A Journey Towards Equity & Excellence for All. No Matter What.

“This is the story of how one school division has navigated through the coronavirus pandemic; the lessons we have learned along the way; and how those lessons have helped us shape plans for an improved future.”
— Dr. Sharon I. Byrdsong, Superintendent

A summary of the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years
A Journey Towards Equity & Excellence for All. No Matter What.

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A MESSAGE FROM NPS’ CHIEF NAVIGATOR

Dear Friends of Norfolk Public Schools,

We can all agree that the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years were historic collectively and life-altering individually. That most certainly proved to be the case for me. On February 19, 2020, I became the newly appointed superintendent of Norfolk Public Schools (NPS). Then, a mere 23 days later, on March 13, 2020, Governor Ralph Northam announced the closure of the Commonwealth’s schools in an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). It was, as we all know now, a decision that remained in effect for the rest of the 2019-2020 school year. Indeed, for most of the state’s school divisions, closure also extended well into the 2020-2021 school year.

Norfolk Public Schools is publishing this examination of our response to the pandemic for two key reasons. First, it seems appropriate to celebrate our endurance and ingenuity during what could be labeled as the “worst of times.” Second, it is also important to capture, for the sake of posterity, the lessons we have learned. In the summer of 2020, during the ongoing press of the coronavirus crisis, NPS committed to the framework of Drive for Five. In essence, division-wide we focused upon five visionary goals as our GPS, so to speak, intent on moving in the direction of equity and excellence for all — even in the face of a worldwide pandemic!

So, please review this document and take a look at how NPS performed in these goal areas. Together, we should examine what worked well and what we need to improve upon to help ensure continued progress. After all, at this writing the pandemic is not over, so continued vigilance and innovation will be required of us. However, before you start turning the pages here, let us also take a moment to acknowledge all who helped us to successfully navigate our altered reality. So, thank you to:

Our teachers who did whatever it took to uplift children;
Our building principals who managed and led the work that had to be done to keep our schools operational;
Our school nutrition staff who prepared and disseminated nutritious meals to ensure that no child faced hunger throughout the pandemic;
Our custodians and facilities staff who kept our buildings safe, healthy, and clean;
Our curriculum staff who guided the pace and content of instruction;
Our information technology staff who worked to close the digital divide in NPS;
Our division and departmental leadership teams who steered the course operationally; and
Our support staff who ensured that important day-to-day business did not grind to a halt just because work, as we knew it, had changed dramatically.

We also appreciate our students who proved to be resilient and eager to continue learning and their parents and guardians who were our partners in providing productive, at-home learning environments. In addition, “hats off” to our supportive city leaders and community members. Despite all the hardships the pandemic presented, we proved that together we would do whatever was necessary to ensure the children of Norfolk Public Schools could still learn and thrive. No matter what.

Sincerely,

Dr. Sharon I. Byrdsong
Superintendent

On March 15, 2021, NPS’ younger students returned to school. Governor Ralph Northam was on hand for the occasion.
As school year 2019-2020 drew to a close, the leadership of Norfolk Public Schools examined how the school division could move ahead to support students no matter where they fell on the learning spectrum. A beginning point was to explicitly identify goals in tandem with schools’ leadership teams that would support equity and excellence for all, despite the fact that the country was still in the midst of battling a pandemic. Having these goals written down signaled a commitment to evaluating school and school division progress in a very targeted context.

The result of this planning was the framework now known as Drive for Five: Five Goals for Achieving Equity and Excellence for All. Its five goals are:

1. We will work to improve students’ academic performance while integrating social-emotional learning into daily instruction.

2. We will attract and retain highly qualified, effective teachers to teach our students.

3. We will commit to improving our aging infrastructure so that our students are educated in school buildings that are worthy of them.

4. We will be more purposeful and strategic in developing and sustaining effective partnerships with our families and other community stakeholders.

5. We will be more intentional in our efforts to foster a division-wide culture of caring.

The ensuing pages of this publication outline examples of progress made in each goal area. Please note these are highlights only and do not reflect the entirety of what was accomplished in school years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. In short, this is a “peek under the hood” at the engine that fuels the work of public education in this city.
During the pandemic, one of the overriding challenges was to engage all students in learning and not to overwhelm them as they adjusted to their in-home classroom environments. Following is an overview of supporting strategies Norfolk Public Schools (NPS) deployed:

- The most pressing challenge at the outset of school closure was to ensure that students could continue their education with fidelity. As a first step, Learning-in-Place (LIP) packets were developed for all grade levels and posted online, but there were many families that did not have Internet access and/or supportive technology. To address that need, hard copies of the LIP packets were distributed through all the meal service sites operating at schools. LIP packets generally covered a three-week period of instruction before the next distribution began. Their availability was communicated through BlackBoard voicemail messages left at students’ homes, npsk12.com, and NPS’ social media channels.

- At the same time the LIP packet distribution process was taking place, NPS leadership began organizing to close the digital divide in record time. Consequently, in April 2020, NPS embarked upon a large-scale effort to address that gap by providing mobile devices (laptops, Chromebooks, and iPads) to every student who needed a device. Mobile mifi devices also were provided to families who did not have Internet access or who expressed a need for additional resources in this area. This commitment continued throughout school year 2020-2021.

- As educators, we are aware of the critical need for children to have nutritious meals throughout the day to foster their academic, physical, and social-emotional well-being; therefore, continuing with the school division’s breakfast and lunch programs during closure was an immediate priority. On the heels of the Governor’s closure of schools in March 2020, NPS set up 12 Grab-N-Go meal distribution sites and three sites at community centers which were served by school buses. In May of that year, five more school sites were added, and the meal distribution effort continued throughout the summer at those 20 sites. In September 2020, NPS expanded the Grab-N-Go program to 34 school sites and discontinued the bus service. In addition to serving Grab-N-Go customers, these sites also served childcare programs, athletes,
Before the return to in-person learning in March 2021, teachers and school-level leaders participated in professional development sessions focusing on effective strategies for concurrent teaching. It is indisputable that teaching students virtually—while in-person students are also present—is challenging. Our goal has not only been to help teachers gain a more satisfying comfort level with this new reality, but also to encourage student-student connections no matter where they are learning.

Prior to developing a return-to-school plan, NPS surveyed parents/guardians and teachers to help assess the effectiveness of virtual education and to determine the likelihood of participation in both virtual and in-person education. Among the key survey findings were approximately two-thirds agreed that online instruction was going well. Secondary parents/guardians were slightly more positive than their elementary counterparts. Approximately 100 percent of families were offered supportive technology for student learning, 93 percent said their children had the necessary technology to participate in virtual learning. Approximately half of those surveyed noted that their children needed additional social-emotional learning supports.

