

**NQSI:**

**QUALITY SCHOOLS COME FROM QUALITY  
PEOPLE**

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Since the time of the now fabled one room schoolhouse, American schools have undergone tremendous change socially, structurally, and instructionally. Our public schools are under the microscope like never before. Charter schools and tuition vouchers circle above public education like vultures. New special education regulations loom menacingly on the horizon. Prophets of doom are on every street corner and in every Internet chat room. The Virginia General Assembly has mandated higher standards and tougher discipline. Innumerable publications document both technology=s explosion and the American family=s implosion. Against this seemingly foreboding backdrop, a school district in Southeastern Virginia researched, designed, and implemented the Norfolk Quality Schools Initiative (NQSI).

Ever since the days of the old one room school house with its slate chalkboards and pot-bellied stove there have been scores and scores of movements to improve American education. Some have stressed the product while others have emphasized the process. The NQSI is not just another attempt at educational reform; it is a focused, inclusive and comprehensive plan for school revitalization and renewal. NQSI is unique in the fact that it employs a very specific process designed to develop a very specific product. Simply put, it is a systematic, outcome-based process.

**HISTORICALLY SPEAKING**

In studying our pioneer past, time and again, we have seen American pragmatism and ingenuity establish, shape, adapt, and reshape communities around the cultural beliefs, the local climate, and the natural resources available. From Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Significance of the Frontier* in the 1890's to Tom Peters' *A Passion for Excellence* in the 1980's, American writers have explored in detail and defined in concept the character of this country. While this process began on Virginia's Jamestown Island, the product it developed now extends from Asea to shining sea.

Norfolk, Virginia, located at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, has helped define the American spirit since its town charter was issued in 1682. In its long history, Norfolk has experienced more than its share of both triumph and tragedy. Town Norfolk was originally built on the ruins of the great Indian village of Ski-co-ak. Even before Christopher Newport first set foot at Cape Henry, King Powhattan had razed and burned Ski-co-ak and massacred its inhabitants, the Chesapeake Indians. In 1728, Col. William Byrd II, Virginia's first Atrue historian, pictured Norfolk as a town built on a level spot of ground upon the Elizabeth River. Byrd described, the streets are straight, and he also commented on the fabric of the people-- A[t]he two cardinal virtues that make a place thrive, industry and frugality, are seen here in perfection. This strength of character and strong work ethic would be sorely tested and clearly defined over and over again in the next 270 years.

For the next 48 years, Norfolk remained a thriving port, until in 1776, Lord Dunmore's cannons leveled the city. One of his calling cards, a cannon ball, can be seen in the aging, but still formidable, walls of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, the only structure still standing after the bombardment. Like the Phoenix from the ashes, a strong more vital city arose. In 1855, Norfolk, again a thriving port, was decimated by a yellow fever epidemic. Nearly a third of the city's population perished--many were buried in a mass grave on Hampton Boulevard. Before the city could reach its feet again, Norfolk suffered through the four years of the American Civil War and two decades of Reconstruction. The city again lifted itself up by the bootstraps only to look two World Wars straight in the eye.

Like many of its sister cities to the south, Norfolk was not spared from the advancing turmoil surrounding *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954; in 1959, public education came to a grinding and bitter halt with the schools officially closed and the schoolhouse doors locked and chained.<sup>109</sup> Having learned another lesson from tragedy, Norfolk picked itself up from the canvas, refocused, and went back to work.

The City of Norfolk has a history of overcoming tragedy with triumph. This constant reversal of misfortune is more than just good luck; yes, it is something more than that-- it is a reflection of the initiative, hard work, and character of the people. NQSI is more than just a response to the General Assembly or the political climate of the times; it is yet another reflection of the initiative, hard work, and character of the citizens of Norfolk.

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<sup>109</sup> See 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

## PARADIGM SHIFTS

In the late 1980s, then Superintendent of Schools Gene R. Carter (now Executive Director of Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) sent parents, teachers, and school officials scurrying to their dictionaries when he started talking about paradigm shifts. At that time, many educators did not know what a paradigm was and thought handling a paradigm shift might be more appropriate work for chiropractors than for educators. *Webster's College Dictionary* defines paradigm as a model or pattern. It lists mold, ideal, standard, model, and paragon as synonyms.<sup>110</sup>

