HALLMARKS OF EXCELLENCE

How successful schools succeed

School Visit Findings
of Governor Easley's
Education First Task Force
Spring 2002

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to William G. Enloe High School, Kingswood Elementary School and Magellan Charter School whose staff and students were photographed for this report.

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Executive Summary

In May of 2001, Governor Mike Easley appointed a Task force to recommend ways to build upon the past decade's educational progress and to assure that all of the state's students receive a "superior and competitive" education. He asked a committee of the Education First Task Force to choose a small number of high-performing schools, visit them to learn how they achieve superior results, and report its findings to guide other schools' pursuits of excellence.

On the basis of information about student performance, demographics, and related data, the Committee chose 12 elementary, middle, and high schools from different types of communities across the state. Nine are traditional public schools, two are magnet schools, and one is a charter school. Teams composed of committee members joined by educators, school board members, and business people made one-day visits to the schools during the fall. The teams observed classes and other activities and interviewed school administrators, teachers, students, parents, and others at each school. The Committee then analyzed the results of all 12 visits to uncover patterns and major themes.

In each school, a few major factors seemed to account for the high performance, but these factors were different from school to school. For example, strong leadership from the principal was a major factor in about half of the schools, but in others, the leadership came as much from district administrators or teachers as it did from the principal. Put differently, no single set of factors is dominant in accounting for success in all 12 schools.

One implication of this finding is that schools do not have to do everything well in order to succeed, but if the schools we chose are any guide, they have to do several things very well. Perfection may be beyond the reach of schools, but success on a handful of factors seems within the reach of most schools that make a strong and persistent effort.

Common Success Factors

While the specific success factors varied, a few broad generalizations do seem to hold across many of the schools.

Results oriented

These schools are clearly results-oriented. What is done in one school is different from what is done in another, but all of the schools do things in a whole-hearted rather than a mechanical, pro forma manner. In other words, the administrators and staff do not adopt a curriculum and an approach to discipline and then just go through the motions of implementing it. Rather, they go about their everyday business mindfully, with the full intention of achieving results and with the confident expectation that they will do so. If a given program or technique does not deliver the expected results, they modify or abandon it in favor of an approach that works. Results with students are the touchstone of what they do, not what is comfortable or what they "have always done that way."

High expectations/good relationships

Administrators, teachers, and other staff in these schools generally share a strong focus on student achievement, but they also show concern about students' overall well-being and work to cultivate warm relationships with them. The small size of most of the schools – for example, one high school had only 530 students – undoubtedly made it easier for the staff to know students individually, but it was also clear that both teachers and administrators worked hard to get to know students well. Caring about students and demanding hard work from them are not seen as opposites in these schools. Teachers and administrators do not choose between warm personal relationships and high expectations; they combine them in the belief that neither is effective without the other.

Clearly defined goals

High expectations are not expressed only in fluffy generalizations or fine-sounding rhetoric. Rather, the message that all students are expected to work hard, learn, and perform well is communicated to them in very specific terms. For example, students in one elementary school are told and know exactly how many books they have to read in order to get a certain grade or reward. They also know what skills they must improve, by exactly how much, in order to move on to the next unit or

grade. Across the schools, all students are expected to succeed, and in most they are told exactly what they must do in order to do so.

A family feeling

In most of these schools, teachers, administrators, and other staff communicate the strong sense that "we are family, all of these kids are our kids, and we mean for all of them to succeed." Teachers speak not of "my kids," but of "our kids." This message of inclusiveness gets through to parents as well as to students. As in the case of high expectations for students, the sense of family is not just a warm, fuzzy sentiment, but is expressed through concrete actions. Teachers and other staff members often pitch in to help each other carry out instruction, tutor students who have fallen behind, and help or direct students in a variety of other ways, even when they have no assigned responsibility for the students in question.

Collaboration and shared planning

In nearly all of the elementary and middle schools, schedules are carefully constructed to afford teachers regular opportunities to plan together within and sometimes across grade levels. "Planning" includes working out better ways to present especially difficult material, sharing individual content expertise, making sure that one grade level's curriculum is linked with the previous and succeeding grade levels', exchanging information and strategies concerning specific students, interpreting test score data and its implications for instruction, developing ways to track students' progress between formal testing occasions, and a variety of other tasks that teachers learn from and that make for a more coherent, better-crafted instructional program.

Parent involvement

With some notable exceptions, the level of parent involvement in activities at the school seemed only middling, but many of the schools make active and successful efforts to involve parents in their children's learning at home. In several schools, parents are asked to read with their children, check on homework, and sign off on recently-graded tests and papers. Parents often mentioned that teachers do not hesitate to call them about problems, and teachers noted that parents generally respond readily to requests for help with discipline problems or homework. In several communities, the school's success clearly owed a great deal to the job that families had done to teach their children the value of education and the importance of hard work.

Enjoyable environments

Most of these schools seem to be lively, fun, enjoyable places. They are not grim despite the strong no-nonsense determination that students will learn. Most of the administrators and teachers in these schools do not see having fun and working hard as incompatible.

Making the most of resources

These schools seem to be squeezing a great deal out of the resources that the state and local district provide them and to be working actively to raise extra resources from state and federal grants, foundations, businesses, parents and other local citizens. None of them seemed lavishly funded, and many appeared to be struggling to get by and to be depending heavily on a rather uncertain flow of extra resources to do so.

Strong leadership

Strong leadership is important in all of these schools, but it comes from different places in different schools – sometimes from the principal, sometimes from teachers, and sometimes from district administrators. Leadership styles varied widely, and there was no one formula for success.

The goal of school improvement is for all schools to be "Hallmarks of Excellence." The findings in this report point out that to be successful, schools do not have to be perfect in every way. Instead, they must be committed, mindful, and focused on doing a number of things very well.

Perfection may be beyond the reach of schools, but success on a handful of factors seems within the reach of most schools that make a strong and persistent effort.

Introduction

In May of 2001, Governor Easley's Education First Task Force began work on recommending strategies to assure that North Carolina's system of education offered a superior and competitive education to all students.

One of the three subcommittees formed from that full Task Force was given the job of identifying a set of high performing schools and discovering, through school visits, what accounted for their success. The governor referred to the features of these schools as "Hallmarks of Excellence." The subcommittee, known as the Hallmarks of Excellence Committee, reports its findings here.

School Selection

In announcing his Education First Task Force, Governor Easley made it clear that he recognizes the state's responsibility to provide all students with a sound, basic education but insists that to be economically, politically, and socially vibrant, the state must go far beyond the sound and basic to provide a "superior and competitive" education for all of its future workers, citizens, and community members.

Accordingly, he asked the Hallmarks of Excellence Committee to choose and visit schools that exemplify how the state can raise both the floor and the ceiling of the education system – how we can sharply improve the performance of low performing students but also how we can enable our top performers to reach or exceed the learning levels reached by America's best students. So the Hallmarks of Excellence Committee chose two main types of schools to visit: "beating the odds schools" and "high flying schools."

Beating the odds schools

"Beating the odds schools" have substantial proportions of students from impoverished and/or minority family backgrounds, but

have refused to accept the notion that such children are fated to perform poorly in school. More specifically, these are schools:

- with high proportions of poor and/or minority students
- which are making such strong progress that if the current rate of improvement is sustained, all ethnic groups and virtually all individual students in the school will be at grade level by 2010
- which are making steady progress (no “backsliding”)
- whose best performing students – students scoring at Level IV on the state’s ABCs assessment – are also being educated well and are in at least the top 50% of such students statewide, and
- whose current levels of performance, if not yet outstanding, already represent an unusually effective response to the educational challenges they face.

To assure that the set of schools visited would include schools with substantial proportions of Black, Hispanic, and Native American students, the Committee also chose some of the top-ranking “high-ethnic minority” schools in the state, even though not all of them fully met the “beating the odds” criteria. These top “high ethnic minority” schools may be thought of as close cousins to the “beating the odds” schools.

High flying schools
“High flying schools” are some of the top-performing schools in the state. They generally do not have such high proportions of poor and/or minority students as “beating the odds schools” have, but the poor and minority students they do have are performing well on state tests, and the gaps between whites and other ethnic groups are closing.

Other selection criteria
In addition to the criteria already listed, the Committee also deliberately selected a set of schools that are distributed across grade levels (elementary, middle, and high schools), across the state (Western, Piedmont, Eastern regions), and across community types (rural, small town/large town, city). Finally, we thought it important to include at least one magnet school, at least one charter school, and at least two of the schools singled out in Judge Howard Manning’s rulings in the *Leandro* case for their success with “at-risk” children.

Thus, the Committee did not set out to choose the 12 very “best” schools in North Carolina but a set of schools that are making impressive progress and/or performing at high levels in various kinds of communities across the state. These were schools that could tell us from their own experience how to educate at-risk children much more effectively and how to enable far more students to reach peak levels of performance. The list of schools chosen by the Committee is provided at the end of this report, along with some of the extensive information that led the Committee to select them.

School Visits

Members of the Committee visited all 12 of the schools between the middle of September and the middle of October, 2001. At least two Committee members visited each of the schools, joined in most cases by a district or school administrator, a teacher, a school board member, and a business person with a strong interest in education. These additional members of the visiting teams were chosen with the help of:

- NC Association of Educators
- NC Association of School Administrators
- NC Business Committee for Education
- NC Center for the Advancement of Teaching
- NC Federation of Teachers
- NC School Boards Association
- Principals’ Executive Program

They were chosen for their knowledge of education and their insight into schools. A documenter also accompanied each team to capture and write up the findings of the visit.