The school division implemented a comprehensive return-to-school plan during the 2020-2021 school year. On March 15, 2021, students with disabilities served in the school division’s special education programs returned to school on days of in-person learning. Also on that date, prekindergarten through grade 5 students and English language learners returned to school on a hybrid schedule (two days of in-person learning and three days of virtual learning). Middle school and high school students returned on April 12 and April 26 respectively, also on the hybrid schedule. The comprehensive safety measures and mitigation strategies in place were communicated well ahead of time on the school division’s and schools’ websites and through the Coronavirus Communications Update newsletter. In addition, each school received a return-to-school planning guide to ensure mitigation strategies were consistently implemented according to the CDC’s guidelines. Parents were able to access resources and guidelines on each school’s website.

A Virtual Scholars Academy (VSA) was established as part of the return-to-school plan. This initiative allowed families to have their children attend school virtually on the timeline of a semester commitment, with flexibility for extenuating circumstances. This was done in anticipation of a significant number of parents/guardians preferring either option for their children. The curriculum and pacing for this PreK-12 academy mirrored what was taking place in the classroom. When in-person learning resumed, approximately 38 percent of NPS students were enrolled in the VSA.

In an effort to standardize the approach to instruction division-wide and to place resources under one “virtual roof,” NPS launched the MySchool Management System during school year 2020-2021. Canvas connects teachers and students. It is used to monitor assignment submissions, share course documents, and facilitate message correspondence between teachers and students. It also contains materials and institutional information for all to access. Curriculum teams also developed enhanced pacing guides to offer guidance to teachers on what had to be covered.

The availability of the Canvas Learning Management System allowed schools personnel access to school division-developed and school-developed resources in an instant. Undoubtedly, this accessibility helped instructional staff better support their students. For example, the school division’s social studies staff, in collaboration with an NPS instructional technology resource team, developed a history course for K-5 students that modeled how to use Canvas effectively. In addition, “sandboxes” were created for all grades 6-12 core history classes. This sandbox allowed teachers across the division to share materials they had developed within Canvas and to converse and troubleshoot as they mastered the capabilities of this new learning management system. Additionally, NPS was able to incorporate materials from Virtual Virginia so teachers and students could take advantage of these resources.

The school division initially suspended athletic competitions in the spring of 2020 for health and safety reasons. However, staff worked to ensure there were extensive safety measures in place so when athletics did resume, there would be a common understanding of requirements and guidelines. These plans included daily on-site COVID-19 screening protocols as well as the launch of an “RSchools Activities Schedule” health screening app. All student-athletes and coaches were required to use this app as a pre-screening tool prior to reporting to practices or games. NPS allowed practices to resume for the fall/winter sports in September 2020 under the VHSL mitigation plan for return. Conditioning for fall was suspended until the start of the winter season due to the high positivity rate in the area. Eventually, the winter sports season was canceled due to safety concerns regarding that high positivity rate. The fall sports season’s competitions resumed in February 2021. This included football, golf, field hockey, cross country and competition cheer. Fall sports included fan participation for the playoff competitions. Spring sports competitions resumed in April 2021.

In addition, a COVID education video and information form were developed, and student athletes and their parents/guardians were required to view the video and complete the form prior to athletics resuming on campuses. This reinforced a common understanding of safety protocols and individual responsibilities for supporting a safe athletic environment.

With the return to athletics, there was a great deal to celebrate. In football, the Maury High School Commodores defeated the Deep Creek Hornets 49-0 to win the school’s third Straight Class 5 Region A Championship. The Lake Taylor High Titans defeated the Woodbridge Island Truckers 20-18 to take the Class 6 Region A Championship for the third consecutive year.

Every school completed a yearlong series of Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA) training in 2020-2021. A CNA is a process used to identify needs and performance challenges in schools to help staff determine root causes of the identified challenges and then to set priorities for future action. The leadership teams of NPS’ schools are using this approach to develop multi-year school improvement plans.

Comprehensive summer school programs, focusing on remediation and enrichment, are being offered both in person and virtually in the summer of 2021. The offerings available to students include face-to-face basic skills programs at the elementary and middle school levels and specially designed offerings for students with disabilities and English language learners. Other opportunities include: preparation for Pre-Algebra 6 and Algebra 1; health and physical education for rising 7th and 8th graders; career and technical education programs; an Advanced Placement Academy; and enrichment programs such as Camp Einstein for grades K-5, Junior University for grades 6-8, and Green STEM Academy for grades 9-12. In addition, summer school sites have also designed individual Innovation Programs to meet the needs and interests of their students. At the high school level, students are taking advantage of online classes through GradPoint for both credit recovery and initial credit. All repeat courses are being held as in-person sessions. The breadth of the 2021 summer programs is more extensive than what was offered in summer 2020, as the offerings then were virtual only.
GOAL 2
We will attract and retain highly qualified, effective teachers to teach our students.

After studying what makes schools and educators successful over many years, Dr. Robert Marzano, a leading researcher in education, had this to say: “The one factor that surfaced as the single most influential component of an effective school is the individual teachers within that school.” While this may seem like an obvious conclusion, it is an emphatic reminder, from an expert, that school divisions must be strategic about recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers. In NPS, we realized that a pandemic could have a detrimental effect on teacher satisfaction and our ability to recruit and retain the best of the best. Following are some of the strategic steps we took to support teachers so, in turn, students could be well-served:

- Clearly, competitive compensation is crucial in recruiting teachers. The 2021-2022 budget was strategically crafted to improve NPS’ competitiveness in the employment market place. A top priority was to increase the starting pay for teachers. Next school year, the entry pay for new teachers will increase from $44,220 to $47,200 (a 6.7 percent increase).

- In addition, all current teachers will receive a one-step increase in the 2021-2022 school year. The combination of a step increase and the increase in starting pay increases base pay for currently employed teachers by an average of 6.1 percent.

- The FY 2021-2022 budget includes an increase in the hourly rate for part-time teachers from $25 to $30 as well as an increase in the hourly rate for summer school teachers to $35. In addition to improving teachers’ earnings, we believe these measures will help to support more teachers who will commit to teaching in the summer months and in after-school tutoring programs.

- Teachers who teach concurrently, meaning they teach students both virtually and in-person at the same time, will receive a stipend during the 2021-2022 school year as a result of the approved budget.

- It is important to provide pathways for advancement for teachers. That is why NPS is continuing to provide support for the development or continuation of three Grow-Our-Own programs for (1) reading specialists through a partnership with the College of William and Mary; (2) mathematics specialists through Old Dominion University; and (3) assistant principals and principals through the

In school year 2021-2022, the entry pay for new teachers will increase from $44,220 to $47,200 (a 6.7 percent increase).
School Leadership Development Team (SLD) of NPS.

