

# CLOSING THE GAP: WHAT WE'VE DONE, WHERE WE ARE, LOOKING AHEAD

A report to the Arlington Public School Board

by

the Arlington County Civic Federation Schools Committee

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## **CLOSING THE GAP: WHAT WE HAVE DONE, WHERE WE ARE, LOOKING AHEAD**

This is a report by the Schools Committee of the Arlington County Civic Federation. It was prepared in anticipation of the Superintendent's proposed FY 2007 budget, to review prior strategic initiatives to raise academic achievement and close the so-called "minority achievement gap" during the period of the first strategic plan (2001 - 2005).

Our report focuses not on what we have accomplished, but on what remains to be done. Consequently, it is a somewhat darker picture than that we usually see. It is not intended to denigrate or diminish those results we have thus far achieved in a task whose complexities are not always appreciated.

### **Executive Summary**

We found that the Superintendent proposed initiatives totaling more than \$30 million to achieve our goals of raising student achievement and eliminating the gap during fiscal years 2001-2005. When amounts in the base budget are considered as well, more than \$230 million appears to have been budgeted for these purposes.

Our efforts have achieved gratifying results in the increasing percentages of students passing the SOL tests and other measures of progress. However, we also found that there may be a hard core of 150-200 students (approximately 15% - 20%) in each grade who fail to meet the SOL standards, even when looked at longitudinally. We also found that existing records cannot tell us how many students continue to fail as they pass through our school system.

We found that if we project forward the rate of progress in closing the gap anticipated in the second Strategic Plan 2005-2011, we will not close the gap for African-American students until 2016-2017. The gap for Hispanic students at this rate of progress will not be closed until 2019-2020. Today's African-American second graders would be the first to break the SOL barrier. Hispanic students entering Kindergarten next fall would form the first cohort of Hispanic students to close the gap.

If we are going to move faster toward closing the gap, we will have to turn some substantial portion of that hard core of failing students into successful students. We believe that unless we begin to focus on the actual numbers of living, breathing students who need help rather than on the abstraction of percentages, we are unlikely to do so. We further believe that we need to have a clearer sense of priority among the many objectives, sub-objectives and indicators we have set to achieve our goals. Better identification of the obstacles we have discovered to achieving our goals and the most effective means to overcome them would make the best use of our resources.

Finally, we noted a disquieting undertone that perhaps factors outside the control of our schools may act to blunt the effectiveness of our efforts. What these factors might be is not defined nor is their importance evaluated. They are like unknown bacteria or

viruses that endanger our health but are not amenable to treatment at our present level of knowledge.

### A Word About This Report

This report is written in direct speech wherever possible. Consequently the word “we” appears throughout. The meaning of “we” depends on the context in which it appears:

- “We” means the Schools Committee of the Civic Federation whenever it speaks of the report, how it has been put together, etc.
- “We” means the Arlington School Board, the Superintendent of Schools, the school staff, and the whole community when it speaks of programs inaugurated, their evaluation, etc.

The School Board, the Superintendent, and the whole school staff are our chosen means to secure the kind of schools we want to have. Their successes are our successes; their failures are our failures. We have a common interest in seeking improvement wherever possible.

### **The First Strategic Plan’s Goals for Raising Achievement and Closing the Gap**

In the fall of 1999, the School Board adopted a Strategic Plan to guide the schools through the fiscal years 2001 through 2005. Two principal goals were to improve academic achievement for all students and to eliminate the existing achievement gap between white and minority students. The superintendent had proposed a more modest goal, but strong citizen support for eliminating the gap entirely led the School Board to adopt the more ambitious objective.

Although progress has been made during the first Strategic Plan, the goal has not been accomplished.

During fiscal years 2001-2005, we budgeted \$56.3 million in new initiatives for the Strategic Plan, of which \$30.6 million were budgeted to improve academic achievement and eliminate the gap. In FY2005 alone, we budgeted over ten million dollars in new initiatives towards those two goals. In addition to the initiatives, we appear to have spent approximately \$40 million each year in the base budget on the two goals, or \$200 million during the 5 years of the Strategic Plan.<sup>1/</sup> Thus, between the base budget and the new initiatives, we spent approximately \$230 million in four years on raising achievement and eliminating the gap.

