

January 13, 2015

At the special meeting of the Board of Supervisors of Prince Edward County, held at the Court House, thereof, on Tuesday, the 13<sup>th</sup> day of January, 2015; at 5:30 p.m., there were present:

Board of Supervisors

Howard F. Simpson, Chairman  
Pattie Cooper-Jones, Vice Chairman  
Calvin L. Gray  
Robert M. Jones  
Charles W. McKay  
C. Robert Timmons, Jr.  
Jerry R. Townsend  
Jim R. Wilck

School Board

Russell L. Dove, Chairman  
Dr. Timothy W. Corbett, Sr.  
Dr. Peter Gur  
Sherry Honeycutt  
Susan Southall Lawman  
Darin Thomas  
Lawrence C. Varner  
Beulah M. Womack

Absent:

Also present: Wade Bartlett, County Administrator; and Dr. K. David Smith, Superintendent.

Chairman Simpson called the meeting to order.

Mr. Bartlett stated the purpose of the joint meeting of the Board of Supervisors of Prince Edward County and the School Board was to discuss how to improve the SOL scores. The Board of Supervisors requested a report on the milestones, goals, and performance measures the School Board has established to help overcome some of the shortcomings of the last test scores in the 2014-2015 school year.

Dr. K. David Smith, Superintendent, began by discussing focused actions developed to make improvements which began last summer. The first preliminary scores received prompted them to take quick action; he said he directed principals to develop their school's improvement plans based on those preliminary scores. Work was done at the Administrative Retreat at the end of July, focus was established for the staff for the school year; this was announced at the opening activities of the convocation.

Dr. Smith said the changes that have been put in place affect all core subject areas and focus in three primary areas:

- Increasing student achievement
- Improving the professional work environment
- Improving the student learning climate

There were several test scores that remained the same or increased, including a strong increase in Math at Third Grade, which had previously been an area of concern. Fifth Grade Virginia Studies showed

a slight increase, well above the threshold for passing. U.S. History I also increased. Algebra I at the Middle School was at a 92% pass rate, which is a significant increase. Geometry at the Middle School level dipped a few points to 91%; the SOL threshold is 70% in those areas. High School Biology showed an increase as well.

One focus of concern is Third Grade Reading which showed a slight increase, but was five points away from the threshold for passing. Fourth Grade is the major focus for improvements at the Middle School. Their Reading and Math scores were farther from passing than they had been the previous year. In the Middle School, Fifth Grade Reading, Writing, Math and Science were all far from the threshold; all are areas of focus. Sixth Grade English, Reading, Math; Seventh Grade Reading, Math, U.S. History; Eighth Grade English and Math are all areas of concern.

Dr. Smith stated there were 60 students that took High School Algebra I; Geometry remained about the same but was not above the threshold. Earth Science took a dip but the impact over the past four years of the new tests – every time there's a revised SOL test, the standards are raised. It is not an indication the students are learning less but that the standards are higher. Everyone then works to meet the higher standards.

The focus of the efforts began with reassignments of a number of teachers. As vacant positions were filled, specific skills were sought to improve the instruction in those areas. The staff has worked closely with the coaches assigned by the Department of Education, and are working diligently with the teachers and aligning the three levels of curriculum: the written plan, the curriculum which is taught, and tested curriculum, which aligns with the SOL tests. This applies in these core subject areas.

Work has been done in-house and also with consulting curriculum experts; their work is yielding results and improvements. At mid-year, SOLs are not administered; the disadvantage of the accreditation plan is that one SOL test at the end of the school year is one day in a child's life, and determines the accreditation of the schools.

Dr. Smith said the state recognizes the weakness in that and as we understand it, the State Board of Education and the State Legislature are working diligently to revise that accreditation so that they're looking at broader measures instead of just these 34 test scores.

Dr. Smith said that in the summer, the curriculum is realigned in the core areas with the changes in the SOLs themselves, and pacing guides are developed to match. The SOL revisions and pacing guides are to ensure a teacher doesn't hit a favorite section of the topic and stay there for six weeks, shortchanging the rest of the curriculum. It helps to achieve a balanced flow of instruction and ensure continuity from classroom to classroom.

Teacher observations by principals have been refocused to confirm that teachers are teaching what is being tested. Interventions with low achieving students in Reading and Math are done at each school.

Dr. Smith stated he implemented a change just before Christmas; principals and teachers were requesting more targeted information about SOL performance. They wish to know what information can be obtained from a different type of test that would let them know at the mid-point of the year how students had done so far during the year. These formative tests are more diagnostic than anything else.