- NPS collaborated with Old Dominion University to obtain a Virginia Department of Education grant to launch a Teacher-In-Residence (TIR) program. Teachers enrolled in this program, who are referred to as TIRs, seek to earn both a master’s degree and initial teaching license in the areas of secondary education, mathematics or science. This program, which is still in effect, provides intensive support to TIRs through NPS coaches and ODU’s faculty for a preparation year and three years of classroom service.

- NPS partnered with James Madison University (JMU) to develop a support plan for teachers new to the profession. Collaboration with JMU has been instrumental in developing the school division’s coaching and mentoring framework.

- NPS focused on the recruitment and retention of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) teachers. In school year 2020-2021, NPS hired an elementary STEM coordinator for the Southside STEM Academy at Campostella. Norview Middle School’s teachers also received a STEM grant to augment STEM instruction at that school.

- The NPS administration launched a School Leadership Development Program in school year 2020-2021. This program, designed for teachers aspiring to move into school administration, included their participation in an NPS Equity and Excellence Summer Leadership Institute as well as PreK-12 Equity and Excellence instructional meetings held throughout the school year.

- NPS consistently sponsored online job fairs and created virtual orientations to onboard new teachers. In addition, a new recruitment video was developed that highlights the school division’s philosophy and competitive advantages. The Department of Human Resources has used this video in its online recruitment ventures and will continue to do so when in-person recruitment fairs resume.

- The newsletter was distributed to all employees through their leave options and strategies for consistent resource and support available to them. This newsletter was distributed to all attendees of the New Teacher Institute, ITRTs, and administrative departments. Additionally, NPS will be extending the New Teacher Institute to a two-year program to better support and retain teachers.

- In each school building, lead teacher mentors are on hand to support new teachers. Administration has concentrated on equipping these mentors with a coaching framework that advances consistency in the support of teachers new to NPS.

- NPS publishes a monthly “New Teacher Newsletter” that addresses topics helpful to new teachers. Some of the topics explored included: classroom management tips, social-emotional learning strategies, and support resources available to them. This newsletter was distributed to all attendees of the New Teacher Institute, ITRTs, and administrative departments. Additionally, NPS will be extending the New Teacher Institute to a two-year program to better support and retain teachers.

- To support teachers’ professional development needs, asynchronous instructional days were designed and implemented on Wednesdays of each week during the 2020-2021 school year. Each Monday, an all-staff email was sent to remind teachers of weekly professional development needs, asynchronous Wednesdays served to de¬crease students’ screen-time and provide them an opportunity to meet one-on-one with their teachers and make up missed assignments.

- To strengthen the school-wide focus on continued improvement, principals assembled a team of teachers from their schools to participate along with them in the school division’s monthly Equity and Excellence Full-Day Professional Learning Sessions during the 2020-2021 school year. The participating teachers were then positioned to be champions in their buildings in a number of areas, such as data analysis, instructional delivery, assessment, and student outcomes. These sessions also concentrated on advancing the implementation of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) programs in both virtual and in-person learning environments.

- NPS led and directed the research for employees on the federal law known as Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) of 2020, which required employees to provide for paid leave for COVID-19 related circumstances. The Department of Human Resources oversaw and approved the design of the associated leave forms and written process for guiding employees through their leave options and for processing their leave requests.

- During the 2020-2021 school year, the school division leaders worked with school-based personnel to plan professional development that would be delivered in the framework of the Drive for Five goals. From August 2020 to April 2021, central office leaders worked in collaboration with school-based committees/teams to plan highly targeted sessions at every school.
GOAL 3
We will commit to improving our aging infrastructure so that our students are educated in school buildings that are worthy of them.

While NPS has rebuilt or renovated nine schools during the last 20 years, the average age of schools in Norfolk is 52 years. Twenty-six (26) of them are more than 61 years old. Yes, our inventory of buildings can, for the most part, be deemed “aging infrastructure.” However, NPS is now better positioned than it has been in a long time to make meaningful improvements to schools. Our end goal is that EVERY child will have equitable access to state-of-the-art learning environments. This is where we stand now:

- The Norfolk City Council approved a $26.7 million Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget for school maintenance for the 2021-2022 fiscal year. These funds come from $9 million in city funding augmented by $17.7 million in school funding, the result of budgetary savings accumulated during the prior two fiscal years.
- These CIP funds will primarily be used to fund replacements of school roofs, heating and HVAC units, and doors and windows as well as a feasibility study to support Booker T. Washington High School’s specialty program.
- NPS worked with a consulting firm, Cooperative Strategies, in the development of a plan that prioritizes projects on a specific timeline culminating in 2030. Early in the process, Cooperative Strategies identified $200 million in pressing renovation needs and has recommended that at least $66 million, plus annual inflation, be set aside annually in the NPS CIP to tackle this enormous need. There is reason to remain optimistic as there is a strong possibility that additional federal stimulus funds will be available in the future to undergird the school division’s five-year CIP and long-range facilities plan. NPS is committed to communicating with its stakeholders on this important front should that possibility prove to be a reality.

It is also important to note how NPS worked to make schools safe places for students and staff while the pandemic persisted. Below is an overview of health and safety initiatives that were taken. Please note that these initiatives will most likely remain in place for next school year.

- Key mitigation strategies, as advised by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), were implemented division-wide to include: mask-wearing, hand-washing and respiratory etiquette, physical distancing, cleaning and sanitizing, and contact tracing.
- Schools were cleaned and sanitized daily using specialized equipment and products.
The staff of the Department of Human Resources established protocols and procedures for the handling of COVID-19 cases reported through a COVID-19 Communication Report Form. Collaborative efforts between this department, school division leaders, and contact tracers were implemented to ensure accurate reporting and to determine the status of all affected employees. In NPS, school nurses serve as the contract tracers in schools. Staff from the Norfolk Department of Public Health provided technical assistance and training.

In addition, during school year 2019-2020, a comprehensive water-testing program was initiated and completed in all schools and administrative offices. This effort addressed the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA’s) guidelines that limit acceptable lead levels at 15 parts per billion. NPS also committed to keeping its stakeholders informed on the results of this testing. Each time testing concluded at a school or facility, stakeholders were notified of the results. To ensure transparency, the NPS website served as a repository for all results.

There is another vital element that goes into making schools superb learning spaces and that is adequate technology infrastructure. The FY 2021-2022 operating budget contains additional targeted funding for future technology expenditures. As an overview:

- A major upgrade of our network systems and cybersecurity will safeguard the educational/work experiences of students and staff.
- In the coming school year, NPS has planned for the purchase of additional virtual learning supports (both hardware and software), so students and teachers can have access to the latest technological advances. In addition, the division-wide commitment to providing mobile devices (Chromebooks, iPads, laptops, etc.), as well as mobile hotspots for students who need Internet access, will continue.
- Our goal is to eliminate the digital divide for children in Norfolk Public Schools. We are proud to say we are well on our way to achieving that goal.
GOAL 4
We will be more purposeful and strategic in developing and sustaining effective partnerships with our families and other community stakeholders.