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<sup>1/</sup> A February 19, 1999, memorandum from the Assistant Superintendent of Finance reported that over \$40 million was being devoted to closing the achievement gap before the Strategic Plan was adopted. Assuming that amount was not decreased in later years, it would total \$200 million over the course of the first Strategic Plan. However, this report looks only at special initiatives during that period. It does not include the base budget.

## How Was The Money Spent?

This question can not be answered directly, but the adopted budgets for the years 2001 through 2005 reveal how the money was **intended** to be spent.<sup>2/</sup> Budgets do not reveal how they are executed. According to the adopted budgets (eliminating as far as possible one-time expenditures), the picture looks like this:

In millions of dollars

<b>Initiative</b>	<b>Annual FY2005</b>	<b>Cum for 2001-2005</b>
Class size reduction	1.5	3.5
4-year old preschool	1.5	4.2
Gifted services	1.1	4.7
Elementary schools assistant principals	0.6	1.8
Sixth grade reading teachers	0.6	1.2
Skills program	0.6	1.0
Summer school	0.45	1.9
SOL test and remediation	0.45	1.15
Elementary art and music teachers	0.4	2.0
Special education integration (secondary schools)	0.4	2.0
Claremont immersion	0.4	0.8
Bilingual resource assistants	0.35	0.9

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<sup>2/</sup> We do not know the extent to which budget plans were altered by managerial decision, whether such decisions were consequent to exigent situations or managerial choice, or whether such decisions, if made, secured the objectives of the budget allocation or modified them in any way.

Our procedure was to take the budget allocation for the year made and multiply it by the years it was in effect to arrive at the cumulative amount expended during the period of the first Strategic Plan.

To arrive at the amount expended for each initiative in SY2005 (school year 2005), we took the separate amounts directed toward an initiative in different fiscal year budgets, added them together and used the sum as the amount devoted to that initiative in FY2005.

We eliminated such one-time items as we were able to identify. We did **not** include the consequences of changes in personnel compensation applicable to these initiatives.

<b>Initiative</b>	<b>Annual FY2005</b>	<b>Cum for 2001-2005</b>
HILT/HILTEX teachers	0.3	0.9
Alternative programs and extended day	0.3	1.0
Exemplary programs	0.3	0.6
Middle school assistant principals	0.2	0.4
Middle school guidance	0.2	0.4
Truancy initiatives	0.2	0.85
Minority achievement coordinators	0.15	0.65
Reading teachers	0.1	0.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>10.10</b>	<b>30.05</b>

At first glance, this imposing list of activities inaugurated or expanded to reach the Strategic Plan goals looks like a scatter-gun approach that throws money at a problem without any clear idea of the nature of the problem or how to deal with it.

However, looking at the list more closely, we may infer a logic that goes like this:

1. We are going to try to level the playing field by giving “at risk” children an extra year of pre-school that we hope will put them on a more even ground with other children as they begin Kindergarten.
2. Once children are in Arlington’s K-12 program, we are going to seek to raise the academic performance of all students through smaller class size, by augmenting resources provided to areas of greatest student difficulty, and by augmenting resources devoted to realizing the full potential of our most gifted students.
3. For students who continue to have difficulty, we are going to expand our efforts to get them back on track.
4. We are strengthening managerial and administrative leadership at the school level to try to assure effective implementation of these goals.

Does this logic hold up when we look at the full range of initiatives launched or expanded during the period of the first Strategic Plan? We can see that over half of the FY2005 expenditures on programs launched or expanded during the period of the first Strategic Plan are concentrated in six program areas. They also account for more than half of all additional funds devoted to raising academic achievement and closing the gap during the whole period of the Plan.

