to instilling the notion that family and community engagement is essential to the learning needs of every student.

DOMAIN OVERVIEW

VSBA

The VSBA plays a critical role in supporting family and community engagement through, and expanded recognition of, divisions that engage families and can show academic outcomes for their efforts. Further targeted reviews can be conducted that specifically address state policies that limit or hinder family and community engagement in schools and divisions. Most importantly, the VSBA can conduct ongoing family engagement training as part of their comprehensive training program for school board members across the Commonwealth.

TARGET GROUP: School Board/Governance Leadership Team

RECOMMENDATIONS



- Ensure a division commitment to family engagement through policy development with support for clearly articulated goals in family engagement
- Explore differentiated funding supports to enhance family engagement opportunities and professional development for staff
- Promote family engagement in school and division decision making through policy and procedures
- Ensure that the division strategic plan includes specific language regarding the promotion of family engagement as a conduit to improved student achievement
- Create an effective family engagement division survey

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Goals regarding the extent and type of family engagement are extensive, specific, and require regular measurement to ensure continued effectiveness for the division and individual school sites
- Family engagement survey results measure effectiveness of policy and practice

ACCOUNTABILITY

- VSBA / task force provides community & family engagement policy template
- Superintendent recommends to board
- Governance leadership team discusses in work session; includes in policy/regulations
- Superintendent recommends update to Strategic Plan or appropriate district document
- Task force provides survey to divisions

DURATION/TIMELINE

- Immediate upon adoption of new policies
- Strategic planning can be 6-12 months depending on where a division is in the process; adapting a strategic plan to incorporate specific family engagement processes and practices is less time
- Survey can take 6-12 months in development

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Costs associated with policy or procedural changes
- Costs of additional hours for staff or dedicated staff in family engagement
- Costs associated with survey development and implementation

TARGET GROUP: Community

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Celebrate student academic success at every opportunity (i.e. faith-based institutions, community meetings, local businesses)
- Through business and community engagement programs, advocate for high quality enrichment opportunities not dependent upon family contributions
- Coordinate / leverage community events to align with school events and activities
- Facilitate / support home and community visits of teachers and principals
- Create a shared vision with all community stakeholders that all students can learn and the partnership between the school and the community is vital to that end

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Increase number of positive images of academic achievement
- Extracurricular activities are not limited by family income
- Increased positive academic experiences outside of the school setting through collaborative / leverage resources
- Increased home and school interactions
- Increased teacher understanding of children's strengths and assets
- Decrease in student behavior incidents
- Eliminate barriers to family and community engagement (i.e. transportation, child care, timing of events)

DURATION/TIMELINE

- Target dates and timelines included in locally adopted strategic plan or relevant plan document

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Budget neutral
- Increased time demands on teachers and principals; see other domains for supports

TARGET GROUP: General Assembly

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognize and acknowledge the value of family engagement in education
- Provide the necessary framework for all schools and divisions
- Increase local flexibility under the SOQs (i.e. office staffing needs of two schools of the same size but in different environments are not necessarily equal)
- Conduct “listening tour” of challenged schools modeled after VSBA tours
- Recognize successful parental and family activities with commending resolutions

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Provide superintendents with increased flexibility to match resources with needs / demands
- Flexibility of local spending
- Legislation that is supportive of challenged schools
- Scale back or eliminate punitive measures based solely on lower test scores

DURATION/TIMELINE

- Listening tour following 2015 General Assembly session through July 2015
- Recommend studies / proposed legislation for 2015 General Assembly session

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Budget neutral

TARGET GROUP: Virginia School Boards Association

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand recognition of divisions that engage families and can show academic outcomes for their efforts
- Conduct targeted review of state policies that may limit or hinder parent and community engagement in schools
- Conduct training for school board on family and community outreach (specific methods on school board engagement)

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Highlight the role of the board in supporting challenged schools through friendly competition
- Remove policies barriers, if any, that may limit support of challenged schools