The nature of family and community engagement changed considerably when sheltering in place became the statewide expectation. While we typically welcome and celebrate community engagement, the pandemic required a new paradigm. Consequently, the NPS approach with stakeholders has been to communicate comprehensively and frequently through its website, social media channels, WNPS Channel 47 specially developed videos, email, Blackboard voicemails/telephone calls, and special publications. We look forward to a future when parents, guardians, business partners, and community members can once again be welcomed into our schools; when athletic competitions are open to unlimited cheering fans; and special events are a safe way to celebrate achievement. In the meantime, however, this is an overview of how NPS has worked to maintain connections with our stakeholders:

- Just prior to school closure in March 2020, Norfolk Public Schools had launched an expansive effort to engage volunteers. A new online portal had been established that included a volunteer application process. That system also provided volunteers with their own accounts so they could log their hours and the school division could track those hours. Unfortunately, the pandemic temporarily curtailed in-school volunteerism. However, the process remains operative, and when NPS welcomes volunteers in its schools once again, this tool should prove invaluable. It will help ascertain the level of volunteerism in the schools and identify areas where there are needs for ongoing volunteer support.

- Throughout the pandemic, NPS published and distributed a Coronavirus Communications Update newsletter to families and employees to ensure they were informed about school operations and key decisions. These publications addressed such high-interest topics such as how to obtain a mobile device or Internet hotspot, child-care options, expansions of meal service, graduation requirements and waivers, graduation plans, and the details of the NPS return-to-school plan, just to name a few.

- NPS initiated a number of surveys to obtain parent/guardian feedback on important issues. For example, early into school closure, families were surveyed on their level of Internet and mobile device access so plans to provide the necessary supports could be implemented quickly. In addition, the school division also asked parents/guardians to weigh in on their experiences with virtual education.

- During the 2019-2020 school year, in-person graduations could not be held. In response, NPS through WNPS Channel 47 and npsk12.com, hosted virtual graduation ceremonies for the five high schools and summer school graduates. Salutatory and valedictory addresses were also shared as stand-alone videos on the NPS social media channels. Superintendent Dr. Sharon I. Byrdsong highlighted examples of student resiliency at each school in her graduation addresses. The 2021 NPS graduates were able to enjoy in-person ceremonies with their peers and families.
with the appropriate safety protocols in place, at the Charterway Arena located on the campus of Old Dominion University.

Virtual workshops were held to support parents’/guardians’ efforts to help guide their children’s at-home education. Notable examples included workshops for families with children who receive special education services. These offerings included an inclusion workshop focusing on strategies parents/guardians could use to encourage their children’s meaningful engagement in the virtual classroom and a telepractice series for parents/guardians whose children receive speech and language services and occupational and/or physical therapy.

When schools and offices were closed, the traditional open houses of making in-person visits and/or talking to office staff via telephone were no longer the best options to help families get their questions answered. While schools made good faith efforts to return telephone calls and emails, the school division worked to make the NPS website a “go to” resource for parents/guardians during the extended closure. It was here families could learn about operational plans such as Learning-in-Place packet distributions, the resumption of athletics, how to schedule conferences with building principals and teachers, and return-to-school details. The website also featured a repository of Frequently Asked Questions addressing such subjects as how to obtain a mobile device, grading procedures, the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) for families whose children would be receiving free or reduced meals if schools were open, and how their children would be using the Zoom videoconferencing tool. When there was breaking news, NPS would issue telephone calls/viaemails and emails through the Blackboard Connect system. These outreach efforts usually provided a brief overview and then directed families to npsk12.com for more detailed information.

When the athletic season resumed, family attendance at events was limited. Aware that the privilege of watching their children’s competition is important to families, the school division entered into a partnership with NFHS Network to install cameras in the high school sports venues. Fans of any of the five NPS high schools had the opportunity to subscribe to the NFHS Network and enjoy full access to all Eastern District athletic events, as well as high school sports from around the nation.

All schools hosted virtual open houses for parents at the start of the 2020-2021 school year to help families understand the resources schools and teachers would provide to them while their children were receiving virtual instruction. In addition, middle schools held virtual Sixth Grade Transition Programs, and high schools held virtual Ninth Grade Transition Programs.

Aware that families needed to hear frequently from NPS decision makers, Superintendent Dr. Sharon I. Byrdsong committed to ongoing communications with parents/guardians and staff. She released video messages on a host of topics from updates on school closure plans to a heartfelt thank you for the support of stakeholders; she wrote a regular column in each of 10 issues of the Coronavirus Communication Update newsletter; and she communicated directly with families and staff through email updates.

NPS published Attendance Guidelines for the 2020-2021 school year to help parents/guardians understand how attendance would be recorded both in the hybrid and virtual models.

NPS leadership met regularly with the Norfolk Trusted Partners committee throughout the 2020-2021 school year to strategize planning how the faith-based community could aid in advancing the Drive for Five commitment to equity and excellence for all. At the time of publication of this document, 24 Norfolk schools had faith-based partnerships, and the Norfolk Trusted Partners committee, in cooperation with NPS, was working to plan a summit of faith-based partners to discuss their shared goal of this summit is to help partners understand what guidelines schools have in place for such partnerships and how those partnerships can align to support the Drive for Five goals.

The Norfolk Department of Public Health and Norfolk Public Schools have worked closely together to mitigate the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as proactively, as possible. Because of this valued partnership, NPS has been kept up-to-date on community transmission levels; had the necessary support to engage in contact tracing; and had access to research on best practices in prevention protocols. Additionally, this partnership extended into NPS hosting vaccination sites for community members in 2021 at Booker T. Washington High School, the Southside STEM Academy at Campostella, Ruffner Middle School, and Lake Taylor High School.

Inarguably, the pandemic was particularly challenging for families who did not speak English as a first language. The all-important need to support their children’s remote learning experiences had the potential to become overwhelming. Consequently, the staff in the NPS English as Second Language (ESL) Office was purposeful about helping these families navigate the inherent complexities. For example, their strategic outreach in the 2020-2021 school year included participating in pop-up events around the city, particularly with the OpenNorfolk Outreach. It was at such events that ESL families could become acquainted with the technology the school division had provided their children and learn about the services and benefits available to them, such as the NPS meal distribution program or how to obtain a food box. Knowing that in-person ESL Family Academy outreach, the ESL Office adapted to the new reality, launching virtual sessions for families. These classes touched upon a range of topics, including how to use ParentVUE, understanding grading procedures, and learning about social-emotional supports available to their children. However, face-to-face outreach was not abandoned. Both central office staff and many school staff members committed to doing home visits in both years of closure to ensure English language learners remained connected to their education. In addition, the ESL Office worked to ensure their webpage (https://www.npsk12.com/Page/14601#) provided helpful resources.