1. Trying to level the playing field by additional pre-school for "at risk" children	\$1.5
2. Trying to raise the academic performance of all students K-12	\$3.8
smaller class size 1.5	
smaller class size 0.5*	
sixth grade reading teachers 0.6	
reading teacher 0.1	
gifted services 1.1	
* shown as improving staff quality in 2003 budget	
3. Help children with difficulties	\$4.45
skills program 0.6	
summer school 0.45	
SOL test/remediation 0.45	
special education integration 0.4	
help with English language 1.05	
Claremont immersion 0.4	
Bilingual resource assistance 0.35	
HILT/HILTEX teachers 0.3	
alternative programs & extended day 0.3	
minority achievement coordinators 0.15	
4. Strengthening managerial and administrative leadership	\$1.2
elementary schools assistant principals 0.6	
middle schools assistant principals 0.2	
middle schools guidance 0.2	
truancy initiatives 0.2	
Outside four top priorities	\$0.7
5. Elementary art and music teachers 0.4	
6. Exemplary program 0.3	
Total:	\$11.65

Thus, it appears that the whole list of new and expanded initiatives supports the logic indicated by the six initiatives accounting for more than half the total expenditures devoted to raising academic achievement and eliminating the gap between white and racial and ethnic minority academic performance.

### Proof of the Pudding

How effective have these new initiatives been? Have some been more successful than others?

There is a substantial amount of information bearing upon student achievement and closing the gap to be found in the Annual Student Assessment Report and in Results of the 2004-2005 Annual Priorities. The latter is an especially rich source because it provides detailed information on 20 different indicators used by the schools to measure progress toward the goals of the Strategic Plan, together with historical data in many instances reaching back to the beginning of the Plan and earlier.

Unfortunately, the information focuses on measuring the degree to which the goals have been achieved, not on **how** progress was made. Thus, it is not directly related to the programs that received the resources to make the progress.

A number of the indicators are responsive to the reporting requirements of No Child Left Behind, thus designed to measure the effectiveness of the **individual schools** in meeting that program's requirements. They are not particularly helpful for our purposes.

Since the indicators are responding to annual priority goals, they deal mostly with percentages, the terms in which the annual priorities were set.

Both of these abstractions are useful for overall managerial decision-making, but we are interested in knowing the numbers of actual living breathing children we are talking about. For example, Indicator F of Priority 1 of the Strategic Plan called for, "Demonstrat[ing] rising student achievement among all students and all student groups (e.g., Asian, black, Hispanic, white) as measured by the . . . percentage of middle school students who pass the 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading SOL test will increase from 79% to 84%."

We know that we failed to meet this goal, although we achieved some improvement. For school year 2005, the percentage of students who passed the 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading test rose to 81%, but not to 84%. What we do not know is: How many individual students met the goal of this indicator? How many students do we have who still did not pass the test? What are their characteristics? Will our present programs, including the initiatives, help them? These are the real questions facing our schools.

Using the Annual Student Assessment Report for the years 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 and Results of 2004-2005 Annual Priorities, we find that our efforts have produced limited success. We looked at the cohort of students who were 3<sup>rd</sup> graders in 1998-99 who were tested again as 5<sup>th</sup> graders in 2000-01 and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in 2003-04. Our results follow:<sup>3/</sup>

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<sup>3/</sup> Unfortunately, we do not know how many of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders listed above were with us in the earlier grades, as compared to those who were transfers from other school systems. The Committee asked APS for this information, but was told that APS does not have it. The Committee finds this gap in APS' student information remarkable, especially considering the APS preference for longitudinal studies.



### Students failing SOL reading

	# of students <u>who failed</u>	total students <u>who took test</u>	<u>% Failing</u>
As 3 <sup>rd</sup> graders 1998-1999	245	1,024	24%
As 5 <sup>th</sup> graders 2000-2001	213	1,085	20%
As 8 <sup>th</sup> graders 2003-2004	222	1,052	21%
As 3 <sup>rd</sup> graders 1999-2000	236	995	24%
As 5 <sup>th</sup> graders 2001-2002	174	1,115	16%
As 8 <sup>th</sup> graders 2004-2005	201	1,119	18%

In order to deal with the reversal of progress between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, we added a new 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading program in FY2004. The first students benefiting from this initiative will be taking the 8<sup>th</sup> grade SOLs in May of 2006.

Looking at another indicator, the number of students needing remediation in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade according to the Degrees of Reading Power assessment at the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, the prospects for improvement appear brighter in the future. Of those tested in 1997-98 (rising 3<sup>rd</sup> graders in 1998-99), 167 were identified as needing remediation. Of those tested in 1998-99 (rising 3<sup>rd</sup> graders in 1999-00), 127 were identified as needing remediation. In contrast, by 2004-2005 only 48 rising third graders were identified as needing remediation. This has been followed by substantial reductions in the number of students failing SOL reading tests at the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade levels. These are hopeful signs for the future.