Paradigms generally do not shift voluntarily; they most often shift because they must. In the 1860's and 1870's, the American Civil War and Reconstruction forever altered this country's paradigm of freedom; in the 1950s and 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement redefined this country's standard of equality. Although not as monumental a shift as from slavery to freedom, the American Civil War shifted another paradigm-- the structure of the newspaper story. Before that time, the standard newspaper article maintained the basic literary structure of a novel or short story. The current structure, that of an inverted pyramid, evolved during the war because the telegraph lines were frequently cut. Reporters started telegraphing their stories backwards just in case the lines were cut during transmission, a clear reflection of American pragmatism. Certainly civil wars often bring about dramatic paradigm shifts, but generally speaking early responsiveness to needs can result in less painful, but necessary, shifts in our paradigms. NQSI is Norfolk's effort to shift the public education paradigm before charter schools, tuition vouchers, and independent contractors do it for us.

## THE CONCEPT OF QUALITY

Quality is easily recognized, but somewhat harder to define. *The Random House College Dictionary* lists ten definitions and seven synonyms for the word quality. Two of those definitions apply rather appropriately to NQSI. The first high grade; great excellence refers to the desired product of this initiative while the other character with respect to fineness or grade of excellence characterizes the designers of this process. The leadership under the direction of the Norfolk School Board knew that this revitalization process must take the high road in order to be successful. Influenced by Stephen Covey's writings on the morality issues of education and their ultimate effect on educational reform, the leadership realized NQSI could not be just another top-down decision if it

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<sup>110</sup> WEBSTER'S COLLEGE DICTIONARY (3d ed. 1994).

were to be successful. Dr. Roy D. Nichols, then Norfolk's Superintendent of Schools, grasped full-well an understanding of this fact when he described the initiative as, It [is] a whole new way of doing business.

From Nichols' statement, much can be inferred, but the key element in his description of the initiative is the word *Abusiness*.<sup>@</sup> The school district has undergone close self-examination. It has closely studied how successful organizations work. The schools, all of the schools, will have a common focus, a common vision regarding their mission in Norfolk. The old way of doing business is gone forever.

Approaching education as a business is a relatively new concept. Just as a decade earlier the standards and process of professional writers were applied to the Writing Process Movement, in *A Passion for Excellence*, Tom Peters applied many of the successful practices of American business to education. Much of this innovation stemmed from the work of W. Edwards Deming in the 50s and 60s. His concept of Total Quality Management (TQM) was given much of the credit for the incredible economic recovery of Japan after World War II. The children of the Fifties and Sixties no longer look upon a product Made in Japan with the disdain of their youth; unfortunately, this now forty something generation does not particularly view Made in America as it once did either.

According to Deming, quality is achieved only when the needs and expectations of the customer are met or exceeded. Although, with all of its subtle nuances, the concept of TQM is complex, simplistically TQM brings together or incorporates parts of an organization into a whole. TQM refocuses a business' organizational management and human resource management systems on the same goals. Not only does the right hand know what the left is doing, they are both working together with the same purpose and same ultimate goals. TQM cannot and will not work if internal management systems are at cross-purposes; all components of the organization must form a synergistic relationship. As recounted in much of the TQM literature, when this synergism takes place, the two management systems become blended, integrated, aligned, and maximized. In the Nineties, the pioneering applications and adaptations of Deming's principles to education gave rise to the Schoolhouse of Quality movement. But how new a concept is this?

Ralph Waldo Emerson, America's pre-eminent philosopher, delivered his now famous The American Scholar speech to the Phi Beta Kappa members of Harvard during the heyday of the one room schoolhouse. Oliver Wendell Holmes, America's pre-eminent jurist, would later refer to this speech as America's intellectual declaration of independence. In this speech, Emerson discussed an ancient fable of man's creation. According to this fable, he recounted:

A . . . the gods, in the beginning, divided Man into men, that he might be more helpful to himself; just as the hand was divided into fingers, the better to answer its end.

Emerson then bemoaned the current state of society as its:

A . . . members have suffered amputation from the trunk . . .  
. [have become] Walking monsters, -- a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.

Was Emerson laying down the foundation for TQM over 100 years before Professor Deming?

Probably not, this idea is much older than that; in fact, it predates the birth of Christ. As the human brain provided the prototype for the computer, it seems that the human body may well have provided the design for TQM.