For seven seasons, the Booker T. Washington baseball and softball teams traveled three miles to the Azalea Little League complex for competitions because their fields were not up to regulations. In May 2021, the need for these student athletes to travel the time changed. The Bookers were able to stay home and host baseball and softball games on upgraded fields as a result of almost $20,000 in funding provided by NPS and $7,000 in donations from the community and parents. These donations were used to improve the softball dugouts.

Despite the closure and the subsequent pressure to open schools, community partners worked with NPS to continue supporting students. For example, Booker T. Washington High School alum and former professional football player Bruce Smith, presented his alma mater a $10,000 grant on behalf of the NFL Foundation. The grant was targeted to support the school’s football program. Additionally, the Mr. Holland’s Opus Foundation awarded music grants to Blair, Northside, Norview and Azalea Gardens middle schools, and Lake Taylor High School.

With an eye toward strengthening Norfolk Public Schools’ communications outreach and community connections, Superintendent Dr. Sharon I. Byrdsong created a Division of Communications and Community Engagement in the 2020-2021 school year.

For the summer of 2021, the United for Children organization is offering an enrichment program in the afternoon for students who currently reside in the St. Paul’s area of Norfolk. The enrichment program will offer students opportunities through project-based learning, play, and field trips. The United for Children organization began in 2012 in the St. Paul’s area as an initiative to bring public and private partners around the table to address a variety of educational and community issues. The St. Paul’s Area is defined as three neighborhoods: Tidewater Gardens, Calvert Square, and Young Terrace.

Norfolk Public Schools launched a new app called “Here Comes the Bus” in the 2020-2021 school year that allows families to monitor daily school bus transportation information, including where a specific bus is on its route. The “Here Comes the Bus” app links to an easy-to-use website that has the following features: notifications on any bus number change, direct access to families when a bus is approaching the bus stop. This app can be downloaded to a smartphone, tablet or personal computer.
In the rush to ensure children could still receive an education during the pandemic, NPS had to make many changes on accelerated timelines. This inevitably caused some stress for staff, students, and their families. Keenly aware of this, our Executive Leadership Team had many pointed, in-depth conversations on how to encourage students’ success, motivate staff, and support families in ways that would dial down anxieties. Sometimes, we were able to do this successfully, and sometimes we could not. Admittedly, this has been a pressing challenge because so many of the circumstances facing staff and families have been very personal and individual. Such obstacles cannot always be resolved by corporate responses. However, we came to a simple conclusion that is still resonating with us today: We need to remind our stakeholders that NPS cares deeply for them, that whenever there is a large-scale crisis, we are all in it together, and together is how we will overcome any obstacles. These are some of the strategies NPS employed to uplift its stakeholders during school closure:

- While some students thrived in the virtual environment, others struggled. Consequently, grading had to be approached in a manner that would pave the way for successful completion of student work. With this goal in mind, in Quarter 4 of the 2019-2020 school year, the administration chose to award a “Pass” or “Incomplete” rather than formal letter or numerical grades to all students, including kindergarten students. Students who received an “Incomplete” were given a sufficient period of time to complete the required work. The deadline was set at August 28, 2020. Detailed information on how students and families could proceed was widely communicated, through emails and Blackboard telephone calls/voicemail messages to families from both the school division and schools, on the NPS website, and through the Coronavirus Communications Update newsletter.

- During the 2020-2021 school year, NPS returned to its traditional approach of assigning grades to student work. However, continued flexibility was provided on the associated timelines for completion. The reason for this flexibility was NPS’ recognition that families would be facing some difficulties accessing individualized supports for their children when their homes were the new classrooms. While student completion of assignments remained important, the major goal was...
To advance children’s understanding of the standards they were studying.

- Teachers had to adjust instantaneously to a new way of teaching. NPS provided tools for teachers who did not have the technology needed to deliver instruction from their homes. Additionally, we provided professional development opportunities for teachers on effectively engaging students in virtual settings. In most cases, instructional technology resource teachers (ITRT) led this training. Content specific sessions were also offered to teachers so they could better take advantage of specific online tools available to them within their content areas.

- The school division’s social media channels have been used to motivate and thank teachers, students, and families for a job well done. A video series called Rising to the Challenge #NPSInThisTogether was initiated during the 2019-2020 School Year. This series highlighted: individual schools working to engage and communicate with their students; teacher parades through schools’ neighborhood service areas; the community’s efforts to send inspirational messages to hardworking area; the community’s efforts to send encouraging messages to hardworking teachers through chalk sidewalk art; inspiring messages to hardworking areas; the community’s efforts to send encouraging messages to hardworking teachers through chalk sidewalk art; inspiring messages to hardworking areas; the community’s efforts to send encouraging messages to hardworking teachers through chalk sidewalk art; inspiring messages to hardworking areas; the community’s efforts to send encouraging messages to hardworking teachers through chalk sidewalk art.

- Open Campus High School’s 2020 graduates were saluted in drive-by presentations with congratulatory gifts such as balloons from staff. These students are generally young men and women who have dropped out of school or who are at risk of dropping out, so they choose Open Campuses’ alternate, non-traditional path toward graduation. It was important to let these students, who had persevered in their efforts to obtain a high school diploma, know that their commitment had not gone unrecognized.

- The key to facilitating the social-emotional health of children division-wide is to have an organized system in place to support them. NPS uses the Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports (VTSS), a model endorsed by the Virginia Department of Education. VTSS is a data-informed decision-making framework that puts into place needed academic, behavioral and social-emotional supports for schools to be effective learning environments for all students. In anticipation of children returning to school in the spring of 2021 and a more traditional year in 2021-2022, a cross-departmental team from school division personnel began meeting to develop a Social-Emotional Learning Plan. While aspects of that plan are still under development, a decision was made to offer intensive training on VTSS during the 2020-2021 school year as a key step toward moving forward. To ensure NPS was aligned with VTSS, every school established a team that participated in monthly trainings throughout the school year. At the end of the year, every school had a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Program (a key plank of VTSS) designed for implementation in both virtual and in-person settings. A culminating session was held in May 2021 at which time all school leaders shared their PBIS implementation plans.

- Administrators collaborated with pre-school teachers and stakeholders to implement procedures that would help overcome the barriers associated with engaging the youngest learners virtually. For example, in the 2020-2021 school year, administrators provided professional development opportunities for daycare providers and developed a lesson design structure for teachers.

