

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

Teaching Old Dogs New Tricks

Mark Warner isn't just shoveling money into Virginia's public schools -- he's raising standards and holding administrators accountable for results.

By James A. Bacon

The way Gov. Mark R. Warner figures it, after fighting for a \$642 million increase in state aid to education this year, he's entitled to make some demands of Virginia's educational establishment. He didn't raise taxes this year for the purpose of writing a blank check to school administrators. "We're going to make record new investment in public education," he says. "There are going to be some strings attached."

The bottom line: No more excuses, no more business as usual. Educators have to be accountable, and they have to be willing to change. In a knowledge-based economy, the consequences of failing Virginia's children are too calamitous to tolerate. Says Warner: "Doing more of the same is not enough."

It was a tough-talking governor I encountered several days ago when I met with him on the Third Floor of the Capitol Building for an interview. Warner was hard-nosed but also enthusiastic about the prospects for reforming Virginia's bureaucratic and risk-averse educational system. Citing a number of initiatives -- school efficiency reviews, the school turnaround program and the refusal to back down on the Standards of Learning -- the Governor clearly believes he can inspire, cajole or arm-twist Vir-

ginia's schools to achieve a higher level of efficiency and quality.

As loyal *Bacon's Rebellion* readers will recall, I opposed this year's tax hikes, which clearly overshot the mark. (Indeed, I hope to address the impending \$800 million to \$1 billion budget surplus in a future column.) But I can't quarrel with *where* Gov. Warner is putting the tax money. If we want our children to prosper in a globally integrated economy, we must ensure they develop the cognitive skills they need to compete with the best and brightest from around the world.



which invariably entail spending more money. In particular, I found his school turnaround program to offer intriguing possibilities. The idea, though alien to the public sector, is disarmingly simple to anyone in the business world acquainted with corporate turnaround specialists. With Warner's encouragement, the Darden School of Business and Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia developed a program to equip school principals with the managerial and financial tools to turn around the state's worst under-performing

schools. The first 10 principals went through the program this summer.

The turnaround program sounded like a great idea in theory, but I wondered how much it could accomplish in practice. After all, school principals have limited power, and the U.S. educational system couldn't be more dysfunctional if someone had designed it to fail. Funding comes from federal, state and local governments, each with conflicting priorities and mandates. School principals are subject to the political dictates of superintendents and school boards, and they contend daily with disrespectful children, litigious parents and the distractions of a hedonistic youth culture. It would be unwise to expect too much from the principals, I mused, even if the Governor armed them with MBAs.

I couldn't have been more surprised by the Governor's response.

Before talking about the school turnaround program, the Warner wanted to discuss the larger context of educational reform. In doing so, he addressed almost every question I'd come prepared to throw his way, and rendering many of them moot in the process.

Early in his administration, the administration implemented the PASS (Partnership for Achieving Successful Schools) program focusing on 34 of the schools having the most trouble meeting the state's Standards of Learning (SOL) goals. Warner personally visited all 34 schools, and

he helped recruit educators, businesses and faith-based organizations to partner with them. After a couple of years, nine of these troubled schools have won accreditation. Half have made "Adequate Yearly Progress" as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act.

One of the lessons he extracted from the experience, Warner says, is that leadership makes a difference. "I'd get these excuses: 'You just don't understand. The community is too tough, the students have too many disadvantages, you have to give us a break.' I reject that. If others can do it, don't give me the excuse that your circumstances are different."

Whoah. Not what I expected. I consider myself a take-no-prisoners kind of guy when it comes to government reform, but even I was impressed. Clearly, Warner can talk the talk. Whether he can walk the walk is another question, of course. I'm not in a position to judge -- I don't have the contacts in the educational community to know whether the Governor's policies are being diluted or hijacked as they percolate through the system. With the caveat that the ultimate fate of Warner's reforms are at present unknown, I have to say that they appear to be well thought out.

The tenets of Warner's philosophy for educational reform can be summarized as follows:

- Provide schools the money they need, but insist that they strive for greater operational efficiency;
- Set high standards, and don't accept excuses for falling short;
- Develop metrics for objectively measuring achieve-

ment; and

- Reward success and punish failure.

Funding and efficiency. K-12 schools are the big winner in the state's current budget. Total state aid to public education will total nearly \$5 billion this year, and somewhat more next year - enough to meet the so-called "Standards of Quality" (not to be confused with the "Standards of Learning") that define the level of resources that schools require to do their jobs properly.