Results for other test for two sets of cohorts are as follows (see note 3, below, which also applies to this data):

### Students failing SOL mathematics

	# of students <u>who failed</u>	total students <u>who took test</u>	<u>% Failing</u>
As 3 <sup>rd</sup> graders 1998-99	190	1,040	18%
As 5 <sup>th</sup> graders 2000-01	248	1,092	23%
As 8 <sup>th</sup> graders 2003-04	150	1,068	14%

### Students failing SOL mathematics

	# of students <u>who failed</u>	total students <u>who took test</u>	<u>% Failing</u>
As 3 <sup>rd</sup> graders 1999-00	155	1,008	15%
As 5 <sup>th</sup> graders 2001-02	229	1,114	21%
As 8 <sup>th</sup> graders 2004-05	160	1,156	14%

### Students failing SOL history

	<u># of students who failed</u>	<u>total students who took test</u>	<u>% Failing</u>
As 3 <sup>rd</sup> graders 1998-99	236	1,038	23%
As 5 <sup>th</sup> graders 2000-01	365	1,048	35%
As 8 <sup>th</sup> graders 2003-04	166	1,021	16%
As 3 <sup>rd</sup> graders 1999-00	238	1,010	24%
As 5 <sup>th</sup> graders 2001-02	146	1,005	15%
As 8 <sup>th</sup> graders 2004-05	175	1,069	16%

### Students failing SOL science

	<u># of students who failed</u>	<u>total students who took test</u>	<u>% Failing</u>
As 3 <sup>rd</sup> graders 1998-99	180	1,039	17%
As 5 <sup>th</sup> graders 2000-01	200	1,079	19%
As 8 <sup>th</sup> graders 2003-04	89	1,038	9%
As 3 <sup>rd</sup> graders 1999-00	180	1,011	18%
As 5 <sup>th</sup> graders 2001-02	218	1,151	19%
As 8 <sup>th</sup> graders 2004-05	115	1,121	10%

A more complete table showing SOL test results for major subject areas for all levels and all years through 2004-2005 is at the end of the report.

### What Program Evaluations Tell Us

An evaluation of Minority Achievement Programs in Arlington Public Schools, June 2004 focused on three programs that directly support the academic achievement of students:

Minority Achievement Coordinators (approx. \$1.1 million since FY2002)<sup>4/</sup>

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<sup>4/</sup> The Superintendent's proposed budget for FY2003 indicates there were 4.7 minority achievement coordinators in FY2002 (Proposed 2003 Budget, p. 6-29). The budget indicates an additional coordinator was added that year at a cost of \$52,000. Assuming there were 4.7 coordinators in 2002 and 2003 and 5.7 coordinators in 2004 and 2005, total salary cost at \$52,000 each would be \$1.08 million. The amount is rounded to \$1.1 million to account for salary increases and benefits costs.

Project Greater Opportunities (Project GO) (approx. \$1.3 million since FY2001)<sup>5/</sup>  
The George Mason University Early Identification Program (approx. \$ .03 million since FY2003)

The report also evaluated Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA), a staff development program that indirectly supports student achievement.

The report was critical of the Minority Achievement Coordinator program, finding it under-staffed, too buried in paperwork, and hampered by lack of continuity in leadership.

Project GO was likewise criticized for lacking focus and overall direction. The report recommended that funds currently devoted to Project GO be redirected to other programs that might better serve the purpose of improving minority academic achievement.

The GMU Early Identification Program was generally given high marks, but its potential effectiveness was seen as blunted by a lack of participation by black male students and by a high rate of attrition during the four-year program.

A by-product of this evaluation study was a parent evaluation of important indicators of minority academic success. Parents were particularly interested in **enrollment in advanced courses** and **students graduating with advanced diplomas**.

#### Annual Priorities 2005-2011 Strategic Plan.

The Annual Priorities 2002-2003, 2003-2004, and 2004-2005 are reports that chronicle the extent to which Arlington Public Schools achieve their annual performance goals.

