

Virginia Beach City Public Schools

Strategic Planning Focus Group Summary Report

Report to the
Virginia Beach City Public Schools
Department of Planning, Innovation, and Accountability

March 28, 2014



Preface

This external qualitative study was commissioned by the Virginia Beach City Public Schools' Department of Planning, Innovation and Accountability in 2014. The study sought to collect feedback from key stakeholder groups on the school division's current and future goals, outcomes and strategies to support the school division's strategic planning. This report presents the findings from a series of 18 focus group discussions held during February 2014 across the City of Virginia Beach.

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- Community members, business representatives, military community representatives, higher education representatives, and parents of the City of Virginia Beach and central office administrators, school administrators, teachers, general employees, and students of Virginia Beach City Public Schools for their participation in focus group discussions.
- Researchers Dr. Patricia Moore Shaffer and Kristi Wagner, M.S., for their contributions through data collection and analysis that are reflected across this report.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS) has entered the planning phase for a new strategic plan that will focus and guide the school division through 2021. Gathering input from students, parents, teachers, staff, and members of the Virginia Beach community is an important part of the process. In addition to meeting with internal and external stakeholder groups and creating a “virtual town hall” on the school division’s website to collect community input, VBCPS contracted the Shaffer Evaluation Group to serve as external facilitators and analysts of a series of stakeholder focus group discussions held during February 2014. This report provides a summary of the findings from this series of discussions.

Method

The external researchers facilitated 18 focus group discussions with VBCPS stakeholders to gather their perspectives, insights, and input on the current strategic plan goal and outcomes, as well as the skills and experiences that students might need for success in 2021 and challenges students are likely to face in the future. VBCPS provided the focus group protocol and discussion guides customized for individual stakeholder groups, identified and invited a sample of individuals for each of the focus group discussions, and arranged for discussion sites on school division properties across the city. The focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The researchers utilized appropriate qualitative analysis methods¹ as the framework for data analysis. The methods consisted of data preparation and organization, followed by systematic coding, condensing of codes, and subsequent development of themes. Emergent themes were analyzed by major stakeholder groups in addition to being examined in the aggregate.

Findings

Findings from the focus group discussions are provided under three sections—1) reactions to the current strategic goal and learning outcomes, 2) progress to date on accomplishing the strategic goal, and 3) addressing the needs of the 2021 learner. Subsections address different aspects of the section theme that emerged during analysis and are largely aligned with the original protocol questions. The findings reflect the most common perspectives across all stakeholder groups (i.e., community, staff, and students). However, perspectives of individual stakeholder groups are presented if they represent a unique viewpoint. Key findings are highlighted below.

¹ Creswell, John W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Section 1: Reactions to the Current Strategic Goal and Learning Outcomes

Current Strategic Goal

- All stakeholder groups agreed that the current strategic plan goal—that students will graduate having mastered the skills needed to succeed as 21st century learners, workers, and citizens—was appropriate, both in current times and in the future.
- The use of the term, “mastered,” was debated during some focus group discussions, with alternatives provided, including “demonstrated.”
- Community representatives championed that every child should be challenged and supported to reach their potential.
- Staff urged the division to provide more guidance on implementation in support of the strategic goal and learning outcomes, and to ensure that school division policies and practices are closely aligned with the goal.
- Students articulated a need for an education that balances the accomplishment of 21st century skills with “fun” and that ultimately prepares them to pursue their “passion” after graduation and lead balanced lives.

21st Century Skills

- All stakeholder groups emphasized the continuing importance of the 21st century skills included in the strategic plan.
- One suggestion from participants was to remove the “21st century” label, given these skills have been important throughout time.
- Conversations with stakeholders emphasized the priority of some skills, particularly critical thinking and communication.
- School division staff also expressed a strong interest in the desired learner outcome of responsibility.

Skills to Consider Adding

- In addition to the current skills in the strategic plan, many stakeholder groups suggested the addition of life skills, a sense of collective responsibility in their communities, and personal accountability.
- While technology skills are implied in the current plan, there was discussion across stakeholder groups of making this skill set more explicit.
- Community representatives offered a unique perspective, advocating for the inclusion of workplace readiness skills.