- During school year 2020-2021, central office and school administrators worked with local daycare providers to help ensure child care would be in place for families that needed it. This effort resulted in offering childcare in school facilities that mirrored the academic day virtually.

- With the assistance of a military student transition consultant, NPS was able to assist new military-connected students transitioning to the eight elementary schools that serve large military populations. This included individual outreach and providing unique welcome packets to those families.

- NPS was purposeful about compensating employees for the additional duties that had to be assumed with new approaches to teaching and learning. Consequently, bonuses were approved for designated staff for the 2020-2021 school year. The staff designated to receive bonus payments were full-time, contracted school personnel including: teachers, media specialists, guidance counselors, building principals, assistant principals, custodians, food service staff, instructional technology resource teachers and any other full-time, contracted employees assigned to work in schools under the direct supervision of principals. Other employees at the central office eligible to receive the one-time bonus payment included: school nutrition staff, full-time, contracted facilities management and custodial services staff, and identified information technology personnel. Designated part-time staff, such as eligible long-term substitute teachers, also received the one-time bonus payment.

- Looking ahead to school year 2021-2022, it is our sincere hope that schools in Virginia will be able to reopen, as much as possible, in a traditional manner. NPS has taken firm steps to be prepared for this eventuality. At the heart of our plans is the commitment to do just what this goal says — to be more intentional in our efforts to foster a division-wide culture of caring. The fiscal year budget for the coming year reflects that philosophy. Some of our planned endeavors include:

  - Hiring an English language learner specialist to better address the needs of a growing group of students seeking to master the complexities of the English language; five additional behavior specialists to strengthen behavioral supports for schools; an additional school social worker to ensure more comprehensive support for the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students; and five additional gifted resource teachers to more effectively identify students for gifted education services across the division and to better meet the academic and social-emotional needs of our gifted learners.

  - Providing enhanced professional development to encourage more consistent, division-wide execution of social-emotional supports for students in all of our schools.

  - Providing additional professional development for teachers in the area of trauma-informed care and the continuation of a psychologist internship program.

  - Hiring additional attendance technicians and extending the contract of current attendance technicians as a way to address students’ attendance challenges earlier and more assertively.

  - Providing stipends for wellness champions at each school to encourage a more organized approach to encouraging healthy behaviors among students.

  - Hiring an equity administrator who can work with schools and leadership to ensure all students within NPS are afforded high quality educational learning experiences and are provided every opportunity to be successful in a manner that advances equity throughout the school division.
Let’s Hear From Others Who Traveled Alongside of Us on This Challenging Journey!

Local and national newspapers and television and radio news programs constantly covered the widespread disruption the pandemic caused. In fact, they continue to do so. While this document largely examines Norfolk Public Schools’ corporate response, we want to acknowledge the incredible efforts many of our stakeholders made individually to manage the impact of the changes we had to make. Consequently, we offer these contributions from some individuals who traveled this road with us. We trust they are representative of situations that many others in our NPS family faced as well.
REFLECTIONS FROM A PARENT

BY MICHELLE FISH

How did we manage and overcome problems during school closures and COVID-19? I am a mother of three elementary-aged students enrolled at Sewells Point Elementary School. I am a veteran myself and married, for almost 13 years, to a Marine stationed at Naval Station Norfolk. March 2020 went very differently than any of us could have imagined. My husband was deployed in Spain, scheduled to return at the end of March 2020. Then, COVID took over the world. Like the school closure, my husband’s deployment became an extended one. The news of no return date was challenging to explain to anyone that asked. Trying to navigate three children’s emotions, along with my own during the first few weeks, was difficult. We laughed together, we cried together, and we loved each other more than ever. The isolation in the beginning had us asking many questions: Who was safe to be around? If I got sick, who would take care of my kids? How were we to keep a balance of everyday life when we could barely step outside? Then NPS announced the school lunch program. Not only was this a way to get the kids out of the house and do it safely, but it also gave us the opportunity to see familiar and friendly faces from a distance. We made a COVID team with certain families that we knew were taking the same precautions we were. My husband finally returned in June. By that time, we understood more about the virus and had a full routine of sanitizing and self-awareness of our proximity to others. The kids adapted well to the six feet rule wherever we went. Once playgrounds opened back up, the idea of personal space and distance were engrained in their minds. When the announcement came to start the school year virtually, my kids’ spirits were down. They all enjoy attending school in person and were a little hesitant about a virtual school year. The excitement grew once teachers were announced and we were able to put a face to the name. Although they did not know who the teachers were, due to volunteering at school, I knew exactly who we were going to have the pleasure of working with. September came, and while there were many bumps along the way, being flexible became second nature to me. The kindergarten, second grade, and fourth grade. Being home and having the ability to watch how incredible our teachers are proved amazing. Ms. Barham, fourth grade teacher, had her students laughing together daily. She has such an uplifting personality that even on low days, she made playing certain educational games something that all of her students wanted to participate in! Mrs. Kerchner, second grade teacher, has so much love for her kids that she welcomed personal time to help the kids share how they were feeling as well as something fun about their home lives. We got to navigate learning new weekly with each other and the rest of the students. She engaged them to try their best and encouraged them to learn in new, fun, and interesting ways! Learning our way through Google together helped us all, even the parents! Mrs. Coro, kindergarten teacher, opened her Zoom with a bright smile and work area every day! She kept my 5-year-old’s attention with learning, and stimulated her mind with new adventures every day! Virtual learning has been a good experience, but it did not come without challenges. Had it not been for our teachers and staff being as supportive to our needs as I felt they were, it may have been a different experience for us. My children missed seeing their friends in person. We were in our first year at Sewells Point when COVID closed everything down, so the friendships were still new. The lack of physical interaction with peers was and still is tough. They did go in person two days a week and that helped some. I always made myself fully available during the school day. If anyone needed help with anything, they just had to ask. I even expressed to our teachers that I was available to help in any capacity I could from home if need be. Some days more help was needed than others. As the year ended not as much help was needed as the expectations and curriculum had been taught and learned. Virtual learning has been a learning experience for us all. It has taught us some things that we may have not learned until the children were older. It has helped my own knowledge of programs with Google that I would not have acquired otherwise.

I consider this year a success for our family. My 4th grader remained an all A student as well as my second grader. My youngest met the standards of kindergarten. We came into the year with open minds and hearts and made many memories along the way. I learned that compassion, empathy, kindness, strength, motivation, and patience go a long way where we are all in a similar situation that is completely out of our control. How we respond and treat others is in our control, and we should react respectfully.

REFLECTIONS FROM A STUDENT

BY DREAM GREGORY

My name is Dream Gregory and I am a graduating senior from Norview High School (NHS), the home of the Pilots. My senior year has not been what I imagined. I really missed the day-to-day happenings of a typical senior year in high school. The COVID-19 pandemic created all sorts of changes. I would venture to say it has been a huge eye opener for me.