As indicated above, the purpose of the visits was to learn what accounts for these schools’ extraordinary success. What are they doing to make such good progress and to promote such high levels of student performance? To help each visiting team address the question, NC Education Research Council staff pulled together some background information on the school, its students, faculty, curriculum and instructional programs, and relationships with parents, community organizations, and businesses. The visiting team spent a day at each school, observing and listening to educators, students, parents, and community members. Research Council staff organized the visits, coordinated the documentation, and worked with the Committee to prepare this report.

Categories Examined

In the sections that follow, we deal with seven broad categories of success factors:

- Leadership and organization
- Programs and practices, including curriculum, instruction, assessment
- Resource availability and use, including overall funding level and allocation to personnel, facilities and equipment, discretionary funds, etc.
- Teacher quality, including teacher preparation, experience, professional development opportunities, etc.
- School climate, including order, cohesion, student and teacher work environment
- Students’ sense of belonging, challenge, support, equitable treatment, etc.
- Parent, business, and community support

Leadership and Organization

Leadership is important in these schools, but leadership comes from different places in different schools – sometimes mainly from the principal, sometimes mainly from teachers, sometimes mainly from district administrators.

Principal Leadership Styles

In the majority of the Hallmarks schools, the leadership provided by the principal is crucial. But even in these schools, the style of principal leadership varies from school to school. In some, the principal is a charismatic, inspiring, and facilitative leader. She or he makes the mission clear, fires up the faculty to pursue it, galvanizes community support, finds resources, raises extra funds, and leads by example and by orchestrating the efforts of others. This kind of inspiring leadership succeeds in part because it mobilizes extraordinary commitment and effort from virtually everyone associated with the school.

To illustrate, when the current principal took over at one elementary school, she noted that the school was virtually "at the bottom" on standardized achievement tests. She says she told the staff, "We are going to change this, for the county, the community, and the children." (The need to protect or boost community pride as well as to benefit students was a motivator in several cases.) The principal went on to say that "every person in this school is a teacher." She then mobilized everyone in the school to act accordingly – the teacher assistants, the guidance counselor, the media specialist, the physical education teacher, and an assistant from the computer lab all assist teachers in reading instruction every day. The cafeteria manager, the custodian, and the bus drivers all know that they have a role to play in assuring students' success, as well. For example, the custodian is well-known as an informal confidant and "counselor" to students about problems they encounter both in and out of school.

At another school, the principal's style is more authoritative, establishing a clear chain of command and thorough specification of the scope within which people can make decisions at different levels of the system. Everyone in the school knows what the mission is, exactly who has what authority, and whom they should go to for decisions or help. As a result, the school functions smoothly, and both administrators and staff can concentrate on getting their own jobs done, attending to special cases from time to time, but not spending unnecessary time figuring out just what should be done in each part of the curriculum or every case of student discipline. Teachers and other staff know what they are supposed to do and how much autonomy they can exercise. This approach seems to profit mainly from increased efficiency and focus rather than extraordinary commitment and extra effort.

One specific point is important to note about the distribution of decisionmaking authority between principals and teachers: even the most "facilitative" principals made it clear in no uncertain terms that they reserve the right to make decisions about teachers' assignments. It was also clear that they make these decisions on the basis of what they believe is best for the students in various grades and classes, even when the assignment decisions conflict with teachers' preferences.

Principals were not deaf to teachers' requests. Nor did they make decisions without consultation. But they expressed a certain firm resolution to place teachers where they believe the teachers can do most to help students.

Teacher Leadership

It is so often emphasized that the principal is the key to schools' success that it may come as a surprise to many that in some of these outstanding schools, leadership comes mainly from teachers working in teams, committees, and/or departments that deliberate and make decisions together. At one elementary school where the graph of performance climbed steeply over the past five years, a new principal came on board two years ago, yet there was not so much as a blip in the upward trajectory. Teachers praised the principal for the support she gave them and for other aspects of her performance, but told the visiting team that for the past several years they themselves had felt in charge of the essentials of curriculum, instruction, and their approach to working with students. A similar pattern was observed at other schools where leadership changes had taken place recently.

Another mix of teacher and principal leadership characterized a large high school we visited. The school had an extraordinary array of different courses and programs. Especially talented teachers seemed to be attracted to the school specifically because they could teach certain specialized courses to students who shared their interest in the subject matter. The principal seemed to be highly regarded by teachers and other staff, but worked in a largely facilitative way to make sure that teachers in each department, program, or set of courses had the resources they needed to teach effectively. His skillful administration helped, but in a quiet, background way, and instructional leadership was exercised by small groups of teachers associated with each area of specialization.

In both of these teacher-led schools, teachers and parents made it clear that the principal is able, hard-working, and does much that is important to their success. Yet when one stood back to identify the main success factors, it was clear that groups of teachers were performing the key leadership functions – establishing and maintaining the guiding values, making decisions about curriculum and instruction, choosing materials, using assessment data to decide which students needed extra help, and so on.

We noted earlier that the schools we visited did things wholeheartedly, mindfully, and with the full intention of making things work. This finding applies as much to collaborative leadership as to other aspects of the schools. All of us have observed committees, teams, departments, and other groups of teachers and staff that seemed to be just going through the motions of developing a mission statement nibbling around the edges of the school's operation and taking on little of substance. The difference between wholehearted, mindful, results-oriented implementation of participatory decisionmaking and just going through the motions of using them is as striking as the difference between wholehearted effort and just going through the motions in teaching, or involving parents, or forming partnerships with businesses.

District Leadership

In several schools – even some schools where leadership from the principal seemed strong, the superintendent and/or other district leaders were just as crucial to the school's success as was the principal – sometimes more so. In one rural and small town district, for example, the superintendent spent most of every day out in schools and classrooms, observing, asking questions, and constantly making notes about this teacher who needed more textbooks, that one who needed lab supplies, or another who wanted to attend a staff development session being held at the nearest university. Teachers spoke as often of help they had received from the superintendent as from the principal. Other district administrators were also visible, walking the corridor engaged in a problem-solving session with the principal or worrying with a teacher about how to handle a particularly delicate problem with a parent. According to DPI research staff, there was an unusual concentration of what we called "beating the odds" schools in this district, and it was not difficult to understand why that might be.

There were at least three other districts in which leadership from top administrators seemed to be a significant factor accounting for the success of the school we visited, and in several other schools, contributions from the district level seemed important if not quite so crucial. (Leadership from the board was clearly an influential factor in the success of the one charter school we visited – a form of "district leadership," if you will.) The most striking examples of district leadership were in districts with relatively small student populations. But even in the largest districts we visited, district policy was important. For example, it was through district policy that two urban Hallmarks of Excellence schools had been made magnet schools, and features of the schools that derived from their status as magnets – such as a strong shared philosophy – helped account for their success.

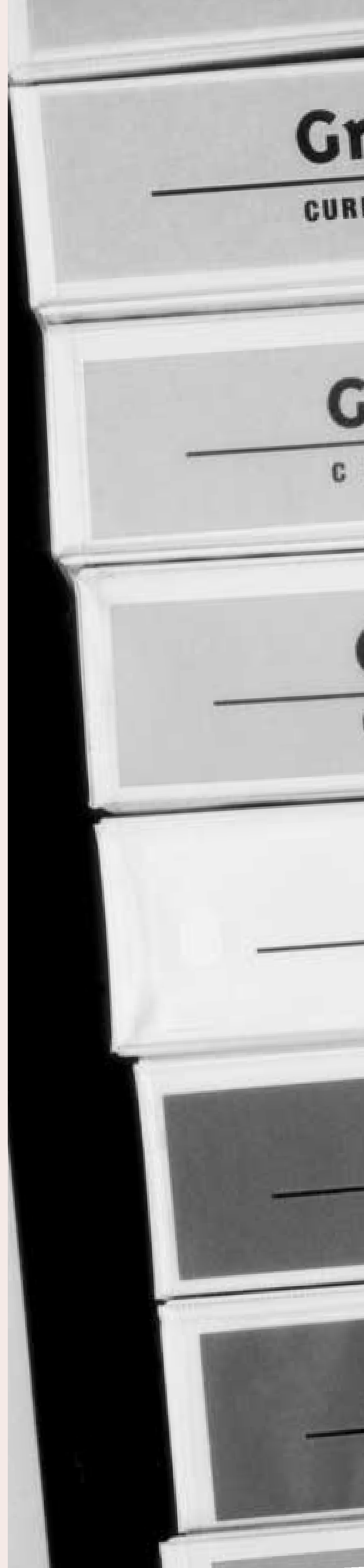
Looking across the set of 12 Hallmarks schools, the Committee was persuaded that school district policy makes substantial contributions to the success of several schools and indirect contributions to several others. In a very few cases, teachers or principals reported that they had found it necessary to press very hard to keep a certain curriculum or some other feature of their school intact despite a specific district policy. But even these cases underline the importance of district policy and leadership to school success.

The Committee believes that the current and potential contributions of district level policy leadership may not be receiving adequate emphasis in current state education policy.

Emphasis on Student Learning

Whether it was established by principal leadership, shared decisionmaking by teachers, district policy, or some combination of the three, a crucial factor in the great majority of the Hallmarks schools was the unmistakable emphasis on student learning. As with other crucial values in these schools, the value on student learning was not diffuse and rhetorical, but concrete and operational. As we note in the section on programs and practices, the focus on student learning was often expressed through an insistence on the importance of teaching the NC Standard Course of Study, of using assessment data to monitor students' progress on an ongoing basis, and of intervening with both students and teachers if students' progress was not satisfactory. Well-established organizational routines – classroom observations by principals, regular cycles of testing and reporting of test data – generally gave specificity and firmness to these practices. In a few schools, the Standard Course of Study was not emphasized, and there was less reliance on standardized testing as a mode of assessment. But the focus on student learning and on continuous tracking of students' progress was no less evident in these schools than in other Hallmarks schools.