DURATION/TIMELINE

- Training underway and ongoing
- First recognition at 2015 VSBA Conference on Education
- Policy review completed by June 2015

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Minor impact

DOMAIN OVERVIEW

Virginia public schools in challenging environments are almost entirely located in high poverty areas with unemployment that far exceeds the state average and low per-capita family incomes. School board members are often overwhelmed by the vast multitude of challenges faced by schools, as well as the multitude of needs the students face prior to walking into the school each day. For students in challenging environments there is a vast resource gap that exists between students in poverty and those not in poverty. These resources are tangible and include lack of access to technology, lack of enriching opportunities, lack of access to proper nutrition, and even a lack of living in a safe environment.

The policy and political challenge of providing equal or equitable resources for high poverty schools continues to vex our state and country. Federal and state funding, local resources, grant funding, and human capital programs must target efforts to close the financial and resource gaps between high and low poverty districts, high and low poverty schools within districts, and resource capacities that may exist between the localities who are challenged with the burden to provide educational supports beyond the Standards of Quality. A framework that emphasizes equity is essential to bridging the resource gap.

In the private sector, hard-to-fill positions, jobs requiring specialized skills, and work in challenging environments are often targeted with salary premiums to attract and to retain top talent. In school divisions across the Commonwealth, labor costs are the largest expenditure in our schools. In an article, “Why Public Schools Lose Teachers,” it is estimated that in order to get nonminority female teachers to stay in urban schools, school officials would have to offer a salary premium of between 25 percent and 43 percent for teachers with zero to five years of experience. Considering that, incentives to train and retain educators in challenging environments must be a high priority.

Facing economic and political realities at federal, state, and local levels, task force recommendations provide focus and attention on actions to support better academic achievements within current frameworks (“how do we better leverage what we have”), while laying the groundwork for not only closing resource gaps but allowing data and outcomes to drive funding.

School Board / Governance Leadership

The key work of the school board and governance leadership team begins with drawing a deep line of distinction between the beliefs about the abilities of low-income children to learn, and the challenges, effects, and barriers children in poverty and schools in concentrated poverty have with accessing a positive environment to learn. It is clear that poverty is not an excuse for lack of academic achievement; however, there should also be no excuse for not providing additional support for high poverty schools.

The task force acknowledges that students in poverty face greater challenges than their more affluent peers. Therefore, school boards must deepen their awareness and understanding of funding sources and how they can be used in schools in challenging environments beyond noting per pupil expenditures. We recommend school boards execute equity audits to provide quantitative and qualitative data of human, physical, and financial resources allocated to high need schools and the quality and effectiveness of those resources.

Community

Low-poverty schools benefit from a resource network typically unavailable at high-poverty schools – the supplemental resources provided by the parents and community enrich student learning opportunities. Field trips, enrichment activities during the school day, parent volunteers with high education back-

DOMAIN OVERVIEW

grounds, and the capacity for substantial fundraisers augment district-provided resources in affluent schools. These are all resources that need to be enhanced in the low-poverty school environment above and beyond the basic needs of children provided for in the home. These resources in part come from vast and comprehensive wraparound services.

We recommend wraparound services for schools in challenging environments to support the basic needs of low-income children such as nutritional, medical, and dental care while establishing effective community partnerships designed to provide school-based enrichment opportunities for students comparable to those at low-poverty schools.

General Assembly

The General Assembly must give immediate focus and attention to technological gaps that exist for students in challenging environments both in school and at home. The technological challenges for schools in challenging environments pertain to physical assets (i.e. broadband speeds, network infrastructures) as well as human assets (i.e. qualified support engineers and staff). The attention to technology also requires special attention to geographic gaps – the challenges faced by small or rural districts and the access to technology in contrast to dense population or high income urban and suburban areas.