All online classes were overwhelming at times, and there were times when it seemed like the academic workload had increased. Zoom while learning became the new normal. I missed going to class, taking notes, talking to my teachers face-to-face and staying after school for remediation when I needed help. At times, my teachers seemed stressed too. One thing I realized about the pandemic was everybody was affected. During the pandemic, I experienced many emotions. There were times when I was sad, disappointed, frustrated and anxious. Not being able to hang out with my friends before school, and chat in the hallway and during lunchtime proved difficult. Also, I missed practicing with the NHS Track team. Team camaraderie is everything for me.

Despite those changes and misfortunes, this pandemic has helped me realize things about myself. I had to quickly develop personal plans to keep myself healthy. I had to discipline myself to do the weekly workouts to stay physically fit. The whole while I was doing my workouts, I was hoping school would re-open and my sports activities would resume. I had to develop better study habits and avoid procrastination.

While I love to read, watch TV, listen to music and FaceTime with my friends on the phone, I quickly realized I had to get ahead with healthier habits. I was determined not to gain weight, so I monitored my diet. I was certain to eat three meals and snack less.

Although virtual learning was a big adjustment, today I am more resilient and responsible. I learned to value family, friends, and freedom. Norfolk Public Schools has made a great effort to make virtual learning as normal as possible, and I am grateful for the opportunities that were offered to help me stay afloat! The advice I would share with my peers is embrace change, keep your support system tight, and never let your emotions overpower you because every day is a new blessing.
Reflections from a Teacher

By Padmavathi Chitoor

My name is Padmavathi Chitoor, and I am in my fourth year as the special education department chair at Azalea Gardens Middle School. Prior to becoming the department chair, I taught seventh grade math in a collaborative setting for 10 years, also at Azalea Gardens.

I appreciate this opportunity to weigh in on the pandemic from the teacher perspective, particularly regarding the daily challenges we encountered and how we worked to overcome them. While the following summary is not all inclusive, I believe it captures the “can do” spirit of NFS teachers.

Technology: Going from limited technology to relying solely on technology was the biggest challenge for everyone: teachers, students, and parents. Thankfully, the students were patient and excited about new websites and online classroom activities (Canvas, Nearpod, Flipgrid, SmartSuite, Google-related forms and documents, just to name a few). Teachers really felt our professional development department provided us just a touch of what these programs could do, that there was plenty more to learn about them. However, we soon realized that less can be more, that our students needed one consistent platform to use. It was trial and error at first, but then we employed repetition as needed. That strategy made teaching and learning easier.

Communication: Many students were hesitant to engage in conversation in a brand new, virtual, whole group setting. Students who were shy in school continued to be very quiet virtually, and other students had to learn about the new environment. We worked to help them feel more comfortable. Polls and opinion-based questions seemed to get their attention as we learned more and more about social-emotional learning. It took several months before the kids engaged freely in conversation. Most kids kept their cameras off, and that made it more difficult to have conversation or communicate with them. Maintaining constant communication with parents, largely through texting and emailing, helped increase student engagement. Even when many students were back in the building, we continued to try new ways to communicate and engage.

Lesson Planning: Lesson plans were a challenge because of the students’ varying computer skills. Students struggled with demonstrating acquired knowledge. Teachers struggled with assessing that knowledge. Direct instruction was provided to students on how to access Canvas, Zoom, email, Google sites, and other websites. Constant modeling, prompting, and progress monitoring were needed to ensure that students were progressing through the curriculum. Many students did not ask for help or admit that they needed help, in whole group settings. In the beginning, differentiated instruction for core content areas was difficult due to lack of access to teacher materials and the sheer number of assignments that students needed to complete. When Canvas was launched, we encountered some initial challenges. Like any new technology, a learning curve was involved. For example, students were unsure of where the assignments were because every teacher’s page was arranged differently. It was helpful once we got the directive on one consistent uniform way to make Canvas pages and to post assignments under each content module.

Asynchronous Wednesdays gave teachers more time to plan and to attend professional development which helped to increase student engagement. Teachers have become much more fluent in virtual collaboration and lesson planning. Zoom is a new way of life.

Attendance: Inconsistent attendance and tardies caused students’ grades to drop. To overcome these problems, parents were contacted immediately. The district and administration worked to make sure that all students could access their classes and get credit for their attendance and work.

Student Collaboration via Zoom: Students needed help with Nearpod, Padlet, and Zoom. In addition, small group collaboration became a challenge because breakout rooms would be required, and you had to have adult supervision in each breakout room. The chat box for conversations helped to overcome the collaboration challenge. Observing students’ behavioral and academic needs has been hard to evaluate via Zoom. Reports from general education teachers have been instrumental.

Engagement: Students keeping their cameras off during Zoom sessions proved to be a challenge. The platforms allowed us to view the students when they were engaged, but not when they were not. To increase student engagement, we used different strategies: incorporating current events and social media, topics that interested students, and educational games; giving students time to talk to each other; decreasing “teacher-talk”; incorporating music into our lessons; giving students movement breaks; and doing constant wellness checks of their social-emotional wellbeing.

All in all though, there were some things about teaching virtually that we liked: learning new technology, less behavioral problems, increased parent engagement, students learning to utilize technology, applications and programs, being in a more accommodating and comfortable environment, and increased professional development opportunities which made us better educators. We always love it when the kids do engage, and indeed, they were able to improve their technology skills.

In terms of special education, being able to modify assignments with technology (Wizerme, SmartSuite, Quizizz, Kahoot) provided a different modality to teach the students and alternative fun ways to teach the content. We must remember there is no one size that fits all.

As teachers, we feel that we have been very successful in the process of learning how to teach students virtually—a practice which we had no experience with in our pandemic. Teaching children virtually has been a collective effort. Teachers were supported by administration, colleagues and our families. We also honed our practices through professional development offered from the district.

Here is what was challenging about virtual learning: the negative impact on struggling readers, distractions at home, time required to get everyone on task, less interactions with co-workers and students, and decreased networking opportunities. The worst part is not having direct contact with students to do hands on projects. We miss our kids! We miss students working in teams and coming up with ideas in person and participating in presentations as well. We strongly believe that in-person learning is more beneficial for students who have not developed work habit skills, who need additional academic support or whose parents and guardians are unable to help teach or retread concepts because they lack time and/or technology skills.

The one thing we missed the most about how we used to do business is the camaraderie with students and colleagues who share the same goal of being successful. Interacting with colleagues and students who have so much knowledge and wisdom to share just can’t be replicated virtually.