Dr. Smith reported another change in the SOLs and accreditation over the last few years is in the expectations for accreditation in Special Education; there is no place for a modified diploma in Special Education and those students are held to the same standards as the other students. Schools all over Virginia are taking steps to improve very targeted instruction that is focused on the standards of the SOLs. These are causing big changes in the way Special Education is taught. Another change made to improve Math instruction is a realignment of the Math classes at the Middle School. The pattern of low test scores were very concerning; it was determined there is no advantage to move students into advanced math classes at a very young age. Ten years ago, there was a push to teach Algebra to Sixth and Seventh grade level students. Most students are not ready for that; the Middle School Math curriculum has been realigned. This will move Geometry to the High School level and take it out of the Middle School. Algebra I will be taught at the Eighth Grade level or later; for those not ready it will begin at the Ninth or Tenth Grade level.

One of the shortcomings superintendents across the state have seen is the lack of re-take capability at lower grade levels. The elementary and middle grade students are not able to get a second chance to improve their score; it would help students and school performance scores overall for students to be able to retake those tests after a period of remediation. Work has been done to that end, and it appears the Legislature is interested in moving in that direction which will help students.

Dr. Smith said that several things were put in place over the last several years specifically targeted at helping student achievement, long term. The High School has a new master schedule with a seven-period day instead of the rotating eight-period day that had been in place for about four years. The goal was to achieve consistency day to day in time schedules, and the rotating schedule was not allowing for the kind of consistency that is needed at the high school level. Another change is the graduation requirement for high school students to align directly with the Virginia Standards; the purpose of that is to reduce drop-outs and increase the graduation rates. The shift in grading periods from six weeks to nine weeks reduced the amount of testing time and allowed for longer periods of instruction. There is subject-specific training for teachers that continues year round; specialists are hired to work with teachers to improve their teaching skills.

Dr. Smith stated student success isn't dependent upon the facts that are memorized but what is done with the information, the application of the information, and how it's synthesized with other information and applied to any situation that is faced in daily life. Because of that, the SOLs are shifting in a way that is requiring less drill and lecture as teaching methodology and more emphasis is placed on inquiry based learning and collaborative instruction models. Technology is used to enhance instruction in the classrooms; the students' interest is high.

Dr. Smith stated Science textbooks were purchased this past year; the curriculum is inquiry based and hands-on, completely different from lecture and reading from a textbook. Because of this, teachers are reporting the interest in Science is much higher than before.

Dr. Smith then discussed the professional work environment with a stress on common planning time. The schools have decided to organize common meeting times; faculty meetings and committee meetings are held Tuesday afternoons. There is also emphasis on developing a more collaborative work environment; teachers are learning to refine their skills in working together in collaborative teams, at a great benefit.

Dr. Smith stated improvements to the learning climate for students have been made; the Leader In Me program was implemented at the elementary school based on Covey's "Seven Habits." This is to strengthen student leadership, student motivation and learning, and it has a dramatic effect on energizing the school. The Middle School and High School also are working under similar programs.

Dr. Smith said the Positive Behavioral Instructional Supports Program (PBIS) has been implemented. This program was strongly stressed by the Department of Education, with a focus of teaching students the skills that they need in peer relationships and conflict resolution, to avoid some of the arguments, fights and disruptive behavior and to help kids learn other ways to resolve their day to day problems. A significant decrease has been noted in the number of discipline referrals for disruptive behavior; early indication is that it appears to be making a difference.

Dr. Smith then stated other changes that have been made include an increased level of CTE certifications; the dual-enrollment associate degree pathway that allows students to finish their associate degree while in high school; the elementary school reading instruction called the Level Reader Program; an aggressive approach in the last two years in being involved in truancy cases; and one that will be implemented is adding the second school resource officer at the Middle School. The Security Equipment Grant received from the Department of Criminal Justice is being used to increase cameras, security at entranceways and heighten the control of entrance to buildings. Student Support Teams have been developed at each of the schools; this is augmented with the Threat Assessment Teams that have also been implemented.

Dr. Smith reported that over the past four years, the graduation rate has increased from 76% to 87%. That's a difference of 25-30 additional students per year that are completing school successfully that were previously being lost to drop-outs. The graduation rate isn't as high as desired but the efforts from working on the individual student basis and meeting individual needs has really paid off. A few years ago the drop-out rate was 17% and it's about 7-8% currently. A significant improvement has also been seen by being able to lower the number of students found eligible for Special Education; sometimes misbehavior is diagnosed as a Special Education problem, and by working to solve this problem a different way, the School Division, over the past seven or eight years, has been able to reduce Special Education enrollment from 23% to 12% currently. This brings Prince Edward County's Special Education enrollment more in line with national statistics. Coupled with strengthening instruction geared toward the accreditation standards in Special Education can only improve the quality of education those students are receiving.

Dr. Smith stated the efforts will continue. The teachers are increasingly determined to see student achievement increase.

Supervisor Wilck questioned the impact on the SOLs due to the change in beginning Algebra in eighth grade instead of sixth grade. Dr. Smith said it allows more time to be spent on the basic level of instruction in math and basic skills. The other problem it seeks to solve is that students who start Algebra I in the sixth or seventh grade, moving to Geometry in eighth grade, when they move to High School, they only have one or two more math classes. Math is a subject that if the instruction is not continuous and not built upon prior learning, that gap of a couple years could put a student entering college into Math Remediation. Dr. Smith said the change was designed to help both ends of that instruction.

