

Remarks for Realtors Meeting
March 14, 2002
Dr. John O. Simpson

Good Morning:

Thank you for providing the opportunity to share information about Norfolk Public Schools. This will not come as a surprise to any of you, but as a school superintendent and a parent myself, I know that selling homes is not just about location! location! location! It is also about schools! schools! schools! You know it is much easier to sell a home in a neighborhood or a city when potential buyers are convinced their children will receive a quality education and that their real estate investment will be a wise one. We all know that schools are a big part of the decision-making process. Where can a buyer have it all? Both location and schools? There is no doubt about it. Norfolk is the place to live and learn!

Norfolk is a city rich in history, culture, and exciting revitalization. From a visit to the MacArthur Memorial to a trolley ride down cobblestone streets, visitors and residents alike cannot help but appreciate the abundance of Norfolk's past. With the Chrysler Museum and additions like the Harrison Opera House, Harbor Park, Nauticus, and the spectacular MacArthur Center, Norfolk's urban setting presents a wealth of opportunities for learning outside of the walls of the classroom. Instead of just listening to a symphony recording, our students attend live concerts. When world-renowned artist Wyland came to town, it was Norfolk students who helped him paint the mural that continues to grace our waterfront today. Yes, from Van Gogh to Wagner, Norfolk has it all. Our students are exposed to the world and to a world-class education.

And, I can't say enough about the strong military presence. Norfolk is proud to be called a "Navy town." Every day our schools welcome men and women in uniform. They enter through the schoolhouse doors as volunteers, mentors, and friends. They already give so much to our country. Yet, they find time to give generously to Norfolk's young people.

All of the districts represented here this morning will tell you how great they are and all the great things they are doing for kids. And, everything they say is true. Schools throughout Hampton Roads are among the finest anywhere. However, it is my turn now, and I plan to share with you why Norfolk Public Schools stands out from the rest. Our schools are not just great, they are world-class!

Like all school districts in Virginia, Norfolk has developed a number of initiatives and fine-tuned instructional strategies to meet the state's new standards. In 1999, less than 4% of our schools were fully accredited; in 2001, 40% met standards or are fully accredited. On top of that, we have been named the most improved district in the state by the Department of Education. We have had congratulatory visits from former Governor Jim Gilmore, U. S. Senator George Allen, and the State Superintendent, Dr. JoLynne DeMary. Our administrators and teachers are committed to identifying "best practices" and building on what works. With this kind of determination, there is no doubt we will meet the state's goal of full accreditation by 2006.

But, test scores and accreditation are only part of the story. We have more than 37,000 boys and girls in our schools — each with individual needs, talents, and interests. All of our schools stress the basics — those same skills that you and I learned so that we could be successful. But, today's youngsters also have more options than ever before. That is why students and parents are provided a variety of programs such as gifted, special needs, career/technical, and alternative education. Options like Ocean View, Northside, and Granby that focus on maritime studies or Chesterfield, Ruffner, and B. T. Washington where math, science, and technology are emphasized. We even have two schools, Camp Allen and Young Park, operating on a year-round schedule. Diversity is Norfolk Public Schools' strength: diversity in students and staff and diversity in available programs.

Bear with me for a moment while I "paint a picture" for you. Envision a school with stunning colonial brick architecture, parts of the building standing tall since 1939; other parts carefully crafted in 1998; a perfect blending of the old and the new. Once inside, you walk across a marble foyer and gaze at stunning display cases holding student art and awards. Sunlight pours in from the skylights in the impressive atrium. Labs are equipped with cutting-edge technology. You can almost feel the excitement students and teachers have about learning. Varied programs and courses of study are offered, including the prestigious International Baccalaureate program. Where can you find all of this and so much more? At Norfolk's Granby High School. But, not just at Granby. Another school opened its doors to innovation in 1978 and is still going strong today. At Ghent School, you won't find enclosed classrooms. There are no walls, no barriers. Instead, you'll find youngsters in grades K-8 learning in small groups in open spaces. Regardless of where a child lives in Norfolk, parents can choose Ghent. If they want an instructional program that is highly individualized and takes place across grade levels, facilitated by a team of four teachers,

Ghent School is the place. Interdisciplinary units of study capitalize on the many cultural advantages and historical sites situated nearby. And, by the way, did I mention that Ghent is among those schools already reaching full state accreditation?