Section 2: Progress to Date on Accomplishing the Strategic Goal

Successes

- Stakeholders generally agreed that VBCPS offered a large variety of courses, programs, and opportunities for students, with Academy programs, AVID, and Technical and Career Education programs singled out as particularly successful.
- Overall student achievement scores on SOL tests, industry certification tests, and AP exams, in addition to a positive graduation rate, were also offered as examples of VBCPS student success.
- The infusion of technology into instruction was also noted as a school division success under the current strategic plan.

Challenges

- Foremost among these challenges was a concern that VBCPS was not successfully preparing *all* students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. Two basic issues that emerged were differences in the quality of education for Academy or advanced students and core students and the differences in educational outcomes for certain sub-groups, particularly low-income and African American students and students with disabilities.
- Basic literacy issues in reading, writing, and mathematics also concerned staff and community representatives.
- Administrators and teachers felt that accreditation issues forced an emphasis on academic proficiency, which often placed other 21st century skills as a lower priority.
- Staff raised concerns about “no-zero” grading practices.

College Preparedness

- Most stakeholders felt the school division offered an array of high-quality opportunities to students that prepared them for college, including dual enrollment, Academies, and diverse course offerings.
- Stakeholders felt there should be a higher level of awareness and improved guidance counseling related to available VBCPS coursework and programs that prepare students for furthering their education. Increased counseling was suggested by participants as a means to encourage *more* students to take advantage of available opportunities and guide them on the pathway to college.
- Concerns were raised about perceived inequities in academic preparation for college.

Workforce Preparedness

- Most stakeholders felt quality educational experiences are available to students but are highly under-utilized.
- Stakeholders shared that the school division's focus on preparing all students for four-year college has led to under-emphasizing other options for students, including technical fields and the military.
- There is a perceived insufficiency in career awareness activities and career counseling for students that may not be college-bound.
- Community representatives in particular expressed a need for increased student access to Technical and Career Education, pathways that did not lead to a four-year institution, and the use of community-education partnerships to increase awareness of career options.
- Students also expressed an interest in increasing the relevance of coursework so that connections to career pathways are more apparent.

Section 3: Addressing the Needs of the 2021 Learner

Skills Needed

- The most frequently mentioned skills that students in 2021 should have were communication skills, global awareness/understanding, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability.
- It is important to note that when discussing skills needed in 2021, the dialogue often returned to the 21st century skills in the VBCPS strategic plan. Collaboration, critical thinking, and communication were deemed even more necessary for the work place in the future.
- The capability of communicating in a second language was also identified by student and community stakeholders as a strategy for addressing global awareness.

Challenges Students Might Face

- The ability to communicate effectively face-to-face and in professional settings was thought by stakeholders to be an even more significant challenge in the future.
- The ability for students to rapidly adapt to changes in a "progressively more competitive" world was also described as a challenge in 2021.
- Students were highly concerned about tolerance for others and often described peer pressure and bullying as issues of concern, particularly if these issues become even more prevalent, both in Virginia Beach schools and society in general.

- Community, staff, and student groups all shared the belief that keeping students engaged would be even more challenging in 2021. Stakeholders felt technology and larger class sizes may negatively impact student engagement.
- The economy was mentioned often during the conversation of challenges in 2021. Stakeholders described a marketplace that is increasingly global in nature; therefore, students will have to be even more “competitive” with a marketable skillset to access opportunities.

Actions to Support 2021 Student Needs

- Educational Activities for Students
 - Stakeholders recognized the need for classroom instruction that is engaging, relevant, flexible, and differentiated.
 - Staff and community representatives suggested that a strong focus be retained on attaining proficiency in English-language arts and mathematics.
 - Student support activities, such as career counseling and student/teacher relationships, were suggested by stakeholders as a desirable part of students’ school experience.
 - Quality experiences outside of the classroom, including activities that promote global awareness, were described by stakeholders as invaluable for connecting students with the community.
- School Division Strategies
 - Stakeholders recognized that school division strategies to support strategic plan implementation must include teacher support and staff professional development.
 - Stakeholders suggested giving consideration to aligning school-level practices with division-wide policies and strategic plan.
 - According to stakeholders, a less “regimented” or “rigid” curriculum would allow for greater instructional flexibility for teachers who are working with diverse populations of students.