VSBA

The VSBA is in a unique position to provide training and board development related to budget development / awareness for challenged schools. Additionally, as a statewide association of 100% of Virginia's school boards, the VSBA would be able to recognize and share effective programs that bridge resource gaps.

TARGET GROUP: School Board/Governance Leadership Team

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Board awareness of the variety of funding sources and how they can be used in challenged schools (SIG, title, local, state, federal, grants)
- Board and leadership training on allocation of resources to the most high needs schools and classrooms in a school division
- Board and leadership development related to closing student resource gaps through community outreach and support (wraparound services)
- Community support for nutrition, basic needs, and medical needs

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Board and leadership awareness of the variety of funds
- Funding allocations reflect the needs of schools and classrooms
- Increase student academic performance, increase student attendance, and decrease student behavior incidents

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Attendance at training by all members of governance leadership team

DURATION/TIMELINE

- 2014-2015 School Year

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Budget neutral

TARGET GROUP: Community

RECOMMENDATIONS



- Development of programs that prevent barriers to student learning (nutritional needs, medical and dental care)

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Increase student attendance, which will improve academic achievement
- Positive correlation between brain development and wellness
- Community wraparound support plan or adopted “best practices” model

DURATION/TIMELINE



- 2014-2015 School Year

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Could impact local spending (i.e. partnering with Communities in School)

TARGET GROUP: General Assembly

RECOMMENDATIONS

-  • Establish / expand special funds to support broadband and technology infrastructure at challenged schools with special attention to rural divisions
-  • Close the technology resource gap between students in poverty and other students.
 - State funding formulas need to bridge resources gaps for challenged schools
 - Charge Commonwealth advisory boards, agencies, and technology focused partnerships to develop specific policy and public/private initiatives focused on digital inclusion

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Increased scores on standardized tests
- Provide 21st century skills and learning tools for students in challenged schools
- Increase in graduation rates and decrease in student drop-outs

DURATION/TIMELINE

- 2015 General Assembly session

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Substantial increase to state contribution for technological resources

TARGET GROUP: Virginia School Boards Association

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop specific workshops for board development related to budget development / awareness for challenged schools
- Recognition and sharing of effective community outreach programs or wraparound service programs that bridge resource gaps
- Lobby General Assembly for student technology devices that close the resource gap for students in poverty

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Increase leadership capacity for school board members by increasing awareness of the challenges and opportunities that exist in funding, grants, master scheduling, etc.
- Increase equity of opportunity for students and schools within divisions
- Increase in “challenged schools” listed as board priority (self-reported on VSBA task force survey)
- Increased technology funding and/or flexibility with existing funding
- General Assembly School in Challenging Environments Caucus

DURATION/TIMELINE

- 2015

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Budget neutral

DOMAIN OVERVIEW

School boards understand governance leadership training form the basis for solid governance execution. Schools in challenged environments are often schools populated with students from high poverty families and neighborhoods or faced with other challenges such as mobility or homelessness. As a task force, we recommend “specialize training” for each target group toward greater understanding of the challenges of these students and schools leading toward improved policies and practices to support academic success.

All stakeholders involved in public education—students, parents, teachers, superintendents, school board members, elected officials, et. al.—bring with them their own personal set of experiences. Too often in public education, personal anecdotes trump data, policy, and practice.

Schools in challenging environments bring with them special sets of opportunities and conditions. These schools often have higher rates of student mobility, teacher turnover, incidents of discipline, conditions at home and the community that hinder learning, and more. In many professions a generalist is suitable for providing primary care or solutions for improving conditions common to many; however, it is a specialist who has particular skills and knowledge for a particular set of conditions or circumstances. The specialized training domain recommends unique skills, practices, and policies intentionally designed and implemented for schools in challenging environments; we recommend specialized training for each target group beginning with the governance leadership team.

Donald McAdams points out in his book *What School Boards Can Do*, “Governance springs directly or indirectly from the people; governance is always shared; and governance must control management. This is because our democracy had been designed to reflect the will of the majority, protect the rights of the majority, and check the exercise of power.”