I offer you two very distinct images: an almost new, state-of-the-art large high school and a 70's-era, innovatively designed elementary school; both strong schools with strong selling points. Both embody the innovation and academic excellence you will find in all of the public schools in Norfolk.

Through our many diverse programs and our commitment to quality teaching and learning for all, we are answering President Bush's call that "No Child Be Left Behind." It's what we've been doing all along. And, we are also making tremendous progress toward achieving our own vision of providing a world-class education. World class may be somewhat hard to define, but we all know it when we see it. World class is Tidewater Park being recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a Title I Distinguished School — the only school in Virginia; world class is Ruffner Middle School students taking credit-bearing high school Latin from a teacher at Granby High School via a distance learning computer network; world class is gifted students participating in advanced apprenticeship programs alongside NASA scientists and Ford engineers as part of the prestigious NORSTAR program; world class is Viva Hathaway, a teacher at Norview High School, who was recognized earlier this year by President Bush as the state's Presidential Winner for Excellence in Science and Mathematics Teaching; world class is Maury High School being the only South Hampton Roads' school ranked on *Newsweek's* list of best high schools; and, world class is the Norfolk Public Schools district receiving a Certificate of Commitment to Performance Excellence by the U.S. Senate Productivity & Quality Awards for Virginia.

If time permitted, I could go on and on. Norfolk offers all the key ingredients for success: rigorous promotion and graduation standards . . . 15,000 computers throughout the district . . . distance learning . . . television production facilities . . . parent and business involvement . . . support for students with special needs, one that has become a model for inclusion nationwide. And, there's more: school safety at an all-time high . . . discipline infractions down . . . zero-tolerance for guns, drugs and violence . . . attendance rates up and dropout rates down . . . small classes—average 19:1 in K-3.

Tell your clients about the success we're having with test results and with closing the achievement gap. Tell them about our graduates who last year earned \$11.4 million in scholar-ships to prestigious colleges and universities like Princeton, Cornell, Duke, MIT, West Point, and Yale. Tell them it is not every school district where 8th graders can choose from five different foreign languages including Japanese. Tell them the Strolling Silver Strings have been invited to perform all over the country and in Europe, and most recently at Governor Warner's inauguration. Tell them that for over 26 years, the Berkley Early Childhood Center has helped 3 and 4 year olds get off to a good academic start. Today, we have pre-K classes in 30 of the 35 elementary schools and offer it at four other locations as well. Don't forget to tell them that NORSTAR students flew their fourth experiment onboard the space shuttle this past December. Remind them that we provide a free PSAT test program for 11th graders who performed well on the test in their sophomore year. And, say something about our collaboration with Eastern Virginia Medical School for students interested in health and science careers. It is obvious: Norfolk is the place to be for quality education.

I told you I could go on and on. But, for now, take out your calendars and mark: August 22, breakfast with Norfolk Public Schools. On that morning, you will get to see Granby in "real time." We plan to share the exciting architectural plans for the construction of a brand-new Norview High School. The design for the major modernization of Blair Middle School will also be available. All of this and more. You won't want to miss this opportunity. We are planning some special touches and promise to keep the program quick and interesting. On August 22, Granby High School is the place to be!

For now, when someone asks you a question about the quality of Norfolk's schools, simply tell them that Norfolk Public Schools is synonymous with all students learning, with high expectations and standards of accountability, with respect for cultural diversity and learning styles and with highly qualified staff. But don't ask them to take your word for it. Invite them to tour our schools. Let them know that they will be welcomed into our buildings so they can experience first-hand the amazing educational opportunities being delivered daily. Tell them it may be hard to define "world class education" but they will know it when they see it. And, they will see it in Norfolk Public Schools.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to share the good news about our district. We look forward to a strong, successful partnership with our regional Realtors.