The 2002-2003 annual priorities include five indicators measuring rising student achievement. The number of indicators was increased to nine for 2003-2004 and to eleven for 2004-2005.

The 2002-2003 annual priorities include seven indicators measuring reduction in the gap between white students and black students and between white students and Hispanic students. There are nine indicators in the 2003-2004 and in the 2004-2005 annual priorities.

Taken together the reports show that the annual goals set for demonstrating rising student achievement have not been easy to reach.

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<sup>5/</sup> We have had 5 Project GO Reading/Skills teachers at 7 elementary schools. At an assumed average cost of \$52,000 per teacher for 5 years, the total is \$1.3 million.

One red flag has been the difficulty in obtaining consistent, reliable figures on the important issue of graduation rates. In 1999-2000 the graduation rate stood at 85%.<sup>6/</sup> By 2003-2004, it had fallen to 81%. The goal for both 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 was set at 83%, lower than the 1999-2000 level. The 2005-2011 Strategic Plan reports entirely different and higher graduation rates, purportedly using the same definitions. For 2003-2004, the graduation rate is reported as 87% and for 2004-2005 as 86%. There is no excuse for two documents from Arlington Public Schools coming out at the same time using the same definition for an observable fact having different numbers for that fact.

Another red flag is our inability to reach our targets for the reduction in the drop out rate. There probably is some irreducible practical minimum for a drop-out rate. Is it around 2%? Or is some figure between 1% and 2% achievable? Are there any experience data from other school systems or are there any studies that could help us set a reasonable goal? It is instructive to note that the 2005-2011 Strategic Plan has an objective to reduce the drop-out rate, but sets no goals.

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<sup>6/</sup> The graduation rate in both sets of numbers as measured by the Virginia Department of Education by No Child Left Behind is calculated as the number of students receiving a diploma divided by the sum of:

- the number of students receiving a diploma, a certificate of attendance or a GED
- plus
- the number of students in grade 11 who dropped out in the previous year
- plus
- the number of students in grade 10 who dropped out two years earlier
- plus
- the number of students in grade 9 who dropped out three years earlier

Thus, the denominator looks like the potential number of students who could have been in grade 12 and could have received a diploma.

Looking at the two indicators regarded as important by parents interviewed in the George Mason University Early Identification Program, enrollment in advanced courses and improvement in graduation rates, we note

Grade 8 Enrollment in Algebra I

% Enrolled	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005
Black	12	21	18	25	22
Hispanic	10	13	18	23	28
White	52	55	60	73	78

The rapid growth in white enrollment actually widened the gap. If we look at numbers instead of percentages, the picture changes somewhat.

Counts of Students Enrolled

	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005
Black	21	41	33	48	40
Hispanic	41	51	72	82	115
White	291	316	344	418	431

Thus, the number of Hispanics enrolled in Algebra I showed continuous growth, almost tripling by the end of the period, while Black enrollment growth seems to have stalled.

We attempted to use the indicator entitled Gap in the Enrollment in Advanced Courses, (Arlington Public Schools Results of the 2004-2005 Annual Priorities, p. 18) but we found it useless. We also looked at tables on pages 26-27. We found no help with these either.

We wanted to know how many students by race and ethnicity were enrolled in advanced courses. No luck. We were interested in knowing what proportion of each group was enrolled in advanced courses. No information available. What we get is that 42% of the grade 6-12 population accounts for 70% of the enrollment in advanced courses, that 15% of that population accounts for 7% of advanced course enrollment, and that 32% of the grade 6-12 population accounts for 11% of the grade 6-12 school

population and 12% of the enrollment. We could not arrive at a consistent figure for the total advanced course enrollment.

It seems to us that the description of this gap and its statistical presentation is worth reviewing. Regardless of its shortcomings, the table clearly shows that minority students are not taking advantage of the advanced course offering.

In the first instance, it seems that the public purpose would be served by seeking out and encouraging minority students who can do the work to stretch themselves to enroll in advanced courses. A straight forward count of students enrolled would show whether our efforts are having any success and how much.

An accounting of students by number of advanced courses taken would be a further refinement. Calculations of percentages and the calculation of whatever gap one desires to measure would follow, but the basic place to start is by counting the unduplicated number of students taking advanced courses.