A crucial and common factor in all of the Hallmarks of Excellence schools was the unmistakable emphasis on student learning.



Programs and Practices

Our main finding in this area concerns a set of general practices that most of the Hallmarks of Excellence schools employ to one degree or another.

Common Practices

With variations and some exceptions, most of the schools do the following: make sure the Standard Course of Study is taught; give students incentives for good performance and sanction poor effort; use test results to spot problems; give extra attention to students and teachers who need it – quickly; and implement things wholeheartedly, with determination to get results.

Teach the Standard Course of Study

Most of the principals emphasize the importance of teaching the content and skills specified in the NC Standard Course of Study. Not surprisingly, the elementary schools place top priority on reading, with mathematics a close second. To some degree, this reflects the fact that reading and mathematics are the only subjects tested through the ABCs at the elementary level. But simply in terms of their own independent beliefs, administrators and teachers in the elementary schools also seemed to regard reading skills as the essential equipment for success in school.

The full set of tested courses was emphasized by the high schools we chose, but even at the high school level, reading skills sometimes received extra emphasis. For example, one high school required all 9th and 10th graders with signs of reading difficulties to take a special reading course in addition to their regular course in English.

Some of the 12 schools seemed so totally committed to high performance on the ABCs tests that success on the tests figured prominently in the great majority of curricular and instructional decisions. Other schools simply took a pragmatic attitude toward the tests. They considered it important to do well, but seemed a little less fervent in their pursuit of ABCs success, and perhaps even somewhat skeptical about whether the tests should really be taken quite so seriously by state policy makers, parents, and the public. But none of the 12 schools either dismissed the importance of success on the ABCs or simply taught to the test, ignoring other content and other important functions of schooling.

Most principals did go to some lengths to make sure that the Standard Course of Study content and skills are covered thoroughly. Pacing guides that tell teachers how far along they should be by a given week in the year were used in at least four schools. Teachers were rarely required to submit detailed lesson plans on a routine basis, but in many of the schools, lesson plans were supposed to be available upon request. Most of the principals reported observing in classrooms for a significant part of every day, and even the principal who inspired the deepest devotion among her teachers regularly reviewed lesson plans as part of her classroom visits. In at least one district, the superintendent and other district administrators also conducted classroom observations daily, with an eye to ensuring that the right content was being taught carefully and thoroughly.

Give incentives for good performance

In many but not all of the elementary and middle schools, the use of incentives or rewards is strikingly pervasive. Students are rewarded for reading and passing quizzes on a certain number of books, for good grades on other tests, for attendance, for good behavior and good citizenship – for just about everything the school wants to encourage. Some rewards take the form of being allowed to attend and being recognized at whole-school ceremonies, fairs, or other celebrations. Some schools also use material incentives. For example, in one school good grades on homework and tests earn students points that they can accumulate and use to buy appealing items in the

school store (items purchased by the school with funds from the PTA and a local business). In one elementary school that rejected the use of material incentives for reasons of educational philosophy, teachers often use verbal praise for good effort, behavior, and performance.

High schools did not appear to use rewards quite so pervasively, though students were certainly recognized for achievements in academics or sports and for contributions to the school that showed outstanding citizenship. High schools did require students to attend regularly, behave well, and maintain a certain grade point average in order to be permitted to play sports.

Use testing data to spot problems

Most schools at all levels regularly used ABCs and other test results to check on students' progress. Several schools administered diagnostic tests every nine weeks to generate more detailed and more up-to-date information on students' progress than the ABCs tests can provide. And several districts had acquired special software tools to break down both ABCs and other test results to the level of individual students' mastery of particular objectives. In some cases, school and district administrators used test results not only to identify students in need of extra assistance, but also to identify teachers who need additional professional development or coaching on how to teach certain objectives. The use of Total Quality Management approaches helped some schools formalize the process of using data to monitor student and teacher performance.

One elementary school deliberately deemphasized formal, standardized assessment, and instead used regular conferences in which teachers drew upon their observations of each student, samples of students' work, and any other sources of available information in order to develop a comprehensive picture of the student's progress. Though very different in character from reliance on data from standardized tests to pinpoint student difficulties, these conferences served a similar function: to provide a regular check on how each student was coming along. Teachers in this school emphasized that students develop and learn at different rates and in different ways, but they were no less diligent about assessing students' progress and assuring that each student was actually making good progress than were teachers in other schools.

While many of the schools we visited used ABCs and other test data very actively, it was clear to visiting teams that these schools and districts saw assessment as a tool for pointing up curricular or instructional weak spots. Test results were seen as indicators of progress, not as the end-all and be-all of education. Administrators and teachers kept the focus on what students were learning or struggling with, not on test performance for the sake of test performance.

Help students and teachers who need it – quickly

Schools used a variety of approaches to providing special assistance to students identified as needing it, from simple steps such as having teachers provide additional assistance to students before or after school, to regular tutoring programs offered after school or on Saturdays, to computer-based lessons. Whatever combination of these approaches schools may have used, they all seemed not just to pick up on problems quickly, but also to provide help right away. As one parent put it, "They don't just hope things will get better. They get right on it!"

A similar observation applies to teachers. Using some combination of frequent observation in classrooms and active use of assessment information, principals (and sometimes district administrators) not only identified classrooms where students seemed to be lagging, but also intervened quickly to put

things right. In general, the interventions were supportive – designed to help teachers learn specific skills or get on track with the curriculum – rather than punitive. Yet teachers whose students did not seem to be making adequate progress were not left to muddle through. They got some combination of help and pressure for improved performance, and they got the attention rather quickly.

Commitment to the goals

Once more, we want to stress that administrators, teachers, and others in these schools did what they did mindfully and wholeheartedly, with the full intention and confident expectation of getting results. In most of these schools, it appeared that little or nothing was done in a mechanical, pro forma manner.

An interesting puzzle is how these schools came to act so deliberately and with such a firm intention to achieve their purpose. Why do these particular schools act in such a wholehearted way, when many others do not?

The question can be approached from a number of angles. For example, in some schools it is clearly the principal who establishes this attitude. In others, it seems to be a matter of beliefs that are shared among teachers – a culture of effectiveness, if you will. Years of research on "teacher efficacy" confirm that a teacher who believes that he or she can get students to learn generally acts accordingly and succeeds in doing so. More recently, "social efficacy" has become a popular concept – the idea that if groups of people share the belief that they can bring about a certain result, then they act in a concerted way and succeed in achieving it.

But whether it is the principal, an individual teacher, or teachers as a group who establish the attitude of mindful commitment to get results, the further question still arises, "How did this principal, or teacher, or group of teachers come to believe that they can enable the full range of students to perform well?" Professional development programs or other interventions to strengthen individual educators' or whole faculties' sense of efficacy will need to give close attention to the research on this issue. A careful review of this research was beyond the scope of this Committee's work.

Other Practices Worth Noting

In addition to this set of practices that were common if not universal among the Hallmarks schools, Committee members also believe a handful of specific findings in one or a few schools are worthy of note.

Reluctant restriction to traditional instruction

One finding about instruction distressed many Committee and other visiting team members. Teachers in some of the Hallmarks schools commented that their teaching had become less imaginative in recent years. Teachers reported increased use of a more traditional combination of presentation, question-and-answer, seatwork and homework, and work-checking. For example, in one school a teacher remarked, "We don't have time to let them discover it for themselves anymore." While teachers acknowledged that their sharpened focus on making sure that the Standard Course of Study was covered thoroughly did seem to result in better student performance on standardized tests, they also lamented reductions in field trips, hands-on discovery-oriented activities, and other "creative" activities.

While the restriction to traditional instruction may be adaptive under present circumstances – promoting curriculum coverage and thus contributing to higher test scores – members of the Committee regard it as a regrettable unintended consequence of accountability pressures. Nor does the Committee believe that the loss of creative, engaging forms of instruction is an inevitable consequence of an accountability system.

As the Third International Mathematics and Science Study noted, compared to many other nations' curricula, American courses in mathematics and science are "a mile wide and an inch deep." That is, courses cover such a broad range of topics that none of the topics can be given adequate time for students to develop a real grasp of the underlying concepts and an ability to use the concepts to solve new problems or understand related phenomena.

The Committee believes that the "mile wide, inch deep" characterization may well apply to many courses in the NC Standard Course of Study, not just to mathematics and science. All too often, the result is hurried treatment of many topics – a pattern that accountability pressures do not create but do seem to worsen in many classrooms. One Committee member observed that block scheduling often compounds the problem by shortening the actual time available for instruction in a given course. A businessman on the Committee recalled a sign that puts the problem pointedly: "Why is there never enough time to do it right, but always enough time to do it over?"

Courses of study that focus on fewer topics each year could be taught in a livelier, deeper way, resulting in better understanding with less need to re-teach the same skills year after year. More instructional time for students who need it – which could be created through a variety of means, including a longer instructional day or year or various scheduling options – would also permit deeper teaching and learning without sacrificing content coverage.

The Committee urges the State Board of Education to consider reducing the range of topics covered in curricula specified in the NC Standard Course of Study and to explore what combination of additional resources and greater flexibility in the use of time would be required to permit deeper, richer instruction than even many of the best schools in the state can manage at present.