Our recommendations include professional development training for new and current school board members. The professional development shall include a series of topics on high quality, effective board governance and shall include an emphasis on the needs of students in challenged environments.

As mentioned earlier, the task force recommend that schools in challenging environments be served by specialists and with specialty. Not all urban districts are the same even if their demographics are similar. A low-income neighborhood with generations of family members attending can be vastly different from a low-income neighborhood with high mobility rates or homelessness amongst its families.

In the Commonwealth of Virginia, schools in challenging environments are overwhelmingly schools with large minority populations and concentrations of poverty. A recent JLARC report on Low Performing Schools in Urban High Poverty Communities, found “only two of the states 120 highest poverty elementary schools scored above the state median on the English SOL.” Additionally, the report documented the primary barriers to Virginia student improvement efforts at these schools included “difficulty training, attracting and retaining effective, committed staff and difficulties with the relationship between schools and their education consultants.” Our task force research supports those findings and notes these challenges exist in high-poverty schools in urban, rural, and suburban divisions alike.

In the set of recommendations that follow are actions for all school divisions across the Commonwealth to consider as well as divisions with high levels of poverty and minority students. Because children in high-poverty schools typically live in high-poverty neighborhoods and bring to school with them challenges

DOMAIN OVERVIEW



outside of the school's direct control, we include actions for local government and community partners to consider.

In summary, a wide range of research over the past fifty years or more documents the challenges students who live in poverty and attend high poverty schools face in the area of academic achievement. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, we recommend specialize training for key target groups with emphasis on the government leadership teams and district teachers and administrators. Demographic shifts in the Commonwealth are underway; our cultural and ethnic diversity, our number of families in poverty, our demand for skilled workers to serve our industry, our diversity in governing bodies are all increasing.

To retain Virginia's competitiveness, we must continuously train and retrain ourselves in best practices so that our educational policies and practices align with our economic development, housing, workforce, and legislative policies and practices that not only advance our children attending schools in challenging environments, but begin to reduce the number of challenging environments our children encounter.

TARGET GROUP: School Board/Governance Leadership Team

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 
 - Inclusion of “challenged schools” focus in strategic plans / board priorities
 - Include high-poverty schools / best practices training in board professional development (increase percentage for high poverty divisions)
 - Establish professional development and differentiated instruction “ends”; support with budget priorities
 - Undergo professional development training and/or research the following areas: equity audit; resources and budget; reduce areas of poverty (zoning); policy development; data analysis; crucial conversation; growing community support and awareness; and knowing the right questions and “look-fors”
 - Understand and monitor characteristics of challenged schools
 - Review policies and best practices matching principal and teacher talent and experience with conditions / needs of challenged schools
- 
 - Participate in VSBA school improvement board training track

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Governance leadership team training track on “challenged schools”
- Best practices professional development library for boards
- “Right questions to ask” to support “ends” and monitoring
- “Challenged schools” plans in strategic plans / board priorities
- Board review of HR reports related to challenged schools (i.e. high qualified / effective staff matches; staff turnover)

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Placement of “challenged schools” review on board agenda as warranted per local division
- Board adoption of challenged schools resolution
- Commitment to support / participate in challenged schools and / or SIG training / tracks

DURATION/TIMELINE

- 2014-2015 School Year and Ongoing

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Professional development may call for increased spending or reallocation of existing resources
- Funding supports to retain/attract highly qualified & effective administrators and staff may be required

TARGET GROUP: Internal Stakeholders

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Development of or expansion of best practices research library of challenged schools
- Integrate messaging of challenged schools into PTA / PTO meetings and other events
- Share lesson plans, techniques, and innovations shown to result in positive student achievement in challenged schools
- Review HR policies and practices for modification and governance leadership team review / adoption
- Recommend reporting strategies / techniques to highlight attention and focus to children in challenged schools
- Review current evaluation instruments for alignment with goals and realistic conditions of challenged schools