### Site-Based Survey

In the spring of 2005, the Department of Planning and Evaluation conducted a Site-Based Survey of parent and teacher evaluations of individual schools. One question asked both of teachers and of parents was “How would you rate the job your school is doing in narrowing the achievement gap between white and minority students?”

Another question asked only of teachers was “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” One of the statements was, “APS is allocating the right amount of resources towards narrowing the achievement gap between white and minority students?”

We did not consider the parent answers to the first question because the overall response was only 31% meaning that we don’t know anything at all about what the other 69% of the potential respondents think.

Teacher overall response rates were a more respectable 70% from a 100% sample. For individual schools, however, the response rates varied widely: from 92% to 48% in elementary schools; from 79% to 39% in middle schools (only one school below 68%) ; from 75% to 55% in high schools.

The summary report available to us notes only the highest response to the questions asked. Thus, we don’t know the full range of responses from Excellent to Poor or from Very Satisfied to Very Dissatisfied of the teachers.

34% of the teachers in elementary schools felt that their school was doing an excellent job in narrowing the achievement gap; 22% of the middle school teachers thought so as did 24% of the high school teachers.

30% of the elementary school teachers strongly agreed that Arlington Public Schools are allocating the right amount of resources towards narrowing the achievement gap; 29% of middle school teachers felt the same way; and 31% of the high school teachers felt the same way. Teacher attitudes as measured by these two statements are very important. We would have a better understanding of the factor if we knew the full distribution of these responses.

### **Some Observations For The Future**

#### 2005-2011 Strategic Plan

We have just adopted a Strategic Plan for the years 2005-2011. It contains four goals, 19 objectives, 12 sub-objectives and 117 indicators of our progress toward achieving our objectives and meeting our goals, together with annual numerical targets to be met for most of the indicators. We even have annual targets for numbers of individual students and schools receiving awards in competitions.

The goal of ensuring rising achievement has four objectives, 8 sub objectives, and 40 indicators. The gap in student reading on grade level at the end of grade 2 will be eliminated by the end of the plan period. There will be a decrease in the gap in student reading level at grade 6, but the size of the present gap is still to be determined and there are no annual targets for reduction of the gap.

Although the goal is to eliminate gaps, it is clear that the goal will not be reached by 2011. The SOL gap for African-Americans will be reduced by half by the end of the Plan. At the rate of progress indicated, the gap would be closed only in 2016-2017 and the gap percentage of African-American students passing at the advanced proficient level would be closed in 2021-2022. These gaps would be closed for Hispanic students in 2019-2020 and 2027-2028.

The annual targets for indicators in every case show a predetermined, inexorable march forward at the rate of 1,2,3 or 4 percentage points per year.

The only thing the Strategic Plan lacks is the exposition of a strategy **describing how** to meet any of the objectives or reach any of the goals.

We don't seem to have a clear sense of priority as among the objectives we set forth to reach our goals. Nor do we seem to have any sense of the nature of the obstacles we need to overcome to reach our priority goals, nor any sense of what we need to do to overcome them, nor do we seem to have any sense of urgency about getting about the business of overcoming them.

Perhaps the indicated slow progress toward achieving important goals of the Strategic Plan, the apparent lack of priorities as among objectives and the apparent lack of urgency in their achievement, reflects not a lack of concern, but a lack of knowledge about the causes of the gap. This, in turn may inhibit our ability to choose priorities more

effectively or to proceed more rapidly toward the elimination of the gap.

### Strategic Plan and Annual Budgets

We use the Strategic Plan to build annual budgets. When we are proposing to add new initiatives to meet the goals of the Strategic Plan, we should be able to:

1. describe the specific problem the new initiative is designed to overcome or ameliorate;
2. describe our understanding of the importance of the problem;
3. describe our understanding as to the magnitude of the problem;
4. describe how the proposed new initiative will overcome or ameliorate the problem;
5. indicate when results of the new initiative are expected to appear;
6. indicate why the new initiative requires additional resources and cannot be met by reprogramming existing resources.

To do this successfully and to make sure that limited resources are devoted to most urgent needs, we need to disaggregate our data to specific grade levels and subject areas to know how many students need to show improved academic performance at each grade level and subject area.

