

**Report of the
Education Advisory Committee**

**Presented to
The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder**

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Committee Members

Dr. Robert D. Holsworth, Chair
Dean of the Virginia Commonwealth University College of
Humanities and Sciences

Heidi W. Abbott, Esq.
Attorney, Hunton & Williams

Dr. William C. Boshier Jr.
Professor of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University;
former Superintendent of Public Instruction for the State Board
of Education; former Dean of the VCU School of Education;
former Superintendent of Schools for Chesterfield and Henrico
Counties

Algenon L. Brown
Retired Principal of Richmond Public Schools

Dr. William H. Goodwin Jr.
Chairman of CCA Industries

Barbara R. Grey
Retired Principal of Richmond Public Schools

Melvin D. Law
Former Chairman of the Richmond School Board

Dr. Gary L. Rhodes
President of J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College

II. Introduction

The committee clearly recognizes that there is a great deal of positive energy in the city of Richmond directed toward the public school system. Hundreds of individuals and groups in the community volunteer their time and energy to promote academic achievement in the schools.

During the last few years, the city schools have begun to improve on test performance, including SOLs. And there are many dedicated individuals in the school system working to enhance the lives of the children and youth they serve.

The committee also believes that harnessing this energy for the sustained, long-term improvement of the system requires a willingness to tackle a set of significant problems that have evolved over time and inhibit allocating resources and energy in a way that can best benefit the students. The physical infrastructure of the school system has not been maintained or modernized; the considerable financial resources dedicated to the schools have not been prioritized and allocated in ways that best serve educational purposes; and the system's governance structure has not generated public confidence.

Mayor Wilder's "City of the Future" initiative represents an historic opportunity to advance the aspirations that the citizens of Richmond have for their city and, most especially, their schools. The vision articulated in the Mayor's plan requires a willingness to address head-on some of the issues that have prevented the public's aspirations from being realized.

In attempting to address these matters, the committee adopted a forward looking approach that emphasizes what can be done to enhance the operation of the school system. The recommendations that follow are offered in this forward-looking spirit. Some outline general concepts in an effort to encourage public dialogue as we move forward.

III. Efficiency Recommendations

Key Finding:

In a review of numerous state and local documents as well as through interviews of school and government personnel, the committee believes that the Richmond Public Schools can operate far more efficiently than it currently does. Total spending per student in the Richmond Public Schools is approximately \$3,000 per student above the state average, or about \$71 million more per year than the statewide average. More importantly, it seems that two thirds of the City's excess in expenditures is not directly related to classroom instruction.

By reforming fiscal and administrative practices, RPS can save money and use it to improve facilities and directly impact the services provided to its students.

Recommendation #1

The City Administration should work with RPS to consolidate duplicated services **immediately**, especially in areas such as health services, security, information technology, procurement, centralized accounting, maintenance, school nurses, and custodial services. Wherever possible, this should be undertaken prior to the 2006-07 school year.

Recommendation #2

The City Administration should be able to identify savings that can be realized through procurement reform and general business practices. This recommendation, in contrast with the first, focuses on operations and functions after consolidation has been completed.

Recommendation #3

Engage an independent firm to conduct a transaction audit and management review of the school division budget with reports submitted to the School Board, City Council, Mayor, and Superintendent. The study should focus on the use of school division resources. The audit and management review should be conducted immediately.

IV. Facility Recommendations

Key Finding:

The Richmond Public School System must develop a comprehensive capital improvement plan that provides the public and city entities with a road map for addressing the current and future facility needs of the schools. Capital improvement plans typically identify demographic trends that impact the schools, specify necessary renovations and plan new construction. Capital improvement plans identify funding mechanisms for accomplishing facility needs. Capital improvement plans also present a clear priority order in which major capital needs will be addressed.

Given the aging and often deteriorating infrastructure of the schools (though the City's funding for capital projects has totaled approximately \$137 million since 1992), capital improvement planning is critical to establishing a rationale for allocating public resources, ensuring accountability, and instilling hope for a better future to those families served by RPS.

Recommendation #4

The Richmond Public Schools should identify each school that should be closed due to inadequate facilities or declining enrollments and create a plan for closings to include attendance zones and timelines. These recommendations should be included in the 2007-08 budgetary submission.

Recommendation #5

The City Administration should hold a set of community forums this summer to listen to the public's ideas about how schools can become centers for Richmond neighborhoods. The primary focus of these discussions should be the renovation and construction of schools to address the comprehensive needs of the children and communities they serve.

Recommendation #6

In addition to developing an annual capital improvement plan for the school division, the School Board, Mayor, and City Council should also be engaged in reviewing and approving the state required six-year plan. The division should also have a 10-year capital improvement plan with annual revisions and updates to include capital needs and potential funding mechanisms.

V. Collaboration

Key Finding:

There is tremendous support in the community to enhance the performance of Richmond Public Schools. A variety of institutions, including those that are public, private, nonprofit and faith based, have exhibited through cash and in-kind support their willingness to work with students, teachers, and school administrators. More efficient and creative methods need to be utilized to ensure that these efforts are coordinated and results are measured.

Recommendation #7

The City Administration and the schools should work closely with area institutions of higher education, the city's major cultural institutions and the private sector in providing specialty centers for math and science, the arts, and high level technical training. Richmond should become a national model for collaborative practices between K-12 programs, institutions of higher education, the private sector and community-based institutions.

For example, the committee believes that the City, the schools, higher education, the Science Museum and the private sector could partner and develop a math/science school that could become a model for urban America. Similarly a collaboration among the city-based community colleges, major private sector companies, business associations such as the Chamber and the Greater Richmond Partnership, trade organizations and the schools could establish a national paradigm for high level technical training.

In particular, we recommend that the Mayor convene three planning groups to develop specific recommendations for a math/science school, an arts school and advanced technical training. The initial reports for each group should be completed by October 15, 2006.

Recommendation #8

The City Administration and the schools should work to coordinate private sector support for the schools to ensure that it is utilized for the highest priority goals and measurable results.

VI. Governance

Key Finding:

The governance structure of the Richmond Public Schools (RPS) can clearly be more effective and accountable.

Public confidence has eroded due to the failure to accomplish certain fiduciary tasks such as the development of an adequate infrastructure and the elimination of duplicated services. Poor communication and distrust between City Council and the School Board has been pervasive.

The public appears to have grown weary of fractious and counterproductive internal operations and this has further compounded the Board's credibility problem.

Recommendation #9

The City Council should conduct an expeditious review of the procedures for changing the method of School Board selection.

The plan for changing the School Board selection process should be submitted to the citizens of Richmond in an advisory referendum.

The public should be provided with an explicit opportunity to choose how members of the School Board should be selected under the City's new form of government. A change in governance has proven to be effective in cities such as New York City, Boston, Chicago, New Haven and Norfolk.