Linking ESL to the Standard Course of Study

In one elementary school, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers told of linking their instruction very closely to what students need to know to succeed in mastering the Standard Course of Study as it is taught in their regular academic classes. That is, after students whose first language is other than English manage to learn enough English to enter regular classes, ESL teachers do not simply teach general English language skills or vocabulary, but target instruction specifically to support classwork and homework in core academic courses. This entails close communication with ESL students' regular classroom teachers to keep abreast of what content and skills are being addressed in their classes, as well as the particular difficulties that ESL students are experiencing in those classes. The tightened focus on the Standard Course of Study content and on ESL students' learning problems seems to pay handsome dividends. The preliminary ABCs results available at the time of our visit showed that 100% of the school's sizeable and growing population of Hispanic students performed at or above grade level in the spring of 2001.

If a group of teachers share the belief that they can bring about a certain result, they act in a concerted way and succeed in achieving the result.

Linking special education to the Standard Course of Study

In one of the Hallmarks high schools, special education teachers reported making a strong effort to keep as many Learning Disabled (LD) and Educable Mentally Handicapped (EMH) students as possible in courses of study leading to a full diploma rather than routing them into the program that earns students only a certificate of attendance. LD and EMH students were enrolled in special elective courses that laid the groundwork for success in courses required for graduation. The elective courses concentrated on concepts, facts, and skills that students would need in order to handle required courses. In addition, the LD and EMH students received extra instruction and tutoring after school and in Saturday morning sessions. In a middle school, special education students were included in regular academic classes. The students were supported by a special education teacher who either taught along side the regular education teacher, or provided supplemental instruction outside of class. As a result, in both schools, an unusually high percentage of special education students were able to pass the competency examination currently given at the end of 9th grade and to score at or above grade level on ABCs tests.

Using extracurriculars to reduce dropouts

All three of our high schools offered strong programs of sports and other extracurricular activities. At two of them, students as well as teachers and administrators spoke with pride about the school's tradition of strong teams in various sports – strong girls' as well as boys' teams. In a long hall outside the gymnasium, one school featured large photographs of teams dating back for many years. Student guides conducting a tour for the visiting team pointed out fathers, uncles, and older brothers or sisters in some of the photographs. Teachers at another high school emphasized how crucial sports and other extracurriculars are as a way of keeping many students in school who might otherwise drop out. For example, the ROCAME program (Region O Council for the Advancement of Minorities in Engineering) has a very high participation rate.

Research from national studies supports the claim that extracurriculars help reduce drop-out rates. While being retained or "held back" tends to increase the drop-out rate, extracurricular participation is almost twice as powerful on the "plus" side as retention is on the "minus" side. It appears that extracurriculars – derided as "frills" by some – can be a powerful force in reducing the drop-out rate. Further, all of the Hallmarks high schools also reported that they require students to maintain a certain average in academics to remain eligible to participate in sports. As a teacher in one high school remarked, "[The coaches communicate] an attitude of high achievement, of going places." She noted that in some sports, coaches require athletes to learn a new word from the SAT list every day. Thus, in these schools, extracurriculars offer important leverage for good effort in academics as well as for drop-out prevention.

Providing assistance to students with academic difficulties

The Hallmarks schools use funding from a variety of sources and a number of different approaches to help students whose skill and knowledge difficulties place them at risk of academic failure, including extended day programs, Saturday academies, and extended year programs.

For example:

One middle school administers a standardized test only six weeks after the school year begins, and after-school remediation is required for all students whose skills fall below the equivalent of Level III on the ABCs assessments. Parents must give consent (100% have done so to date) and must either provide transportation or work with the school to arrange it. The school offers a Support Our Students (SOS) program in conjunction with a local church. The program is funded through a state grant. Through this SOS program, certified teachers tutor students from 3-5pm. The program aims to improve academic achievement, provide special recreational and cultural experiences, build self-esteem and confidence, involve family and community, and prevent drop out. A 21st Century Learning Centers grant also supports an after-school program geared towards students at Level I on the ABCs assessments. Paid teachers focus remediation in four areas: language arts, math, writing, and computer skills. The 21st Century Learning Centers program operates from 3-7pm and provides recreational activities in addition to its academic offerings.

Extracurriculars such as sports offer important leverage for good effort in academics as well as for drop-out prevention.

For example:

In one elementary school, teachers, regardless of grade assignment, volunteer to tutor students in tested grades. Pre-K-2 teachers and resource teachers are actively involved. The school runs a late bus for students participating in after-school tutoring. Another elementary school runs a similar program for students who need extra help, but also provides enrichment for students who have reached grade level but have "plateaued." Like the middle school mentioned above, one elementary school operates an after-school program in cooperation with a local church.

For example:

A middle school uses safe and drug-free schools funds to provide structured activities on Saturdays, including academic as well as recreational components. One high school launched a Saturday program designed to enable students to make up work missed because of absences, then expanded it to serve students who are struggling with their academic work. Special education teachers play a key role in organizing the Saturday sessions, but teachers from several subject matter backgrounds also tutor in the program.

For example:

Two of the Hallmarks elementary schools operate as year-round schools. Teachers in one of the schools stressed that many of their students simply could not maintain grade level performance if they were out of school for a full two-month stretch in the summer. In the other district, central office administrators noted that less review and re-teaching is required during the school year because students are able to retain information over the shorter breaks. They also reported that 70% of the parents like the year-round calendar and say it should continue.

Programs for high-achieving students

The two magnet schools and one charter school we chose to visit offered some of the most impressive examples of programs to "raise the ceiling" for high-achieving students.

The mathematics offerings at the charter middle school were especially impressive, with three different levels of challenge at each grade level. Two classes of Algebra I are

offered, as well as one class of Geometry I, with only 14 students per class.

At another school, an elementary magnet, a member of the visiting team noted that the school "…provides individualized instruction, period. This means that lower level students receive remedial assistance and upper level students receive enrichment and more challenging material. I observed a number of students doing work that was two to three grade levels above their assigned grade level."

Our documenter for the magnet high school remarked, "The curriculum offerings… are astonishing for a high school. The course catalog almost reads like one that would be found at a medium-sized college." Foreign languages such as Japanese, Chinese and Russian, an intensive and broad arts curriculum including four levels of orchestra, science courses such as Human Disease and Microbiology, three levels of Calculus, and dozens of advanced placement (AP), international baccalaureate (IB) and honors courses are offered in addition to core courses. Various dual enrollment options (mostly at the nearby major university) are also available and commonly used by advanced students. The curriculum is the "magnet", so to speak. It draws students from all over the county, with the school receiving many more magnet applications than it has slots available each year.

At the same magnet high school, the full range of course offerings (including AP and IB courses) are open to all students. Enrollment in AP courses is encouraged by fee waivers for needy students who want to take AP exams but cannot afford the fees. However, most staff acknowledged that fee waivers alone were not adequate to assure that neighborhood or "base" students are equitably represented in challenging courses, and one staff member said he thought that the lower-achieving students did perceive a tracking system.

Several Committee members noted that the magnet and charter schools were all located in large, urban, relatively well-funded districts. They argued that it would be difficult to organize such impressive magnet and charter schools in smaller and poorer districts, where students are more dispersed and necessary resources are harder to muster. At any rate, the traditional Hallmarks schools took a variety of different approaches to serving high-achieving students. For example, in one school in a low-wealth district, 80-85% of certified staff are enrolled in or have taken academically or intellectually gifted (AIG) training classes and have an AIG license. A relatively small number of students were designated AIG, but teachers commented that they use AIG practices to enhance instruction for all students. A middle school in another small, low-wealth district offers SAT preparation classes designed to boost scores on the PSAT. Another middle school has recently instituted an Academic Challenge Program. Offered to any 6th grader who wants to participate, the program offers more hands-on work, more depth and enrichment, and more rigorous classes than the regular 6th grade curriculum provides. The Committee was impressed by these ways of challenging top students without contributing to racial or economic resegregation within schools.

Resource Availability and Use

The table on page 15 shows the average per-student spending in the counties where the 12 Hallmarks of Excellence schools are located. The figures are computed on the basis of average daily membership and include small and low-wealth supplements along with county spending. (Note that these funds supplement other funds provided by the state.) The Hallmarks schools' counties' local spending plus supplements are slightly above average for the state. The average rank for all 100 counties would be 50th. The mean rank for Hallmarks schools' counties is about 38th.

As the table also shows, spending by Hallmarks schools' counties ranges from a high of $2,073 to a low of $760. This compares with a statewide range from a high of $2,872 to a statewide low of $671. Thus, while our schools' counties spend a little more than the average county, the lowest-spending county in our sample of schools spends just $89 more per student than does the lowest-spending county in the state, and the range of spending is almost as wide as the range of county spending statewide.

Federal funding

In addition to state and county funds, two other types of funding are important to the Hallmarks schools. Those with large percentages of students from low-income families stress that federal funds are crucial to their success. A principal from one such school remarked, "We'd just be lost without our Title I money. I really don't know what we would do without it."

Other funding

Committee members were also struck by how active these schools are in raising funds from federal and foundation grants, grants and gifts from local businesses, and parents and community members. It is virtually impossible to capture this kind of spending in a way that permits rigorous comparison. In fact, it was sufficiently difficult to determine exactly how much any of our schools actually does raise and spend from these sources that the visiting teams seldom came away with specific figures. But, in case after case, team members were impressed with these schools' and their districts' ability to raise extra funds. And in nearly all schools, teachers emphasized that when they really need something, either their principal or a district administrator "will move heaven and earth to get it for us."