### **NQSI: THE VISION**

Unlike many current educational reform initiatives (which some scholars have equated to rearranging deckchairs on the *Titanic*), NQSI is a very real and systematic approach to school revitalization and renewal. Again, it is not just another feeble attempt at school reform or a flashy (yet unpronounceable) public relations acronym. Like the graveyard of the Atlantic, the floor of the educational ocean is lined with the hulls of innumerable shipwrecks-- the 40 Roles, the *Mary Rose*, modular scheduling, the *Atocia*, phase electives, the *Lusitania*, just to mention a few. The pedagogical ships perished due to poor seamanship and faulty design; the nautical ones sank due to poor seamanship and torpedoes.

Change does not come easily and meaningful change only comes with hard work, dedication, and focus. Like most good ideas, NQSI evolved from many different sources: parents, students, teachers, community leaders, principals, researchers, and central office personnel. Although no single person is responsible for NQSI, Dr. Thomas B. Lockamy, Deputy Superintendent for Academic Affairs and Accountability, is its chief architect. Every fact, figure, and concept regarding the project filtered either onto or from his desk at one time or another.

The old Chinese proverb Each generation builds a road for the next generation might very well describe Lockamy's belief in NQSI. He does not see it as a quick fix but as a beginning, a foundation for others to build on. At times, he seems more of an engineer than an educator always talking of roads and bridges, pathways and gates, doors and windows, connections and intersections. In education, much like with a jigsaw puzzle, all of the pieces must interconnect. Moreover, he envisions schools as gateways to the future not just for students but for entire communities. He views schools as the centerpieces of communities. If a

city's school system is revitalized; if it becomes the crowning jewel of the city; then the whole city will begin the process of renewal.

### **NQSI: THE BEGINNINGS**

In the days of the American country school, major restructuring generally consisted of either putting a new roof on the schoolhouse or hiring a new school master. In Virginia, the school teacher could be virtually anyone of high moral character who needed a job and could read, write, and cipher. The typical school day lasted around three hours and had to be worked around the spring planting and the fall harvest (flexible scheduling is a very old instructional strategy). After a relatively short period of formal schooling, the graduates either went back to the farm or were apprenticed to local craftsmen.

Of course, the American economy is no longer agrarian. Much to the dismay of many, as Will Rogers once said, A things are [not] like the good old days and probably never were. Today, restructuring educational systems requires more introspection than just determining how many shingles to buy or if Miss Brooks is a woman of high moral character who can count. Our society is much more complex. Our knowledge base is now bursting at the seams. All of these factors contribute to our view of our education system and our delivery of instruction.

Interestingly enough, when Norfolk first entered into the NQSI project, the leadership employed an initial strategy as old as America itself-- the Native American Medicine Wheel. They may not have called it by that name, but nonetheless that was the process they employed. The Indian Medicine Wheel was not necessarily a school of thought; it was more of a way of looking at the world. All around the outside rim of this wheel were different points, much like the points on a nautical compass; different members of the community stand on these points observing the events taking place in the center of the wheel. Although what is taking place in the center is really the same, at each of the points, the view of the center may be quite different.

Norfolk realized the importance of this century's old concept and solicited the various points of view from all of its community members (students, parents, teachers, administrators, businesses, and civic organizations) through needs assessment surveys, community forums, and town meetings. These opinions, views, and perceptions all played and continue to play a vital role in the ongoing development of NQSI.

The most far-reaching and specific data came from the NPS Quality Schools Initiative Survey Battery, an extensive and inclusive survey

consisting of teacher, student, and family questionnaires. These questionnaires assessed the district in seven specific areas:

1. School Discipline and Student Behavior
2. Management of School Resources
3. Open and Supportive School Administration
4. Instructional Leadership
5. Student Outcomes and Staff Morale
6. Effective Instruction and School Administration
7. Communication and Parent Involvement

The battery of questionnaires also provided a section for the person surveyed to assess an overall rating for an individual school and the district as a whole. This data is reflected in every element of NQSI.

### **INITIAL FRAMEWORK AND GOALS**

The initial framework of the Norfolk Quality Schools Initiative focuses on many of the tenets of the Effective Schools Research. Central among those tenets is the belief that effective schools must have a clear and focused mission. If effective schools must have a clear and focused mission, should an effective school system not have an even clearer and more focused mission?

The vision statement of the NQSI clearly defines the mission and goals of this program: Each student will achieve at a higher level of performance in a rigorous and caring environment conducive to continuous academic improvement. During the first phase of NQSI, the school district established the following five specific goals:

**Goal Area 1: *Standardized Testing***

The percentage of students in grades 3, 5, 8 and 11 scoring in the bottom quartile will decrease while the percentage of students in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11 scoring in the top quartile will increase.