Conclusions

In conclusion, VBCPS stakeholders support the ideals represented in the current strategic plan and offered minor suggestions to modify the goal focus or augment the learning outcomes. Stakeholders generally agreed that VBCPS offered a large variety of courses, programs, and opportunities for students, with college preparatory and “Vo-Tech” (i.e., Technical and Career Education) programs singled out as particularly successful. The infusion of technology into instruction was also highlighted as a positive outcome of the strategic plan. Stakeholders

emphasized a need for all students to have access to quality programs and instruction. During the focus group discussions, factors such as geographic location, socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, disability, or school were raised as issues that possibly impact students' access to opportunities. Participants stated that all students should be consistently encouraged, supported, and counseled to acquire 21st century skills that can be applied in their chosen paths following graduation.

Factors inhibiting strategic goal success revolved largely around issues with fidelity of implementation. Stakeholders perceived that the strategic plan has been applied inconsistently across the school division leading to descriptions of “pockets of success” evident throughout all stakeholder conversations. Some of the issues raised by stakeholders included inconsistent policies and practices, insufficient professional guidance and professional development on core plan concepts, a strong focus on preparing all students for college to the detriment of other career pathways, and an over-emphasis on academic proficiency.

Looking ahead to 2021, stakeholders generally recommended that VBCPS stay on course with the current strategic plan. They emphasized that 21st century skills such as collaboration and team work, global awareness, critical thinking, and communication will be even more necessary for the workplaces of the future. Adaptability was also identified as a skill that might be considered for a future plan.

In re-visioning the school division in 2021, stakeholders imagined every classroom with instruction that is engaging, relevant, and differentiated for students' needs. They also recognized the importance of introducing greater flexibility into curriculum and instruction, including providing students with greater flexibility in course selection and allowing teachers greater flexibility to teach according to their students' needs and interests instead of being bound by a “huge checklist” of objectives. Stakeholders indicated that while a strong focus should be retained, and even increased, on attaining proficiency in English-language arts and mathematics, they also recognized that student support activities, including career counseling and a caring student-teacher relationship, should be part of the vision. They viewed quality experiences outside of the classroom that connect students to community and career experiences and enhance their global awareness as essential.

Several issues related to the implementation of the current strategic plan were discussed during the focus groups and may have implications for the next strategic plan. Stakeholders referenced the need for teacher support and staff professional development to support fidelity of implementation. Stakeholders also voiced support for aligning school-level practices with division-wide policies and strategic plan, including placing greater emphasis division wide on instruction focused on the 21st century skills and a less “rigid” curriculum that allows for greater instructional flexibility for teachers.

Introduction

The Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS) Strategic Plan, *Compass to 2015*, was adopted by the School Board in October 2008. In the years that followed, VBCPS has used the strategic plan to guide its work. A Strategic Planning Implementation Steering committee was established to oversee the implementation of the plan that included a strategic goal, outcomes for student success (see sidebar), and strategic objectives.

The school division has entered the planning phase for a new strategic plan that will focus and guide VBCPS through 2021. Gathering input from students, parents, teachers, staff, and members of the Virginia Beach community is an important part of the process. In addition to meeting with internal and external stakeholder groups and creating a “virtual town hall” on the school division’s website to collect community input, VBCPS contracted the Shaffer Evaluation Group to serve as external facilitators and analysts of a series of stakeholder focus group discussions held during February 2014. This report provides a summary of the findings from this series of discussions.

The external researchers facilitated 18 focus group discussions with VBCPS stakeholders to gather their perspectives, insights, and input on the current strategic plan goal and outcomes, as well as the skills and experiences that students might need for success in 2021 and challenges students are likely to face in the future. A brief description of the focus group participants is provided in Appendix 3. Focus group protocols were individualized for the target audiences, see Appendix 2. Data collection and analytical methods are discussed in Appendix 1.