While delivering record sums to education, the Governor insists that the schools spend it well. He hopes to expand a voluntary program launched earlier in his term that sends out state auditors to conduct school efficiency reviews. Says Warner: "We're going to come in and look at your business practices and see if you can save money."

An audit of the city of Richmond school system identified \$2.1 million in potential savings through such basics as increasing the energy efficiency of school buildings, reducing bus driver overtime and using software to plot more efficient school bus routes.

As success stories roll in, the state is getting more takers. It's one thing to identify the savings and another to follow through and achieve them, as Warner acknowledges. But it's clear that the cost-cutting opportunities abound.

Standards of Learning. With money off the table as an excuse for failure, Warner is hanging tough on the Standards of Learning, the standardized tests that students must pass in order to advance through the school system, despite heavy push back from schools and parents. "There is no retreat on our con-

sequences component," he says. If students fail, they will not graduate. If schools fail to educate students, heads will roll.

That's not to say he's abandoning students who flunk the tests. "Schools have to work with us on extra remediation for kids who need it," the Governor says. "Even if kids don't graduate, we won't leave them. It's the responsibility of the school to continue working with them. We raise the bar, but we also raise the level of help."

Many thought Virginia would see a decline in the graduation rate if the state raised its SOL standards; some predicted a loss of 10 percent to 15 percent of the student body. But it didn't happen, Warner says. Last year's graduation rate of 94.3 percent was stable.

Metrics. Those graduation numbers leave some room for ambiguity, Warner concedes. The 94.3 percent graduation rate for high school seniors would be less impressive, for instance, if it were accompanied by a surge in the drop-out rate for 10th and 11th graders. He thinks the drop-out rate has remained flat, but there are different definitions for drop outs -- how do you know if a kid has dropped out of school, or just moved to a different locality? -- so it's hard to know for sure.

The metrics issue brings out the policy wonk in Warner. It strikes him as remarkable, he says, that the educational sector, after all these years, has never settled upon a standard definition of something as basic as the "drop out rate." Developing reliable measures is imperative; without them, it's difficult to evaluate anything objectively.

"It's hard to know what makes a good teacher because there's no

good data," Warner says. "Without data, you're basing policy on a bunch of anecdotes." Thanks to the federal No Child Left Behind program, Virginia is beginning to collect the right kind of data, and that's a start. Eventually, it should be possible to track the performance of students, teachers and schools.

The ultimate goal of having reliable, objective data is to be able to reward good teachers, administrators and educational institutions. Says Warner: "I want to be able to look at teachers' performance all the way back to what school they graduated from." If Education School A is putting out better-performing teachers than Education School B, maybe the state should be expanding enrollments at School A and shrinking them at School B.

School turnarounds. In the final analysis, delivering results in schools is all about leadership. The idea behind Warner's school turnaround program is to spot administrators who have demonstrated a capacity for leadership, equipping them with greater analytical skills, and putting them in charge of the tough schools.

It sounds so obvious, but Virginia had never tried anything like it before -- indeed, no one *anywhere* in the United States has tried anything like it. "We'd never identified the successful principals in a systematic way," says Warner. "We'd never provided them with successful training on the business side. And we'd never been willing to reward them with additional compensation."

In the turnaround program, 10 of the state's most promising administrators were plucked out of their local school systems and assembled at the Darden School

in Charlottesville for a couple of weeks of intensive training. The "students" examined case studies of successful schools, strengthened leadership skills, learned change-management techniques, and polished their financial knowledge. After the boot camp, all 10 returned to their assigned schools with a mandate to instigate change.

As part of the bargain, the state negotiated with local school system to give the turnaround specialists "the freedom to try new stuff," Warner says. He admits, though, that "we probably didn't give them as much flexibility as I'd like."

But that's OK. The turnaround program is still an experiment. "These 10 principals are going back to their schools. They're really charged up. We'll see what difference they make."

As a former venture capitalist, Gov. Warner is comfortable with the possibility of failure. If the turnaround program is successful, he's prepared to ramp it up to another level, building a cadre of 30, 40, maybe 50 turnaround pros. If it doesn't work, he's presumably prepared to pull the plug -- and try something else.

This may really be stretching the imagination, but it's a comforting thought to contemplate: Wouldn't it be interesting if, in the long run, Gov. Warner's greatest contribution to educational reform doesn't turn out to be raising the SOL standards, or devising reliable metrics, or even introducing the concept of school turnaround specialists? Wouldn't it be marvelous if Warner's most lasting impact were the transformation Virginia's school administrators into prudent risk takers... if one day, Virginia's schools became known as a hotbed of experimentation,

innovation and change?

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