With all of this disconnect, teachers faced the same challenges everyone else faced in terms of isolation, depression, and anxiety. To overcome the negativity, we focused on things we like to do such as cooking, listening to favorite music, reading, doing yoga, exercising, praying and meditating, watching our favorite movies and shows, talking to family and friends, journal writing and sometimes writing and believing in positive affirmations. If things became unbearable, we knew we could seek professional help through our Employee Assistance Program. We worked to normalize mental and emotional health and stress management. Checking on people to make sure that they were okay and seeing others doing well always made us feel better. Even though we could not see each other in person, we were all a phone call or video chat away. We celebrated birthdays via Zoom and connected to people all around the world.

We learned a lot about ourselves during this pandemic. Foremost, we learned not to take anything for granted. Tell people that you care about them and love them while they are still on this earth because life is very unpredictable and precious.

Seize the movement and live without regret. Appreciate what you have and live life to the fullest. Even with everything happening around you, you still must move on. It’s okay to make mistakes and learn from them, rather than shutting down and giving up. Nobody is perfect, but we all can do something good to contribute to society.
LESSONS LEARNED

Our Experiences Inform How We Intend to Travel the Road to Recovery
by Dr. Sharon I. Byrdsong, NPS Superintendent

Normally, I am an eclectic reader. Yet during this pandemic while the depth of my reading intensified, the breadth narrowed. I read continuously, but it was largely about a single subject. The world’s battle with the coronavirus. I wanted to see how other school divisions, companies, our state and even other countries were adapting to the so-called new normal. I even started collecting quotes about the pandemic, admiring the pity commends that I looked at proclaiming to be the ones to make it.

On one of those rare days when I chose to read something other than an article about the pandemic, I came across this quote from Maya Angelou: “You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.” Right away, my mind went back to work. And I began to think: This is exactly what educators are doing now. We are refusing to let public education be reduced by a pandemic. Even though the shift in our workplaces had been dramatic and sudden, educators had moved decisively into online learning, and we have adapted to this new normal. We have learned new ways of teaching them and reinvented public education overnight. We were poignantly and powerfully reminded that we, who teach children as a living, must also take important lessons to heart.

What I offer next is not the sum total of these two challenges, we have developed a five-year replacement cycle for classrooms and business technology and have shaped a long-range plan for security upgrades. Finally, there is no more room for teachers to point to oth-

er teachers as the testiment to their craft. Each and every one of our teachers must be well-positioned to employ technology to deliver on the instruction during the best of times and the worst of times. Our commitment to targeted professional development will only intensify in the future.

Aging infrastructure presents enormous challenges during a pandemic. City and school leadership must have the political will to renovate, maintain, and build our schools on a more definitive and aggressive timeline. In Norfolk Public Schools, the hard truth is most of our school buildings are beyond the need of some kind of repair. This is a difficult challenge during the best of times, but during the pandem, our physical environment exacerbated issues with our facilities. For example, some of our HVAC systems are closed, meaning the buildings are not able to take advantage of fresh air, as many interior classrooms are without windows or some of the existing windows are not operable, etc. In accordance with guidance from the CDC, we had to make costly emergency purchases, such as sanitizing humidifiers and additional personal protective equipment. As we returned to school, NPS has been working with an educational consultant who has identified $500 million in pressing renovation needs among our schools and has recommended that at least $16 million be set aside annually to begin addressing such needs. However, the school division is not currently on track to address these needs. We must satis-

ify our long-range facilities master plan to more proactively address future facility needs. City and school leadership must collaborate more strategically to change the reality facing us now.

The reliance on effective, ongoing partnerships in navigating tough times. They are necessities not niceties. I cannot begin to capture the value of our partner-

ship with the Norfolk Department of Public Health. Recently retired Director of Public Health Dr. Demetria Lindsay and her team were invaluable in guiding us on the implementation of effective health and safety protocols and working with school personnel on contact tracing. Space does not permit me to list all the partners that stepped forward. From community kitchen-

ers that supplemented our food distri-

bution efforts to the childcare providers that worked to support families once schools reopened, the mantra “we all in this together” proved true. It was comforting to know that other organizations were lending a hand to pull us through.

In closing, we have learned many lessons during this pandemic, some of them hard won. Yet, we also have gained real confidence in our ability to navigate change successfully and expeditiously. I will go back to the quote with which I began this essay, “You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.”

Leadership must commit system-

ically to advancing a culture of caring. A culture of caring is usually built on the foundation of face-to-face relationships. The COVID-19 pandemic robbed us of those opportunities. Consequently, leadership had many discussions about how to motivate, encourage and com-

fort NPS stakeholders. When the dust cleared, we felt there were two primary ways we could accomplish this. First, we needed to commit to communica-

tions that had disappeared during these times. Thus, we employed strategies such as publishing a Coronavirus Com-

munication Update newsletter, sending fast-breaking news through Blackboard Connect telephone calls and emails; and employing nps12.com as a major source of information. NPS has been working with an educational consultant and public relations firm to provide parents and guardians re-

sources, from Grab-n-Go meals to virtual workshops; thanking our everyday heroes and families regularily; and celebrating resiliency through parades, social media shoutouts and specially produced videos. The lessons we faced during this time was our communications office, normally the champion for effective communication and community engagement, was not fully staffed. OKC was under-staffed. NPS is particularly focused on how to strengthen community engagement efforts. As a start-


The pandemic is not over so we must remain vigilant and let the sci-

gence guide our decisions. As more and more people get vaccinated, there is an under-

standable yearning to return to our pre-pandemic routines - to a world that does not demand masks, social dis-
tances that had disappeared during these times. As we work over the summer to prepare for the 2021-2022 school year, we do so with a commitment to develop advance-

navigational strategies the CDC recommends in place. We will also continue to provide a Virtual Scholars Academy for families who, for a variety of reasons, feel this is the healthiest option for their children.

As we work over the summer to prepare for the 2021-2022 school year, we do so with a commitment to keep any health mitigation strategies the CDC recommends in place.
HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT THE STUDENTS OF NORFOLK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

NPS will need the support of its community to facilitate recovery from the pandemic. The interruption of in-person education means we will be working to combat the negative impacts associated with some inevitable learning loss among our students. Our teachers, administrators, and support staff are dedicated to improving student achievement and safeguarding the social-emotional well-being of our students, but your assistance undoubtedly will help uplift students. We anticipate that the 2021-2022 school year will be more traditional in nature, a time when we can once again open our school doors to volunteers. Our schools will benefit from additional mentors, tutors, and volunteers who can serve in a variety of capacities, such as reading to students or helping them improve their reading skills, assisting with field trips, providing clerical assistance, or offering instructional opportunities such as internships at the secondary level. This is how you can proceed if you want to help: Contact your neighborhood school or the NPS Division of Communications and Community Engagement at 757-628-3459.