



Norfolk Public Schools

The Capstone

Building Continuous High School Improvement

October 15, 2003

A Newsletter for NPS High School Faculty & Staff

Volume 1, Number 1

What are we expecting to do?

The anticipated outcome of this effort is an action plan to improve delivery of services to students in our high schools. This plan will center on the results of discussions, research, and application involving three domains: Options and Opportunities, Expectations and Equity, and Relationships and Roles.

Throughout the year, instructional teams at each school will work on ways to meet objectives related to each of these domains. Teams will use a "Framework For Inquiry" to thoroughly investigate each of the domains listed above.

Future issues of The Capstone will focus on each of the domains and accompanying objectives. In addition, the results of the work of schools on these domains and objectives will be shared.

From the Editor...

Welcome to the first issue of **The Capstone**, a semi-monthly newsletter to inform staff members about continuous high school improvement efforts in Norfolk Public Schools. ***Teachers and other staff members in our high schools will receive copies of this newsletter every two weeks between October 2003 and April 2004.*** The newsletter will serve to inform staff about the efforts in the division to find ways to improve our high schools. The newsletter will include status reports, suggested professional readings, web sites of interest, and reports on conferences attended and site visits to exemplary high schools. In addition, there will be a section in which questions from staff, students, and community members will be answered.

Anyone interested in contributing articles for this newsletter can e-mail them to Denise Schnitzer at dschnitz@nps.k12.va.us. All types of submissions will be accepted including book reviews, article critiques, general informational articles, best practices, etc. We look forward to hearing from you as we continue on the journey of continuous high school improvement.

Why Continuous High School Improvement?

Teachers, parents, and students may question why we are concentrating on continuous high school improvement in Norfolk Public Schools. Some may echo the old adage: "If it ain't broke, then why fix it?" Our high schools have made continued and steady progress over the past several years. This has resulted in almost all of them meeting full accreditation by state standards; thus, the question is an obvious one. Yet, it also must be noted that only one of our regular high schools made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind Act. Reasons for not making AYP included not meeting the 95 percent participation rate for various subgroups and not meeting benchmarks in some achievement areas. This points out the need for work in getting students to attend school each day.

One indicator for making AYP yet to be determined is the graduation rate. This indicator requires 68 percent of our students to graduate from high school in four years. With ninth-grade classes currently being three to four times the size of twelfth-grade classes, it is evident that this benchmark will be difficult for us. Thus, there is a need to take a serious look at the way services and instruction are delivered to our students so that we can meet and exceed the graduation rate benchmark. We also have noted that some of our high school students who make passing grades (A, B, or C) in their classes are unable to pass the SOL end-of-course test for the same course.

Future editions of this newsletter will discuss other data and reasons for embarking upon this journey. Throughout this process, we will use the **NPS "A Frame"** to **analyze, align, act, assess, and adjust** as we develop a strategic plan around continuous high school improvement.

Some questions from the School Board:

- What opportunities and/or possibilities do we most want to ensure for all of our high school students?
- How do we begin to accomplish the task of reforming our high schools?
- How can the School Board work to ensure that there is a single focus to support continuous improvement of all of our high schools?
- How might we best ensure that each and every one of our high schools is a place where any and all of our students and families would feel they are getting a quality education?

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Our story so far...

We began our efforts around continuous high school improvement at a work session of the School Board in April 2003. At this session, members of the School Board posed several questions about high schools (*see list at left*). The Board gave full support to the continuous high school improvement effort and spent additional time discussing high schools at their summer retreat.

Several weeks later, Dr. Simpson met with high school principals to discuss continuous high school improvement. He expressed appreciation for the current efforts and successes. Simpson also explained that, while there was no public outcry for change, his expectations of success were for all students, not just the 70 percent who met the SOL indicators. Throughout this effort we will look deeper into the data and, as a community, come to other reasons for the need to improve high schools.

In this vein, several work sessions with principals took place over the summer months. During these meetings, central office staff and consultants from the Panasonic Foundation met with principals to discuss current realities, needs, and the question of whether there were groups of students in each of the high schools that were or were not served well by existing programs and practices.

In mid-August, there was a meeting with instructional teams from each high school and NTV. At this meeting, a general introduction was given concerning the continuous high school improvement effort. Instructional teams from each school then met separately to discuss their particular schools in reference to certain objectives and review of data. This meeting culminated with each school reporting the results of their discussion. The charge was then given to go back to the respective schools and continue the discussion begun on this date.

Support from the Stupski Foundation

The Stupski Foundation has pledged financial support to the continuous high school improvement effort. In return for this support, Norfolk Public Schools has agreed to be a learning lab for Stupski Foundation Alliance districts. This means other school divisions will visit NPS to learn from our efforts and our successes in a variety of efforts. This is the first year of a two-year investment by Stupski in Norfolk. In concert with the continuous high school improvement effort, the Stupski Foundation will provide monetary support to engage the services of an outside consultant to help develop a strategic plan, an evaluation design for the effort, and provide keynote addresses to various groups.

In addition to this consultant, funds also will be used to provide staff development and professional reading materials involving the most current thinking and practices as well as opportunities for school leadership teams to attend conferences on high school reform. School leadership teams also will be given firsthand opportunities to investigate best practices, effective systems, sub-systems, processes, and instructional practices in action by visiting high schools in other districts that have made significant improvement. Finally, funds from the Stupski Foundation will be used to effectively engage and communicate with various stakeholder groups about the effort.