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Provide a resource base of best practices and research for practitioners
- Provide contextual understanding as to the challenges of “challenged schools”
- Enhanced mapping of staffing at challenged schools
- Increased use of challenged school research in professional development
- Challenged school focus at Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS), PTA / PTO, Chamber of Commerce, and other local & statewide associations
- Increase awareness of challenged schools reported on community surveys
- Increased advocacy for challenged schools

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Creation of a web site with best practices and research
- Human resources reports on teacher and administrative retention
- VDOE shares best practices and includes in MOUs / agreements related to priority & focus schools
- PTA / PTO includes challenged schools on advocacy agendas
- Governance leadership teams implement and review equity audits

DURATION/TIMELINE

- 2014-2015 School Year

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Budget neutral—recommendations inclusive within current resources; recommendations give focus to challenged schools

TARGET GROUP: External Stakeholders

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand and / or enhance community vision with focus on equity for all students
- Support targeted funding aligned with recommendations
- Analyze return on investment and social return on investment of challenged schools producing successful graduation pathways aligned with local / state averages

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Provide communities with understanding of equity gaps within and among school divisions
- Local governing bodies support of funding requests tied to needs of school in challenging environments

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Equitable resources among schools and school divisions
- Review annual outcomes of funding initiatives
- Governance leadership teams identify needs and project outcomes specifically focused on challenged schools to local appropriating bodies

DURATION/TIMELINE

- Immediate budget planning for FY 2015-2016

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Supports for schools in challenged environments may require reprioritized or additional funding

TARGET GROUP: General Assembly

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide flexibility in SOQs supporting resource needs of challenged schools (i.e. small challenged school may require additional front office support than a non-challenged schools with similar enrollment)
- Establish the Schools in Challenging Environments Caucus -- a bi-partisan, geographically diverse group of legislators dedicated to addressing academic and economic outcomes for students who attend schools in challenging environments
- Submit legislation requiring school boards with one or more schools with accreditation denied or in warning for three consecutive years to undergo specialized training

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- School divisions allowed to better meet the needs of their population
- Implementation of existing SOQ recommendations and / or creation of SOQ study specifically tied to task force recommendations
- Establish specialized training fund or reallocate existing funds
- Make board training a requirement of SIG funding

ACCOUNTABILITY

- School divisions provide report / justification of SOQ adjustments
- VSBA provides recommended legislation to Schools in Challenging Environments Caucus

DURATION/TIMELINE

- 2015 General Assembly session

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Pending outcome of General Assembly review

TARGET GROUP: Virginia School Boards Association

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Train leaders in engaging in difficult dialogue
- Develop a plan that makes addressing the issues related to challenging schools a primary point of emphasis
- Conduct evaluation of “Role of Boards in SIG” programming and enhance / expand
- Continue / expand tracks on challenged schools at VSBA conferences
- Add “challenged schools” progress award/recognition

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- 100% of high poverty divisions trained
- 100% of all divisions trained
- Continually improving boarding training tracks on challenged schools

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Adoption by VSBA Delegate Assembly
- Inclusion, if needed, in VSBA strategic plan

DURATION/TIMELINE

- Review of boards and SIG Training (end of grant period)
- Challenged schools training tracks (ongoing)

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Grant funding to support training
- Fee for service training model
- Staff professional development or consultant fees to deliver training as core VSBA offering

DOMAIN OVERVIEW

The task force has identified student learning as an important focus area for challenged schools. To make advances in student learning it is important to recognize the impact of poverty on many of our students. While there is much within our students' lives schools cannot control - such as sleep schedules, adult supervision, food insecurity, family turmoil and safety at home – we can direct student learning at school. Therefore, this domain is a powerful one in terms of school and particularly student academic improvement.