Supervisor Wilck said some problems were mentioned regarding reading in fourth grade; is that something Longwood University can assist with. Dr. Smith stated he would be glad to talk with Longwood [University] about that; the schools have targeted efforts underway now. Dr. Smith said the new principal there is a Reading Specialist, working in primary grades specifically.

Supervisor Timmons distributed packets of information from the Superintendent's website and the Virginia Department of Education. He discussed the graphs indicating a decline in Prince Edward County Schools' scoring. He said the students are not performing as well today as they were ten years ago. He asked how the Superintendent intends to do interim milestones and benchmarking, to make adjustments to these scores. He said he is concerned regarding the trend of education in Prince Edward County. Supervisor Timmons stated that each time he has talked with prospective businesses and other professionals about relocating to the County, they question the quality of the schools. He stated the Math program is a positive move, in targeting students with their learning and moving them to a higher level. He asked if the other core courses are going to follow suit or is this just intended for Math. Dr. Smith stated there has not been a restructuring for others like was done with the Math program, but the specifics that were named apply to all the core areas and they are all aimed at improving student tests. Dr. Smith said he and the State Superintendent have both made a statement about the decline in test scores that center around the introduction of new tests and revised standards.

Supervisor Timmons stated this trend continues over a ten-year period; he said in spite of the attempts, the scores are still going down. He said the school has to perform at a different level. There are no interim measurements to indicate the schools are doing better, that the students are performing better,

other than the end-of-year SOL. There has to be a process for a measurable milestone created so the Superintendent, the School Board and the community know the schools are doing better.

Supervisor Townsend questioned what will be done to improve Reading. Dr. Smith stated the elementary reading program, the Level Reader, is geared exactly to do that. The Middle and High school English and Reading are directly connected with the curriculum and the improvement of teacher instructional skills. The intervention and remediation for students are also in place; individual students are tracked in reading and math skills, and the teachers have to provide interventions based on individual students' needs, which personalizes the focus and instruction.

Supervisor Timmons stated the scores are still going down and there must be some adjustment made to turn the performance of the students around. There is a plan for the Math program to make a measurable difference; there is not a process to measure [progress] except the SOLs at the end of the year. He said it doesn't seem to be benefitting the community.

Supervisor Gray stated he wants to see a shift in the trends; he stated one of those is the graduation rate. He questioned what other indications are available to show a shift in the trend. Dr. Smith replied that the implementation of the elementary reading program, which is in its second year, as they grow through the system, all the ones that come behind them will use the same reading program. It will take time for that to have a major impact. Every other one of the instructional programs at the elementary or middle school levels will show progress as those students advance. The teachers are administering another diagnostic test that shows individual student patterns; these are done at the beginning of the year, the middle of the year and at the end of the year. These map the growth aligned with the curriculum content area and teachers use that to make the improvements. The mid-year information allows the teachers to re-focus at the mid-point of the year.

Supervisor Cooper-Jones stated she has a number of Honor Roll papers from her residents; these indicate that there is progress being made. If a report could be generated every nine weeks from each marking period, it would be beneficial to indicate to the students and the community that progress is being made. She stated the YMCA does an after-school program with the students four days a week and that has helped tremendously. She said these progress reports should then be published in the newspaper.

Dr. Smith said in addition to the YMCA's after-school program, there are others. The school has run an after-school program for years, for Reading and Math Tutoring. A second set of buses transport students home after their tutoring programs. There is an interest expressed from some members of the School Board for a year-round schooling plan.

Supervisor Gray asked if there are other entities outside of the school system that impact the score percentages, such as Juvenile Detention or jail, or if the scores are incorporated with those reported. Dr. Smith said some are but when they are calculated for the school report cards, they are factored in. The ones that are from other parts of the state that are housed here are not included.

Supervisor Gray then asked about any changes to the IEP. Dr. Smith stated that reducing the number of students that are misidentified in Special Education, but the other thing that has been done is increasing the effectiveness of instruction in Special Education; all of that is individual based on the IEP and the accommodations that are required. The expectation has been clarified at the state level that they are no longer allowing modified diplomas that set a lower threshold for graduation for Special Ed students. They are now being held to the same standard, which is causing revamping of the instructional program for Special Education students. There will be noticeable increases there as well, over time. It is hard to be specific about how long it will take to see improvements; there will be some over the first few years. It is an effort that is already underway.

Supervisor Timmons challenged the School Board to review test scores on a specific basis and publish the results of the midterm tests. This will put the information out to the public and if there is an interest in Prince Edward County, it will indicate how the schools are and what the standards are currently, and also allows the parents access to the data. It also gives the schools immediate information regarding the programs in place and what works or doesn't work.

Chairman Dove adjourned the School Board meeting.

Chairman Simpson declared the Board of Supervisors meeting adjourned at 6:37 p.m.