Despite the successful efforts of school and district administrators to find extra resources when they are needed, however, visiting teams consistently came away with the impression that the schools were struggling hard to make do. In only a few instances did team members find the level of available resources impressive and attribute a major portion of the school's success to them. Much more commonly, Committee members and other members of the visiting teams were struck by the tenuousness of the schools' financial situation. Many schools seemed to rely heavily on the extra resources they could raise, and the flow of these resources seemed uncertain rather than assured. As one visiting team member put it, "Financially, these schools seemed to be working hard to keep their heads above water rather than swimming in heated pools."

Allocation of Funds

It is important to acknowledge that the Committee had neither the time nor the staff to analyze exactly how the 12 Hallmarks schools are allocating their resources or to compare their allocations with other schools or across the state. The same goes for the districts in which they are located. We do not know, for example, whether these schools are spending either more or less on their sports or music programs than other North Carolina schools are spending.

In several schools, visiting teams found that principals and staff were stretching the resources they did have in notably clever ways. For example, one elementary school was adjacent to a low-income housing project. Working with housing officials, the principal used a HUD Housing Authority Grant for $250,000 to create a computer lab that is used by the elementary school's students during the day and by parents and older students at night. The grant pays for a computer coach who by the terms of the

Current County Spending

	Rank	County	Spending/ADM
	1	Orange	$2,872
Hallmarks Schools	5	Charlotte-Mecklenburg *Amay James Montessori*	2,073
Hallmarks Schools	9	New Hanover *Laney High*	1,868
Hallmarks Schools	16	Wake *Enloe High, Kingswood Elementary, Magellan Charter*	1,528
Hallmarks Schools	24	Jones *Pollocksville Elementary*	1,300
Hallmarks Schools	28	Transylvania *Brevard Middle*	1,202
Hallmarks Schools	30	Wilson *Rock Ridge Elementary*	1,161
Hallmarks Schools	31	Nash-Rocky Mount *Baskerville Elementary*	1,150
Hallmarks Schools	52	Cherokee *Murphy High*	1,034
Hallmarks Schools	68	Halifax *Brawley Middle*	982
Hallmarks Schools	97	Hoke *South Hoke Elementary*	760
	100	Duplin	671

Data Source: *North Carolina Local School Finance Study 2001,* Public School Forum of North Carolina

Note: Spending/ADM includes low-wealth and small county funds. Current county spending is based upon 1999-2000 data and represents the average total county spending.

The counties listed above represent the lowest and highest spending counties in the state as well as the counties in which our twelve Hallmarks schools are located. The range in spending in the Hallmarks of Excellence Schools is almost as wide as the range of county spending statewide.

arrangement between the principal and housing officials must be both the parent of a student and a resident of the housing project. The parent can work for two years and receives training while working, but when the two years are up, must get another job. The grant freed the school to use state technology dollars to put several computers in every classroom.

Yet it is also important to say that the Committee did not find that these schools were allocating their resources in similar ways that would account for their success. They were generally using their resources inventively, but differently from school to school. Take, for example, the use of teacher assistants. The Tennessee STAR study – one of the largest and best-designed studies of class size reduction ever undertaken – showed that reduced class sizes did improve student achievement substantially, but that adding aides to classes of normal size offered no measurable advantage in student learning over normal-sized classes without an aide. The STAR finding has been picked up by districts across the country, including Burke County, North Carolina, where as attrition has permitted, funds formerly allocated for teaching assistants have been reallocated to hire more certified teachers and to reduce class size. One of the Hallmarks elementary schools pursued the same strategy, "trading" teacher assistant slots for regular classroom teacher slots until the school now has only a very few teaching assistants and an average class size of 16-18 students.

In contrast, principals of other Hallmarks schools reported working hard to keep all of their teaching assistants and believing very strongly that the assistants are making crucial contributions to the school's effectiveness. In at least one school, the reasons why teaching assistants are making significant contributions are easy to discern. The principal encourages every teaching assistant to take at least one education-related course per term at a nearby university known for its teacher education program. She also comes up with the funds to pay their tuition. Further, teaching assistants participate in all professional development sessions right alongside the certified classroom teachers. The result is that visiting team members often found it difficult or impossible to distinguish between certified teachers and teaching assistants. Teaching assistants were used for instructional purposes and generally seemed as knowledgeable about subject matter, learning, and teaching as the classroom teachers did, and the classroom teachers were a very impressive group. In fact, several of this school's current teachers first came on board as teaching assistants and "graduated" to the classroom teacher role after several years on the job. At least three other schools pursued similar professional development strategies to strengthen their teacher assistants' knowledge and skill, with similarly impressive results.

So there seems to be no single answer to the question of whether it is better to keep and nurture teaching assistants or "trade them in" for classroom teachers. On average, research shows that reducing class size is generally more effective. But judging by the schools we selected and visited, each strategy can be successful if it is carried out intelligently and with an eye to results. This does not mean that schools should be casual or indifferent about the use of assistants. The Committee concludes that dollars spent on teaching assistants may be either well spent or badly spent, depending on how carefully assistants are selected, trained, deployed, monitored, and supported.

With some exceptions, the schools we selected seem to be giving a higher priority to assuring that their students achieve at or above grade level rather than to assuring the highest possible achievement by their top students. That is, the principals and teachers in the majority of the Hallmarks schools seem to put most of their energy and resources into bringing low-performing students up to grade level.

As previously noted, however, the schools did offer special programs for high-performing students – gifted and talented programs in elementary and middle schools and honors and advanced placement courses in high schools – and in some respects, the schools devoted extra resources to these programs. For example, class sizes often appeared to be smaller in advanced and specialized courses than in more basic courses required of all students. This was especially noticeable in the high school with large numbers of specialized courses. Classes in the third or fourth year of a foreign language or in calculus, for example, were much smaller than classes in 9th grade English or Algebra I. It also appeared that gifted and talented, honors, AP, and other advanced classes benefited from especially well-qualified and experienced teachers. From one point of view, this assignment of smaller classes to advanced and specialized courses is simply a result of enrollment decisions by individual students, but the decision to offer advanced and specialized courses represents a de facto decision about resource allocation – a decision to allocate more of a valuable resource (smaller classes) to high-achieving students rather than to students who may be struggling to achieve grade level success in basic required courses. Similarly, many administrators may take it for granted that more advanced classes required more highly qualified teachers, but this too represents an important decision about resource allocation.

Resource constraints inevitably put all schools in the position of choosing to provide more service to some groups of students at the expense of others – a trade-off that is built in to the effort to assure not just a "sound, basic education" but a "superior and competitive education" for the state's students. Yet with the tight resource constraints we observed, these decisions appear to be more fateful than they might be if funding levels permitted evidently adequate resources for all students.

Technology's Role in Success

A final set of observations about resources concerns the availability and use of computers and other technology in these schools. In most cases, the schools were not richly supplied with technology, and instances of especially well-equipped labs or classrooms where technology use was striking tended to be funded by special grants or gifts rather than from core state or local funding. For example, some elementary schools used local grant funds to equip Accelerated Reader labs with computers. One high school located in a small, remote community used its grant-funded Information Highway site to connect students with university faculty members doing advanced research and to broaden students' horizons in other ways. An urban high school operates a computer-based mastery learning lab that enables many students to get extra assistance in courses, or even to complete some whole courses they need in order to graduate. While technology did play a significant role at many other schools, it generally was not central to their success. The Committee does not mean to imply that technology might not make a very important and powerful contribution in many other schools across the state, or in these schools in the future, but judging by the evidence of these particular cases, the potential of technology has yet to be realized fully.

Teacher Quality

In the introduction, we noted that the factors which accounted for these 12 schools' success were not universal across all schools but varied from school to school. Perhaps the sole exception to this pattern – the only respect in which we can generalize across the 12 schools – is that all 12 did seem to have strong teaching staffs, sometimes strikingly so. Not only did district administrators and principals nearly always begin their accounts of the schools' success by pointing to the strength of the teachers and other staff, but in case after case, parents and students echoed the claim. As indicated in the section on leadership, the principals of some schools may not have been outstanding (though certainly more than competent), but by all accounts, the teachers in all schools were unusually able and highly committed.

In all but a few schools, staff turnover rates were reported to be very low. In general, these were stable staffs, and teachers had enduring positive relationships with each other and cordial or even close relationships with their students' parents. Teachers often went well out of their way to get teaching positions in these schools, some driving 60 miles or more to teach in schools with high proportions of students from low-income and minority backgrounds. The teachers were often devoted to their principals, and even more often, to each other (see School Climate).

There were exceptions to the pattern of low turnover rates. One school in a particularly prosperous ex-urban community lost a high proportion of teachers from year to year, and many of its teachers were relatively new to the profession. But annually, the school attracted exceptionally able, well-prepared young teachers to replace those who left. A school located in a small, close-knit community where low turnover rates had prevailed for years had begun to experience a wave of retirements. The school continued to have an image of itself as having low teacher turnover, but half of the staff teaching in core academic areas were new not only to the school but also to teaching within the past three years. One reason why this school may

have continued to see its teaching staff as very stable was that a large proportion of the new teachers were native to the community – raised and schooled if not actually born there.

Nor was this school alone in having a high proportion of "home-grown" teachers. Especially outside of urban areas, most of the Hallmarks schools seemed to have large proportions of teachers who had grown up in the community and attended either the Hallmarks school itself or another school in the district. Some schools had clearly made a deliberate effort to hire and/or develop well-prepared, highly competent teachers from within the community. The principal of one elementary school made a practice of encouraging and supporting teaching assistants to take at least one university course per term, and several former teaching assistants are now regular certified teachers in the school.