Extended learning time is an important strategy for low-income students because it allows for more time with educators and adult role models. In today's economy, most mothers and fathers work full-time jobs with very few "stay-at-home parents" available during the school day. We have also observed a rise in single parent households and households where a single parent works two jobs. This means that our traditional school day is out of sync with the lives of many of today's parents. An extended school day would be a win-win for parents, children and educators, but would have a budgetary impact that would need to be considered.

In addition to an extended school day, an extended school calendar could be considered by allowing school districts more flexibility in setting the school calendar to allow for additional instructional days prior to student testing. Another extended school calendar option would be to increase state funding for summer "inter-session" programs over the month of July which have proven successful at "An Achievable Dream Academy" in Newport News and at "RCPS+" in Roanoke City. Summer sessions allow for valuable "pre-learning" of upcoming concepts in math and reading. They also give students and their families a head start adjusting to school routines and policies. Summer sessions also decrease student hunger by offering meals and allowing for safe, structured physical activity in low-income communities. Summer programs thereby address simultaneously many of the problems faced by students in poverty. It should be noted that effective extended year programs should be enrichment-based and does not assume all students in a school or division have to attend a year-round school.



Support for physical activity is another key recommendation of our taskforce in the area of student learning. Low-income parents often have difficulty providing their children with opportunities to exercise in safe environments or on team sports. Support for after-school physical fitness programs and clubs can increase mentorship time with highly qualified teachers and coaches, improving physical fitness, team building and communication skills...all skills that are highly prized by employers in terms of workplace readiness. With the dramatic rise in healthcare spending, there are also long-term cost savings associated with promoting student health. Finally, there is substantial research that indicates the connection between physical activity and brain stimulation.

The task force recommends a continued emphasis on smaller class sizes for students in high-poverty schools. Teachers in these environments are more than just teachers; they are also social workers, nurses and counselors to their students. Smaller classes provide more time to care for these issues as well as for differentiating instruction and working with small group remediation.

Finally the importance of high quality pre-K programs for all students cannot be emphasized enough. School readiness promotes healthy childhood development, encourages parent involvement in their child's education, and develops positive family routines. Early childhood education also helps Virginia's economy as the first building block of workplace readiness. Pre-K programs increase the number of children reading on benchmark by the third grade. These programs also decrease the costs of reading intervention and student grade repetition. They are a sound investment for the General Assembly to make on behalf of Virginia's children—the future workforce of the Commonwealth.

TARGET GROUP: School Board/Governance Leadership Team

RECOMMENDATIONS

-  • Smaller class sizes
-  • Extended calendar options (after school, summer school, intercessions)
 - Research initiatives and best practices to support physical fitness (health and wellness disparities are magnified in challenged communities)
 - Expansion of pre-K opportunities

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Enhanced personalized learning / differentiated instruction
- Lessen teacher stress by providing smaller cohort of students
- Reach students earlier to lessen “ready to learn” and word gaps
- Increase number of instruction days students receive prior to testing
- Decrease summer loss

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Prioritized local funding
- Adoption of early childhood quality standards
- Evaluation of existing pre-K programs for qualitative impact of low-income students
- Commitment to annual review of pre / post assessments to insure quality outcomes
- Advocate for local matches to insure 100% usage of Virginia Preschool Initiative funding

DURATION/TIMELINE

- Commence evaluation of current pre-K programs
- Include smaller class sizes in 2015 / 2016 budget discussions
- Maximize VSBA member participation in Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Project
- Immediate

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Facilities retrofit or expansion to support smaller class sizes
- Costs associated with pre-K configuration
- Staff and facilities costs associated with extended days

TARGET GROUP: Internal Stakeholders

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create opportunities for school learning by parents
- Professional development for staff—ensuring appropriate staff placed in appropriate areas
- Partner with PTA / PTO for sponsorship of educational opportunities