Moreover, we need to discipline ourselves to make sure that we clearly identify which of our sub objectives and indicators are of priority importance. For example, is it more important to close the gap in the number of grade 10 students passing Algebra II at the end of grade 10 with a C or higher or is it more important to close the gap in the number of students receiving awards at the national level of Scholastic Art Awards?

As we review what we have done in the past and the outlook for future progress toward the elimination of the gap in academic achievement between racial and ethnic minority students and white students, we are uneasy about our approach that, on the whole, emphasizes new initiatives that benefit the whole school population rather than initiatives that are directed toward specific needs of those who lag behind. True, our pre-Kindergarten program is specifically targeted to benefit minority pre-schoolers. The extended day program and the middle school reading program should also be beneficial. The time is not yet ripe to evaluate effectiveness of these programs, but by 2009-2010 they should receive careful scrutiny.

The minority achievement programs that have been evaluated uniformly appear to show disappointing results. They show that we cannot be faulted for trying but that our efforts have had very limited effectiveness. We need to retool, modify, or abandon programs as seems prudent and expeditious to advance our objective of closing the gap. If existing programs fall short of achieving our goals and over time have shown little prospect of doing better, it is not shameful to abandon them and to try something else.



Our penchant for preferring generalities is shown in the way we define progress in terms of closing the gap over all SOL test for all grades. That may be a useful indicator of overall progress but it is of no value in addressing the specific shortcomings that lead to the gap. The gap will be closed only when the gaps in specific subject areas at specific grade levels are closed.

We need also to focus on the number of students who need additional help in specific subject areas at specific grade levels rather than on percentages of students passing or failing the tests. We need to remember that we are dealing with discrete individuals at specific grade levels who are lagging behind in specific subject areas.

As we increase objectives and goals to include art and music, we need to keep our focus on the core areas of our educational program.

### A Different View

When we were formulating questions for the School Board and the Superintendent for the December Civic Federation meeting, one of the questions was:

“What are the most significant factors that inhibited the achievement of our strategic goal to eliminate the minority achievement gap during the last five-year strategic plan?”

The Superintendent’s response was to list the key variables that account for the gap

- Expectations
- Quality of teaching and classroom interactions
- Access to opportunities
- Support, involvement of parents and community

We accept these as key variables relevant to success in the education of our children. We have not been able to see them as specifically applicable to overcoming the achievement gap.

Of the four, only the first three of these are directly related to classroom instruction and under the control of the School Board and the Superintendent. The fourth key variable is vitally important but can only be influenced, not controlled, by the actions of the Board and the Superintendent.

In order to better appreciate the Superintendent’s appraisal, we reviewed materials used in this report to find out what new evidence they might offer.

We found a paper entitled Overcoming the Achievement Gap written by the Superintendent which appeared in The Citizen to be particularly useful. In Part One (Citizen Summer 2001) the Superintendent, after examining the number and percentage of students receiving free or reduced meals found that while it is an important indicator, “it leaves much to be explored to explain the achievement gap.”

He went on to say that, “It is our belief that a great deal of the explanation may be found in factors such as school and teacher practices, parent involvement and support, and youth culture. **If true**, such a finding is encouraging because schools **can** exert an impact on these factors.”

In Part Two, the Superintendent wrote, “To have an impact, our efforts must focus on one of more of the following variables:

- classroom interactions, including teacher expectations;
- access to educational opportunities;
- the nature of school personnel; and
- parent and community engagement.”

Comparing these variables with those enumerated by the Superintendent at the Civic Federation’s December 2005 meeting, we note that he eliminated the variable “the nature of school personnel” that had to do with recruiting “a more diverse array of teachers” in order that we “have in the schools as role models teachers and administrators who are representative to the extent possible of the diversity of the student body.”

In his Civic Federation presentation, the Superintendent divided and expanded the first of the variables set forth in his Citizen articles to separate out teacher expectations as a separate variable and to expand “classroom interactions” to read “Quality of teaching and classroom interactions”.

In neither formulation did the Superintendent address the variable “youth culture.”

The Citizen articles added a description of Teacher Expectations Student Achievement (TESA), “a staff development program focusing on teacher behaviors that research links to higher student achievement, especially for minority students.” The Citizen articles also mentioned Parent Effectiveness Student Achievement workshops.