Because these schools were popular places to teach, most reporting far more applicants with good qualifications than available positions, they were in a position to be very selective in hiring new teachers. So those who were not "home grown" in the sense that they were teaching assistants deliberately developed into teachers seemed to be well-qualified and well-suited to the school by reason of selection.

Professional development in most of the schools was closely linked to school priorities that had been identified with the use of assessment data. As a result, professional development in these schools tends to focus on one or two themes per year, and sometimes for longer periods of time. Teachers often had a role in making decisions about professional development, but with some exceptions, decisions were made by School Improvement Teams, departments, or other committees of teachers rather than by individual teachers with highly variable interests. In several instances, teachers mentioned that they were attracted to the school or remained there – often despite relatively long commutes – because of the quality of the professional development opportunities. They also expressed a striking confidence and pride in the knowledge and skills developed through the professional development programs, communicating a strong sense that "we're trained and equipped to deal with anything that comes our way."

Complementing these programs of professional development focused on school priorities were at least two additional forms of continuing education or development for teachers: National Board assessment and enrollment in university coursework. One high school reported very active use of both. "We have three Board certified teachers, and five more are going through the process right now," the principal told us proudly. "Our experienced people aren't getting stale. They keep on learning."

Many people view the process of assessment by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards as just that and no more – an assessment of what a teacher already knows and can do. But candidates for Board certification almost universally report learning more from the assessment process than from any other professional development activity they have ever experienced. As they videotape sample classes and analyze the tapes along with their lesson plans and samples of student work, they say, they are forced to confront weaknesses and incompletely thought-out aspects of their teaching, as well as to weave together elements which may be well-developed but incompletely connected with other elements. More and more frequently, new candidates for Board certification also seek guidance from already-certified teachers and join in discussions with other candidates. So the process of assessment represents a major opportunity to learn about their own teaching, and the experience of mentoring new candidates represents an opportunity to help create new professional learning communities for colleagues in their own and neighboring schools.

The same high school that boasted several Board certified teachers also encouraged its teachers to enroll in master's and education specialist programs at a nearby university. Both teachers and administrators praised the programs' "user friendly" formats. Courses were offered on Saturdays once or twice a month, as well as during the summer. A teacher could earn a master's degree in a single academic year and a summer. Teachers tended to form cohort groups, commuting to classes together, working together on assignments, and studying together for exams. So these programs of continuing education not only strengthened teachers' knowledge and skills individually, but also helped strengthen the school as a context for professional exchange – a place where teachers regularly talk with each other about subject matter, learning, and teaching.

As mentioned previously, in at least four Hallmarks schools, teacher assistants participate in all of the same professional development as teachers do, and in at least one school, they are strongly encouraged to take university courses toward certification. The result in each school is a group of teaching assistants whose knowledge and skill are virtually indistinguishable from the teachers.

School Climate

The level of commitment to a shared purpose in these schools was impressive. And in nearly all of them, the purpose entailed both high student performance and student well-being. Administrators and staff were concerned about all students' sense of worth – their "self-image" or self-confidence – but not at the expense of hard work and achievement. Students developed self-confidence by working hard to achieve academic competence. High expectations and demands for performance were seen as a vote of confidence in all students' ability to learn.

The cohesiveness around this shared sense of purpose appeared to create a strong sense of community and inclusiveness in most of these schools. Actually, the term used most often was "family." In school after school, teachers said emphatically, "We are family." The "we" in these families included fellow teachers and school staff, students, and their parents. Speaking in group settings with no teachers present, students and parents confirmed the family-like character of many schools. "They see us as people, not just students," one high-schooler remarked. An Hispanic parent who recently arrived from Florida was impressed by the regular flow of information she gets concerning her elementary school child's education. "And if your child has a problem," she said, "they don't just hope things will get better. They get a program going." Seeing the same teachers over time and bumping into them in the grocery store, another parent remarked, "You start to feel like they are part of your family." Teachers often expressed a sense of ownership and concern about all of the students in the school, not just the students in their own classes.

Reflecting on how this sense of family or community had developed, visitors to some schools emphasized the role of the principal. In some schools, principals had clearly been the ones to articulate a philosophy of inclusiveness that teachers bought into. In others, the common sense of purpose had emerged from extensive discussions among the teaching staff, often but not always led by the principal. A few schools had picked up on an already well-developed and well-articulated educational philosophy (e.g., the Montessori method) or philosophy of management (e.g., Total Quality Management or its educational expression, Total Quality Education). In many small towns and rural areas, the sense of community within the school was reinforced by the close-knit relationships extending throughout the area. In urban areas, the school's sense of community was sometimes reinforced by parents' and students' having chosen the school, as in the case of the two magnets and one charter school among the 12. The small size of most of the schools also seemed to facilitate the development of a community of commitment. However it had developed, the sense of family or community with a common mission and philosophy was a strong feature of most Hallmarks schools.

In school after school, the sense of family or community was expressed and reinforced through a variety of arrangements to facilitate common planning by teachers, within and across grade levels. "Planning" includes a wide range of joint activities including:

- Analyzing data about school's performance
- Deciding what problems to focus on
- Devising/choosing solutions to problems
- Observing in each other's classrooms to pick up new ideas and make suggestions
- Adjusting the curriculum to fit better with what students have studied in earlier grades or what they will need to know in the next ones
- Designing and analyzing results from common exams in a given subject
- Sharing materials developed over the years and individual content expertise.

While some joint work emerges serendipitously, it is not left to chance, but structured very deliberately. In some schools, teachers meet on alternate weeks with others at their own grade level and with teachers across grade levels (e.g., K-2 teachers and 3-5 teachers).

In many cases, regularly scheduled meetings are attended by teacher assistants as well as teachers. As one teacher assistant commented, "We don't separate. And since we go to the same meetings, we can't say we didn't know what was expected of us." One school visit team member commented, "I was impressed by the lack of territorialism and traditional job boundaries in the schools that I visited, and it seemed to have a lot to do with the trust and respect among the adults." In more than one school, adoption of the school improvement plan involves the entire school staff, including the cafeteria staff and custodians.

Students

With rare exceptions, students of all backgrounds and ethnicities seemed very happy to be in these schools. In most, they praised teachers as caring, hard working, and willing to go the extra mile to help them.

Discipline

Throughout the set of schools, visiting teams saw or heard about few problems of discipline or disruption. In part, this seemed to reflect the sense of "family" mentioned above. But families have their problems, too, and several schools have developed inventive ways to deal with them. For example, one middle school developed a program of "overnight suspension" that required a student to bring his or her parents in to school for a conference in order to win readmission. As the name implies, this generally involved no missed school. Conferences were scheduled for the day after a punishable incident occurred.

Several other schools also relied on parents to help address discipline problems. At one elementary school, a parent remarked with a wry smile that, "They're not afraid to call you up. When there's a problem, they don't let it go until it gets bad. They call you right away, and they stick with it until you've got it under control."

One middle school requires students to wear school uniforms, which teachers see as a help in reducing discipline problems. Some students seem to agree. One said, "I like it [wearing uniforms] sometimes, but not always. Uniforms are good because they save parents money. And students don't pick on each other because of clothes."

Character Education

The visiting teams observed or heard about several kinds of activity that were viewed as ways to cultivate good values or habits among students – as forms of character education, if you will. At an elementary school, for example, our documenter reported that, "Toward the end of the lunch period, a boy and a girl from each class began to sweep up the area around their classmates' tables. They stayed a few minutes after lunch to sweep under the tables, collecting dropped food, napkins, and other debris into a large long-handled dustpan and dumping it into a trash can. Asked how he came to be sweeping up, a boy explained that his classmates had elected him one of the sweepers for the week. He seemed quite proud of the honor."

At a middle school, a visiting team member observed an incident that was downright startling:

A child was walking along with visit team members and saw a piece of paper on the ground and picked it up. His friend asked him why he'd want to pick up trash (didn't know where it had been, etc.). The boy replied, "We are a School of Excellence. Schools of Excellence don't leave garbage lying on the ground."

At one of the high schools, a traumatic and widely publicized incident had occurred outside of school in recent years – the death of a student in an alcohol-related auto accident. The school took strong action to reduce the likelihood of similar incidents occurring in the future. As part of a larger anti-drug, anti-alcohol campaign, the school held an assembly in the gymnasium. Several speakers told of their own tragic experiences involving drugs or alcohol. Then students were asked to sign a pledge not to drink or use drugs. Faculty were asked to sign a similar pledge not to use drugs and to drink responsibly if at all – certainly not to drive and drink. The meeting was a way of taking a troubling event in students' lives and using it as a "teachable moment." The principal noted that the meeting had been conceived very explicitly as an instance of character education. Using a tragic incident in students' real lives as the basis for a value-shaping experience struck the visiting team as a powerful example of infusing character education into the school experience.

Engaging Students in School

Of the high schools visited, one was quite small (530 students) and was embedded in a close-knit community with many connections between teachers and parents. The other two high schools were considerably larger and were located in urban areas where naturally-occurring connections among teachers, parents, and students could not be counted upon to give students the sense of being cared about that is necessary to keeping them engaged with their schoolwork. But both of these large high schools had features that promote student engagement. One makes a special point of involving students in extracurricular activities including sports, music programs, and a variety of clubs and groups built around specific interests. The other offers an incredibly rich array of cours-

es, many of which link to a particular career path or special academic interest. As a result, virtually every student can find a niche or place where she or he can connect with a teacher or teachers, with students who have similar interests, and with activities close to his or her interests. In other words, these large schools created smaller "sub-communities" within them to help assure that students stay in school and stay engaged.