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Increased parental involvement
- Staff better trained to handle struggling students
- Additional supplies and support needed to lift struggling schools

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Review / gap analysis of existing division parental learning opportunities
- Professional development for staff working in challenged environments prioritized as budget item
- Host at least one joint meeting with PTA / PTO focused on challenged schools

DURATION/TIMELINE

- December 2014 (gap analysis)
- October 2014 (budget prioritization)
- January 2015 (PTA / PTO meeting)

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Pending review/gap analysis
- Professional development will potentially increase costs or require shifting of other priorities
- PTA / PTO – budget neutral

TARGET GROUP: External Stakeholders

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Seek grant opportunities
- Create structure to help schools partner with businesses to provide mentors and internship opportunities
- Seek opportunity for students to participate with organizations like Junior Achievement

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Increase revenues
- Measurable opportunities for students to interact with positive role models and develop 21st century skills necessary for employment

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Periodic evaluation to measure effectiveness of programming

DURATION/TIMELINE



- Ongoing

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Locally established goals
- Consider setting a VSBA membership-wide goal
- Potential increase due to cost of new programming; however, a review of existing programming for effectiveness may result in budget neutrality

TARGET GROUP: General Assembly

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Request appropriate funding
- Calendar flexibility
-  • SOQ flexibility
-  • Permit expedited SOL retakes for elementary and middle school students
- Implement a statewide comprehensive kindergarten assessment led by the University of Virginia CASTL that defines the readiness gap (Virginia’s entering kindergartners’ readiness skills), tracks readiness across domain areas, and longitudinally tracks the progress of students through third grade

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Increased funding
- More opportunity to prepare students
- Increased opportunity for student success
- Will offer useful data that can be linked with effective strategies so teachers can differentiate instruction and better meet the needs of their students

DURATION/TIMELINE

- Ongoing

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Increased support from state
- Budget neutral if instructional days remain the same; increased cost if total day increase
- Budget neutral (SOL Flexibility)
- \$1.7 Million (statewide comprehensive kindergarten assessment)

TARGET GROUP: Virginia School Boards Association

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Lobby General Assembly
- Provide board mentors to assist with struggling boards
- Board professional development (See “Specialized Training” domain)
- Target challenged divisions by offering workshops, webinars, and other supports (See “Specialized Training” domain)

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Increased funding and other legislative assistance allowing local flexibility
- Improved board leadership as measured by VSBA Board of Distinction criteria
- Targeted and specific training to improve board leadership

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Align with VSBA strategic plan if necessary
- Local board cooperation and participation
- 90% or more participation of target divisions and board member participation

DURATION/TIMELINE

- Ongoing

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Pending VSBA Board of Directors and staff review

DOMAIN OVERVIEW

The preparedness and effectiveness of teachers delivering high quality instruction in challenged schools is critical to student and school success. Research says that a high quality teacher in the classroom is the most important determinant of student academic achievement. Research also indicates teachers in challenged schools typically encounter an extra set of challenges that children bring with them into the schoolhouse. Preparing teachers for and supporting teachers in these environments is essential for student academic success.

The placement of a high quality teacher in our most challenging schools is a necessity. It requires effective teacher preparation, teacher induction, and teacher resources on a sustained basis that cannot be met through the ability of a local school board alone.

Tremendous disparities exist in the supply of high quality teachers across the Commonwealth. Therefore, state involvement is critical in addressing these disparities. A brief description of each of the task force recommendation follows.

School Board / Governance Leadership

School boards and division leadership must ensure policies that lead toward highly effective principals and teachers at challenged schools. Board policies must be reviewed to increase the percentage of highly effective teachers in these schools. There must also be a required teacher induction process for every teacher.

Internal Stakeholders

There needs to be a teacher coach for all new teachers in years 1 and 2 of working in a challenged school.

External Stakeholders

There needs to be a 1 year student teacher requirement from all Virginia universities before graduation. Teacher induction programs, once created, could be sponsored by outside businesses and community groups.