**Goal Area 2: *SAT Testing***

- A. The average highest math and verbal scores of graduating seniors taking the SAT will increase.
- B. The percentage of graduates taking the SAT will increase.

**Goal Area 3: *Higher Level Classes***

- A. The percentage of 11th and 12th grade students taking higher level classes will increase.
- B. The number of students taking advanced placement tests in advanced placement courses will increase.
- C. The passing rate for students taking advanced placement courses will increase.

**Goal Area 4: *Extreme Absenteeism***

The percentage of students absent 15 or more days will decrease.

**Goal Area 5: *Dropout Rates***

The yearly dropout rates as defined by the Virginia Department of Education will decrease.

In establishing these goals, the leadership realized that Norfolk Public Schools had unique needs that had to be addressed as a system and by each individual school. The real thrust of this initiative is to aggressively move more students out of the lower quartile, while increasing the number of students in the upper quartile. The goal for all students, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic status, is higher academic achievement and school success. The overall goals are also further dis-aggregated to set specific goals for both minority and majority students with the intention of ultimately eliminating the achievement gap between the races.

**CHILDREN LEARNING**

In the conclusion of his The American Scholar speech of 1837, Emerson may very well have established the focus for NQSI-- Is not indeed every man a student, and do not all things exist for the student=s behoof? With the inception of NQSI, Norfolk Public Schools reexamined its belief system, its goals, and its identity. Because a school system=s logo and motto reflect its identity, in accordance with the new focus on NQSI, the school district also changed these. *Children Learning* supplanted the old motto *Believe-Achieve-Succeed*. The direct address of the old motto asserted and implied many positive concepts, but it also suggested a termination, an ultimate end to the journey of learning. Perhaps one could complete the learning process at the time of the one room school, but that is no longer possible today. As all parts of the organization must interconnect and have the same focus, the school system's motto provides an umbrella over the entire functioning of the school system. Thus, the ultimate goal and focus of NQSI is *Children Learning* -- all children learning at high levels.

The district's research revealed ten interconnected components of effective school systems. While these components work together like the ten fingers on Emerson's hands, the entire focus and all of the district's resources center on this simple, yet very complex, new educational paradigm, *Children Learning*.

1. *Children Learning . . . at high levels*
2. *Children Learning . . . up to required standards*
3. *Children Learning . . . at customer-centered schools*
4. *Children Learning . . . from well-trained staff*

5. *Children Learning . . . in Early Childhood Education Programs*
6. *Children Learning . . . with community and parental support*
7. *Children Learning . . . with up-to-date technology*
8. *Children Learning . . . through public relations efforts*
9. *Children Learning . . . with adequate resources*
10. *Children Learning . . . for a lifetime.*

## **STANDING BEHIND THE PRODUCT: DIPLOMA WARRANTIES**

The NQSI provides a fine assortment of quality tools for educators to employ. Of course, a tool is only as good as the craftsman who uses it. With NQSI, both the tools and the craftsmen are in place to get the job done and get the job done right. In the days of the one room school house, a master craftsman always stood behind his work. Poor quality was totally intolerable, and no excuses were acceptable. Thus, in the spirit of What [is] old is new, the school district is standing behind its product with a newly developed Diploma Warranty.

As stated earlier, quality is achieved only when the needs and expectations of the customer are met or exceeded. In developing NQSI, the district went to great lengths to discover and understand the expectations of its community. The warranty that Norfolk Public Schools is attaching to its student diplomas emphasizes those specific expectations. This guarantee is the school district's assurance to the community that its student graduates are a quality product. If the community is dissatisfied with that product for any reason, the district agrees to make it right by whatever means necessary. The district believes in its product and is standing behind it. Simply put, that is quality.

## **CONCLUSION**

As the old African Proverb says, It takes a whole village to raise a child. In the City of Norfolk, the education of a child is viewed as a collaborative effort among all members of the community. With the explosion of technology and the implosion of the family, it is more important than ever for schools, businesses, and community organizations to forge meaningful partnerships. NQSI is both a partnership and a contract with the community insuring a quality and meaningful education for all students.

Nothing good ever happens without hard work. Wide-eyed children deserve a quality education -- one that will last a lifetime. The parents, staff, and teachers of Norfolk Public Schools intend to give them that and more. No one knows what the final outcome will be for children of Norfolk and NQSI, but as another old proverb states, A thousand mile journey begins with a single step. With NQSI, the City of Norfolk has

already taken that first step; hopefully, it will be a very long and profitable journey. After all, Each generation builds a road for the next.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> References:

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