Two of the middle schools visited made active efforts to keep students engaged in school with the explicit goal of preventing future school drop out. In one middle school, a drop-out prevention specialist works closely with teachers, administrators, and parents to identify student needs before major challenges surface. This proactive, team approach has increased student attendance, reduced student suspensions, and, according to school personnel, improved the overall school climate. The same school has also instituted the Support Our Students (SOS) program (mentioned in Programs and Practices) and a 21st Century Learning Centers program to provide after-school academic and social support to students who may otherwise be unsupervised between 3pm and 7pm. Program administrators find that students are likely to develop a general interest in school if they are encouraged to stay involved in school-related activities after the official school day ends.

Another middle school also uses SOS as a way to keep students engaged in school activities while providing them with a safe and positive place to go after school. In addition to SOS programs, both middle schools offer after-school sports and club activities.

To address the long-term possibility that their students may drop out, many Hallmarks of Excellence elementary schools focus their attention and resources on assuring that students attend school daily. Rates of absenteeism were very low in most of the Hallmarks elementary schools (96-97% attendance), due in part to aggressive follow-up from the school when a child did not report to school on time. In at least two schools, principals or office staff not only called home to find out why a child was absent, but if the child was well enough to attend school and needed transportation, the principal or assistant principal would provide transportation.

Parent / Community Support

The 12 Hallmarks of Excellence schools vary considerably in the strength and effectiveness of their efforts to engage parents. Many of the schools benefit greatly from the strong value that students' families and certain community institutions (e.g., churches, scouts) place on education. In several of the Hallmarks communities, students' parents were not necessarily highly educated (relatively few advanced degrees, few professionals) but they did see education as crucial to their children's future. They seemed to expect their children to go farther in life than they had, themselves, and to see education as the key to their children's advancement. Yet only a few schools seem to have devised ways to tap into the reservoir of potential family and community support for schools and students' learning.

One of the most impressive efforts to involve parents in their children's education was found at an elementary school located in a rural area on the outskirts of a small city. At this school, every student took a set of three color-coded folders home each night. One folder contained the evening's reading material. Parents were asked to read to or with their children for at least fifteen minutes per night, and to sign a sheet indicating that they had done so. A second folder contained the student's homework assignments for the evening. Parents were also asked to sign off on completed homework. The third folder was for tests, quizzes, or other tasks recently completed in school and graded by the teacher. Again, parents were asked to sign off on this work.

This well-organized system engaged parents in their children's education without requiring them to volunteer in the school, or even to visit it. It was well-adapted to a community in which most parents work outside the home. Parents might have found it difficult to come to the school during regular school hours or even in the evening, but they were able to take an active role in their children's learning at home.

Another elementary school in a small city used a variety of means to involve parents in their children's education, both at home and in school. For example, the principal offered brunches to attract parents for meetings, and often organized meetings by grade level to permit a more explicit focus on what students were supposed to be learning. The school also offers workshops for parents, including a "Dads' Workshop" focusing on parenting skills and on what fathers can do to support their child's education. The school is also open to parents from 11:30am-6:00pm for formal classes and programs. The principal works hard to coordinate schedules so that parents working a morning shift can come to school in the early afternoon to meet their child after school, and then while the child participates in after-school tutoring, the parent takes a computer (or other) class. At 5:00 or 6:00pm, the parent and child leave the school together. After 6:00pm, parents have access to the computers in the school as needed (the school holds parent nights in the computer labs).

At the charter middle school, parents contribute greatly through the purchase of materials and equipment and fund-raising activities, as well as by volunteering. School data provided to the visiting team reported approximately 100 plus hours of volunteer time per week. Ninety-five percent of parents/guardians attended back-to-school night, 90% of families are PTA members, 100% participated in one or more parent-teacher conferences, and 80% attended at least one parent-school meeting.

As is presumably true of schools all across the state, parent involvement seemed lower at the high school level than at the elementary and middle school levels. At one high school, the assistant principal remarked that "the students train the parents" to be neither seen nor heard. Adolescents who are breaking free of their parents' orbit do not want them around their teachers, and especially not around their friends, he explained. This was a high school where the sense of "family" mentioned earlier was particularly strong. "In a way, we're their family," one teacher noted.

The one form of parent, business, and community involvement that was impressive across many of the schools was in making or raising financial contributions. As noted earlier, we could not measure the contributions in a way that would have permitted us to provide an average figure. But for example, at one small elementary school, a local corporation had contributed $25,000 per year for the past several years. At several others, there was no single large contributor, but Committee members estimated that the total funds raised from parents, businesses, and community members often came to several thousand dollars.

On the whole, however, the Committee believes that the potential of parent and community involvement in students' learning is far from fully realized even in most of these high-achieving schools.

Parent involvement is lower at the high school level. As one assistant principal remarked, "students train parents to be neither seen nor heard." Teens who are breaking free of their parents' orbit don't want [parents] around their teachers and friends. In a way the school becomes the student's family.

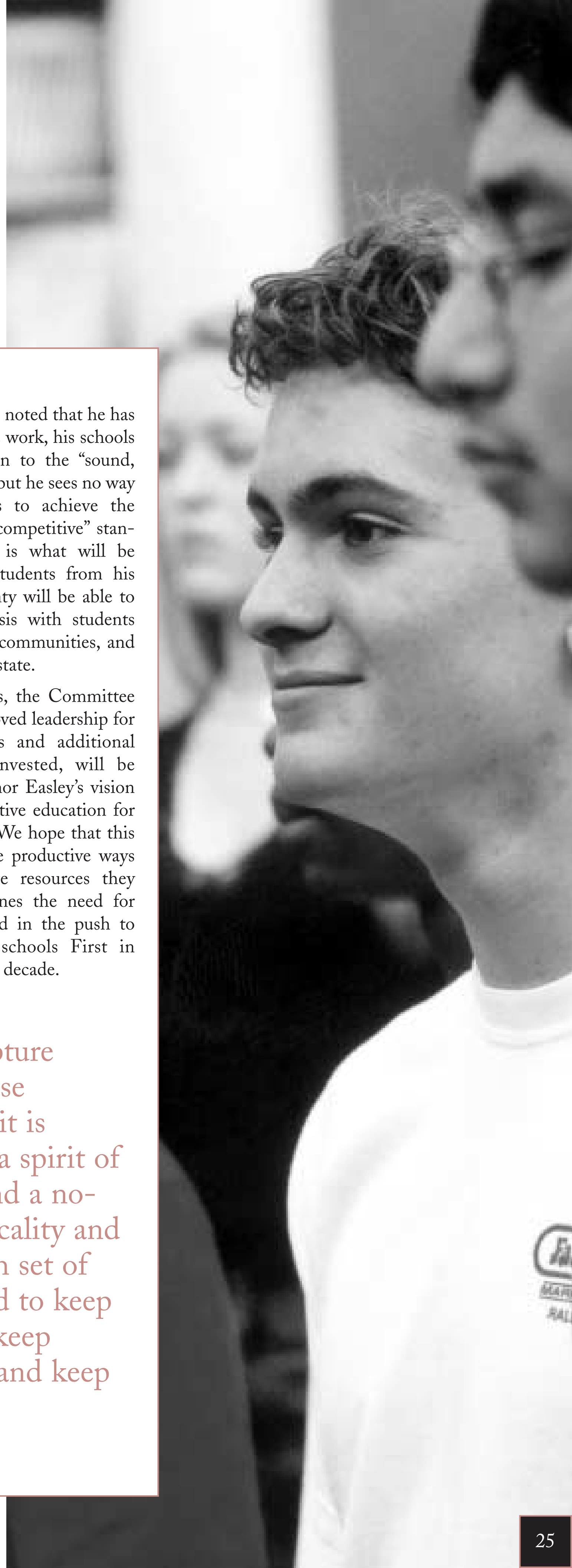
CONCLUSION

Throughout this report, we have used a variety of terms to characterize what is at the heart of these schools' success: results-oriented, inclusive, whole-hearted, mindful, deliberate, determined to achieve results, confident about doing so. We have also stressed that they translate familiar values – such as the value on high expectations, on involving parents in their children's education, on "family" – into specific terms: specifying how many books to read or exactly what skills to master, what and how much parents should read with their children each night, how teachers should pitch in to help other teachers, and how custodians and cafeteria workers can support children and learning. The schools also bridge what are often taken for opposites: not either children's self-esteem or high expectations for academic achievement, but both children's self-esteem and high expectations for academic achievement.

Yet it is difficult to capture what makes these schools work. It is simultaneously a certain spirit of commitment and a no-nonsense, nuts-and-bolts practicality – a set of high-flown values and beliefs, and a down-to-earth if often inventive set of actions designed to keep kids in school, keep them engaged, and keep them learning.

Where does the spark that animates these schools come from? In some cases, it was clearly the principal who fired up the staff to "change this, for the county, the community, and the children." In others, the teachers themselves and/or district leaders seem to have supplied the driving force. In all cases, unusual or even extraordinary leadership has been crucial.

It has been argued that if some schools can assure that nearly all students get a sound basic education with the resources allotted to them, and if these schools get no greater funding than their less successful counterparts get, then the problem is not one of funding inadequacy but of the other kinds of factors discussed in this report. In this



context, the schools we chose and visited may be considered "existence proofs" that good education can be provided within current levels of funding – if schools exist that can do it, then it can be done. There is some truth to this claim, but the Committee has at least three concerns about it.