General Assembly

Teachers in challenged schools should be allowed participation in VRS Plan 1 (providing earlier and more generous retirement) regardless of hire date. Loan forgiveness, bonuses, and tuition and housing assistance for teachers and principals in accredited with warning schools should be provided.

VSBA

Best practices in teacher quality should be shared in VSBA workshops. The teacher quality recommendations should be included in the VSBA's legislative agenda.

TARGET GROUP: School Board/Governance Leadership Team

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Requirement of teacher induction process
- Review board policies aligned with superintendent recommendations intended to boost percentage of highly effective teachers placed at challenged schools
- Review and support superintendent recommendations leading toward sustainability of highly effective principals and teachers at challenged schools
- Review budget priorities to align with teacher quality recommendations (See “Student Learning” and “Funding & Resources” domains)

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Teachers will have an understanding of teaching profession and / or culture of school
- Teachers will have strong foundation for addressing the challenges of teaching high poverty situations
- Retention / stability of highly effective teachers
- Positive staff feedback on morale and climate surveys

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Teachers and principals have increased accountability evaluation tools
- Governance leadership team will establish goals for number / percentage of highly effective staff and administrators in challenged schools

DURATION/TIMELINE

- All new teachers should have this induction within 18 months of them signing employment contract
- If existing teachers are to be “re-introduced” it should be done within 24 months of the proposal being approved
- Periodic review (at least quarterly) of staffing numbers at challenged schools

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Budget neutral (build within existing resources where available; leverage Title and SIG funding)

TARGET GROUP: Internal Stakeholders

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Teacher coach for all new teachers in year 1 and year 2

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- New teachers will be trained under the direction of a seasoned teacher who has demonstrated skills in teaching in a challenged school or classroom

ACCOUNTABILITY

- School systems that employ the teacher
- Evaluation of coaching program and its impact

DURATION/TIMELINE

- The teacher coach would be assigned when the teacher is hired
- Ongoing

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- \$2.5 million (with \$5,000 stipend per teacher per school, estimating 500 schools)

TARGET GROUP: External Stakeholders

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Sponsorship of teacher induction programs, such as Apple Credit Union and Fairfax
- Virginia universities require 1 year student teacher experience

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Create stronger community ties and partnerships
- Businesses will have a better appreciation for public education
- Teachers will have a clearer understanding of teaching in a class room for a full year

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Board chair
- Clerk of the board
- Make part of the school system strategic plan
- School system
- Virginia Department of Education
- Participating college / university

DURATION/TIMELINE







- These programs could start immediately once approved

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Staff costs associated with program administration; potentially budget neutral if “partnerships” is already a responsibility in the division
- Potentially assigned to education foundation partners

TARGET GROUP: General Assembly

RECOMMENDATIONS

-  Loan forgiveness for teachers and principals in accredited with warning schools
-  Bonus for teaching in accredited with warning schools
-  Housing incentives
-  Tuition assistance for teachers extending certifications to critical needs areas
-  Participation in Virginia Retirement System Plan 1
-  Add 10 days to the teaching contract in high poverty schools

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Increase pool of high-quality applicants
- More schools will achieve state accreditation
- Increase teacher stability in challenged schools

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Loan forgiveness and bonuses tied to service commitment and student progress
- Virginia Department of Education
- Virginia Department of Housing and Redevelopment

DURATION/TIMELINE

- Will likely require state approval (target 2015)

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Budgetary impact to follow review / planning associated with recommendations
- Recommend staffing supporting from governor's office and VDOE

TARGET GROUP: Virginia School Boards Association

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Include in legislative agenda
- Share best practices in VSBA workshops and communications

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- Proposed legislation from Schools in Challenging Environment Caucus

DURATION/TIMELINE

- Ongoing/Immediate

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Included in VSBA legislative agenda

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Budget neutral



VSBA

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