We could find no references to either of these programs in the 2005-2011 Strategic Plan. The Results of the 2004-2005 Annual Priorities shows that 861 teachers were trained through the TESA program during the first Strategic Plan. An evaluation of the TESA program was generally favorable but contained disquieting comments that suggested that not all administrators, principals, and “building level staff” support the program.

We could find no further reference to the Parent Effectiveness Student Achievement program.

As a consequence, we are unable to evaluate the extent to which efforts to close the gap in the first Strategic Plan focused on these variables or the extent to which this focus helped to close the gap.

When we formulated our questions for the School Board and the Superintendent, we were looking for some specificity that would help us understand the direction we were moving or should be moving to close the gap. We were looking for something that would indicate the **strategy** we are following to achieve our goals.

It will not be easy for citizens to understand and evaluate annual priorities and budget proposals unless it can be shown that there is a relationship between one or more of the key variables and budgetary proposals for resources to close the gap. This is a critical factor affecting the key variable of citizen support for resources adequate for the task.

Arlington County Civic Federation Schools Committee  
William Barker  
Barbara De Pauw  
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Herschel Kanter  
Roye Lowry  
Roger Meyer  
James Schroeder  
Timothy Wise  
Beth Wolffe, Chairwoman

March 16, 2006

Grade	Year	English Reading			English Writing			Mathematics			History			Science		
		# Tested	% Pass	# Failed	# Tested	% Pass	# Failed	# Tested	% Pass	# Failed	# Tested	% Pass	# Failed	# Tested	% Pass	# Failed
3	2004-05	1081	87.8	132				1232	95.6	88	1164	95.8	88	1172	95.5	88
	2003-04	891	82.5	156				893	94.5	83	868	92.6	83	867	94.0	83
	2002-03	1036	82.8	178				1057	89.4	83	1032	92.4	83	1031	91.9	83
	2001-02	958	84.9	145				981	89.2	85	969	88.2	85	983	86.7	85
	2000-01	996	79.5	204				1002	88.5	80	1005	83.2	80	1005	84.5	80
4	1999-00	995	76.3	236				1008	84.6	76	1010	76.4	76	1011	82.2	76
	1998-99	1024	76.1	245				1040	81.7	76	1038	77.3	76	1039	82.7	76
5	2004-05	1242	90.3	120	1251	93.0	88	1266	87.9	90	1108	92.8	90	1216	87.5	90
	2003-04	1104	87.7	136	1092	90.4	105	1111	82.4	88	1019	91.2	88	1069	89.1	88
	2002-03	1110	86.6	149	1088	88.6	124	1103	79.5	87	986	83.9	87	1082	84.8	87
	2001-02	1115	84.4	174	1119	91.1	100	1114	79.4	84	1005	85.5	84	1151	81.1	84
	2000-01	1085	80.4	213	1089	87.5	136	1092	77.3	80	1048	65.2	80	1079	81.5	80
6	1999-00	1092	77.1	250	1100	83.8	178	1105	74.1	77	981	65.0	77	1099	73.5	77
	1998-99	1061	79.3	220	1039	86.3	142	1076	67.8	79	2141	54.6	79	1066	77.6	79
8	2004-05	1119	82.2	199	1144	76.4	270	1156	86.2	82	1069	83.6	82	1121	89.7	82
	2003-04	1052	78.9	222	1093	80.8	210	1068	86.0	79	1021	83.7	79	1038	91.4	79
	2002-03	1114	70.4	330	1120	79.9	225	1125	83.2	70	1104	78.4	70	1110	86.9	70
	2001-02	1073	70.9	312	1048	81.9	190	1073	76.6	71	1147	72.8	71	1054	86.7	71
	2000-01	1046	74.5	267	1051	78.8	223	1035	75.3	75	1076	53.8	75	1022	86.0	75
Adjusted pass rate	1999-00	1038	74.5	265	1056	78.0	232	1035	75.5	75	1030	51.7	75	1036	84.1	75
	1998-99	1102	71.1	318	1098	75.9	265	1102	72.7	71	2142	52.2	71	1095	81.6	71