First, extraordinary leadership is by definition extraordinary. That is, well beyond the ordinary. Public education is a mass system. The state has over 2,100 schools, over 80,000 teachers, and over 100 school districts. To reproduce outstanding leadership and commitment on a statewide basis would itself be a massive undertaking. Not that good leadership cannot be cultivated on a broader scale through vigorous programs of recruitment, professional development, and reward. Certainly, it should be attempted. But to argue from a few existence proofs to a mass system is perilous. To expect heroic efforts in all schools, all of the time, scarcely seems realistic. Even if the vision could be realized for a time, it seems virtually certain to collapse before long from sheer exhaustion. What seems like hard-headed insistence that if some can do it then all can do it may in fact be implausibly rosy optimism.

Second, while we cannot be certain that these schools are working harder or more effectively to raise outside resources than are other schools, their efforts are impressive, as are the results. In many cases, the funds they raise through grants and gifts provide the extra resources needed to operate special programs, buy materials, or acquire technology. So it is not entirely clear that resources do not matter. When used wisely and with a will, they may matter greatly.

And third, while the schools we chose and visited are clearly doing a good job of educating all or most of their students to grade level expectations, in only a few cases do they seem to be providing their top students with the opportunities they need to achieve all they are capable of achieving. One superintendent on the Committee noted that he has little doubt that with more work, his schools can educate most children to the "sound, basic education" standard, but he sees no way within existing resources to achieve the Governor's "superior and competitive" standard. Yet, he said, that is what will be required to assure that students from his small, relatively poor county will be able to compete on an equal basis with students from well-to-do families, communities, and school districts across the state.

In light of these concerns, the Committee concluded that both improved leadership for use of existing resources and additional resources, strategically invested, will be required to realize Governor Easley's vision of a superior and competitive education for all of the state's students. We hope that this report both suggests some productive ways that schools can use the resources they already have and underlines the need for additional resources to aid in the push to make North Carolina's schools First in America by the end of the decade.

It is hard to capture what makes these schools work – it is simultaneously a spirit of commitment and a no-nonsense practicality and a down-to-earth set of actions designed to keep kids in school, keep them engaged, and keep them learning.

Special Thanks

Though the Hallmarks Committee members and staff listed at the beginning of this report acted as team leaders during the school visits, many others donated their time and expertise to gather the information that resulted in the completion of this report. To those people we offer our grateful thanks.

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	Type			Distribution			Community Type			Key Decision Information										
										At or Above Grade Level					FRL	Racial/Ethnic Group				
	Traditional	Magnet	Charter	Western	Piedmont	Eastern	Rural	Sm/Lg Town	City	96	97	98	99	00		White	Black	Hispanic	American Indian	Asian
Elementary Schools																				
Amay James Montessori		✓			✓				✓	46.7%	66.7%	72.9%	79.4%	83.7%	28.0%	59.3%	38.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Baskerville Elementary	✓					✓		✓		42.6%	43.0%	48.9%	51.6%	62.7%	91.7%	0.4%	99.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Kingswood Elementary	✓				✓				✓	85.3%	86.0%	88.1%	89.6%	95.7%	22.9%	65.9%	16.3%	4.8%	1.0%	11.1%
Pollocksville Elementary	✓					✓	✓			56.5%	58.6%	68.1%	69.2%	71.6%	69.3%	32.5%	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%
Rock Ridge Elementary	✓					✓		✓		52.5%	56.2%	66.4%	84.8%	89.7%	48.4%	64.1%	21.8%	13.2%	0.0%	0.0%
South Hoke Elementary	✓				✓			✓		37.4%	43.1%	41.3%	46.2%	61.5%	80.7%	11.4%	36.1%	3.0%	49.4%	0.0%
Middle Schools																				
Brawley Middle	✓					✓		✓		31.9%	31.7%	55.6%	67.8%	76.2%	92.0%	4.2%	95.4%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%
Brevard Middle	✓			✓				✓		82.8%	86.7%	89.5%	91.8%	92.5%	27.3%	91.0%	6.1%	1.0%	0.2%	0.7%
Magellan Charter			✓		✓				✓			95.8%	96.4%	97.5%		82.5%	9.8%	2.5%	0.0%	5.1%
High Schools																				
William G. Enloe High		✓			✓				✓			71.6%	77.0%	80.9%	16.4%	54.9%	33.6%	1.4%	0.0%	8.1%
Emsley A. Laney High	✓					✓			✓			49.4%	61.6%	69.4%	13.9%	73.7%	23.4%	1.0%	0.6%	0.4%
Murphy High	✓			✓			✓					50.4%	60.3%	64.7%	30.0%	91.4%	2.9%	0.7%	4.3%	0.0%
Totals/selected schools	9	2	1	2	5	5	2	5	5											

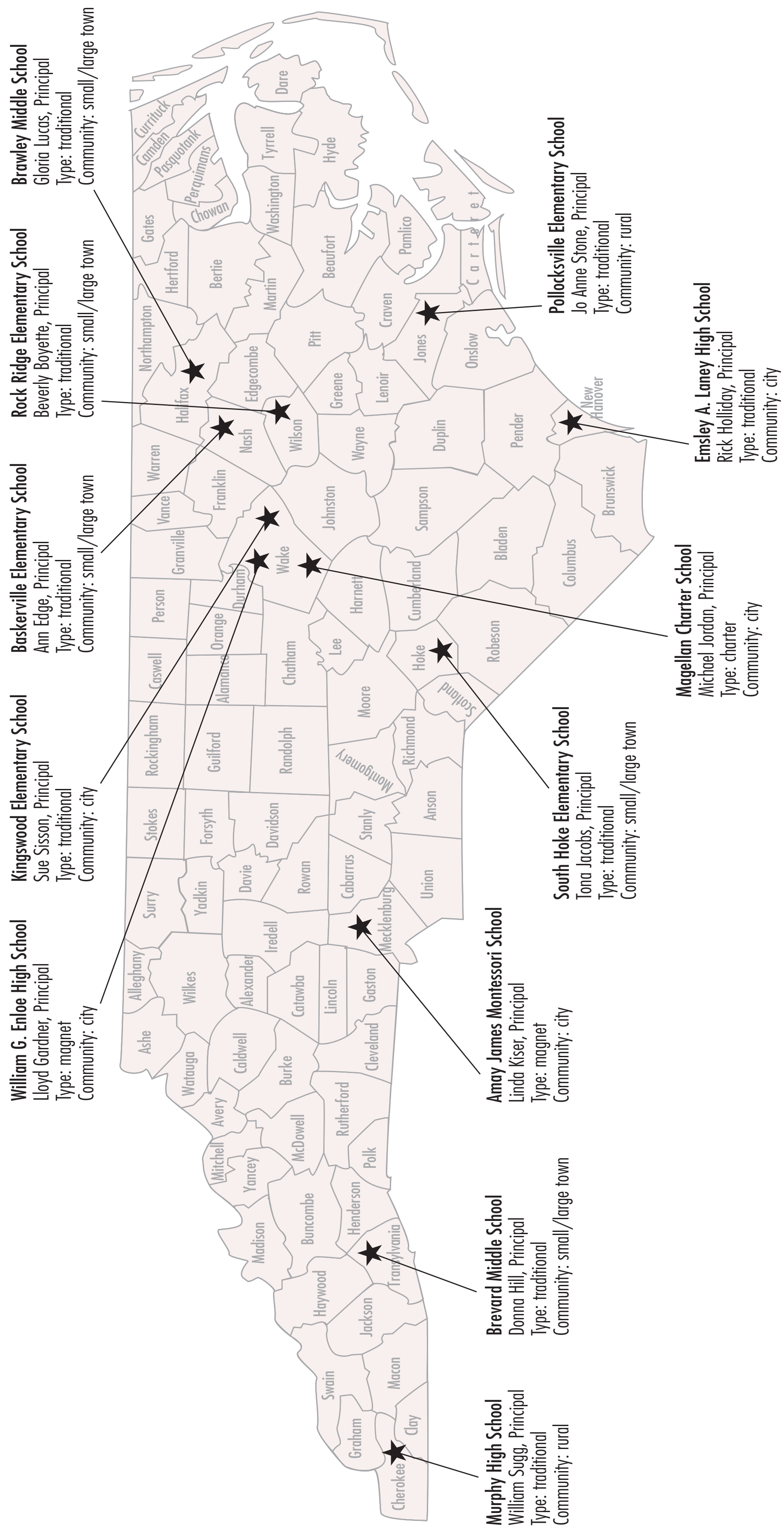
Notes:

The percent of elementary and middle school students at or above grade level is based on state end-of-grade tests in reading and math. Students are considered to be at or above grade level if they receive Levels III or IV on the state's tests. Performance levels on the tests range from Levels I - IV.

The percent of high school students at or above grade level is based on the state 10th grade comprehensive tests in reading and math. Students are considered to be at or above grade level if they receive Levels III or IV on these tests. Performance levels on the tests range from Levels I - IV.

FRL = The percent of students who receive free and reduced-price lunch. Participation in the federal free and reduced-price meal program at the elementary school level is an indicator of poverty in a community. Since high school students are less likely to register for this program, free and reduced meal participation becomes a less reliable indicator of poverty at the high school level.

Hallmarks of Excellence Schools



HALLMARKS OF EXCELLENCE

How successful schools succeed

School Visit Findings
Governor Easley's
Education First Task Force
Spring 2002

In May of 2001, Governor Easley's Education First Task Force began work on recommending strategies to assure that North Carolina's system of education offered a superior and competitive education to all students. One of the three subcommittees formed from that full Task Force was given the job of identifying a set of high performing NC schools and discovering through school visits what accounted for their success. This report documents the subcommittee's findings.