The protocols shared a similar progression. First, stakeholders were asked about the current strategic plan goal and student learning outcomes. Participants were asked whether VBCPS is successfully preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. In addition, groups were asked if the strategic plan goal should remain the focus for the school

Virginia Beach City Public Schools

Compass to 2015

Strategic Goal

Recognizing that the long range goal of the VBCPS is the successful preparation and graduation of every student, the near term goal is that by 2015, 95 percent or more of VBCPS students will graduate having mastered the skills that they need to succeed as 21st century learners, workers, and citizens.

Outcomes for Student Success

The school division’s primary focus is on teaching and assessing those skills students need to thrive as 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. All VBCPS students will be:

- Academically proficient;
- Effective communicators and collaborators;
- Globally aware, independent, responsible learners and citizens; and
- Critical and creative thinkers, innovators, and problem solvers.

division, if the 21st century skills will still be important in the future, and for suggestions of other skills to consider.

The second section of the protocol targeted students' educational experiences in preparation for paths after high school graduation. Participants considered multiple pathways, continuing education, training, or entering the workforce or military. Additional questions focused stakeholders on skills that might be necessary for success in 2021 and the educational experiences that students would need in order to develop those skills. VBCPS staff groups were asked to describe what VBCPS should be doing, and what VBCPS should stop doing, in order to prepare students for the future.

The final section of the protocol was designed to elicit stakeholder feedback on challenges. Stakeholders described challenges that students might face in 2021. This was followed by conversation on what the school division, in collaboration with the community, could do to overcome these challenges.

Overall, the protocols provided a framework for stakeholder conversations. The framework allowed stakeholders to share their perspectives of issues currently facing VBCPS, as well as issues that may be encountered in 2021.

Findings

In this section, findings from the focus group discussions are presented in three sections—reactions to the current strategic goal and learning outcomes, progress to date on accomplishing the strategic goal, and addressing the needs of the 2021 learner. Subsections address different aspects of the section theme that emerged during the analysis and are largely aligned with the original protocol questions. The narrative addresses the perspective across the three primary stakeholder groups—community (including business, military, higher education, and parents), staff (i.e., central office administrators, school administrators, teachers, and general employees), and students (including currently enrolled juniors and seniors and students enrolled in a GED program). The findings are further disaggregated by stakeholder group if there was a cluster of unique perspectives reflective of a single group.

Section 1: Reactions to Current Strategic Goal and Learning Outcomes

Current Strategic Goal

All stakeholder groups agreed that the current strategic plan goal-- that students will graduate having mastered the skills needed to succeed as 21st century learners, workers, and citizens—was appropriate, both in current times and in the future. The appropriateness of the term, “mastered,” was debated during some focus group discussions; the nature of these discussions is shared below. Lastly,

...We're getting closer but it's almost like we need an extension to continue the work that we're doing...we've got the momentum.

~An Assistant Principal

all stakeholder groups brought unique perspectives to the discussion of the strategic goal, which are discussed separately under the headings of Community, Staff and Students.

The goal and associated learning outcomes (also known as 21st century skills) were deemed by all stakeholders as important “absolutely, for all children,” regardless of their plans following graduation. The main concern expressed about the goal statement was that it was “large” and “loaded,” meaning there is “a lot sitting behind” the list of words. There was a perception of “unbalanced” implementation, which often depended on the focus of the individual school with which some stakeholders were associated. One student shared, *“I feel like it's not about what's on the list, but how they execute everything on the list.”* The general consensus was not to change the list, but *“change how we are going about reaching it.”* A detailed discussion of VBCPS successes and challenges from stakeholder perspectives can be found within Section 2 of this report.

The concept of mastery was discussed at length in multiple focus group discussions with stakeholders. Mastery was difficult to define for many, and it was suggested that mastery might look differently for different students, different skills, or content areas. Some community members suggested that “demonstration” of skills was preferable to “mastery,” since it placed the emphasis on performance. Teachers similarly questioned the concept of mastery, wondering if perhaps students were more likely “emerging” or “proficient” in these learning outcomes. Some teachers described “mastery” as students *“translating a skill set from an academic setting into the real world setting or job setting.”* As teachers, they were not comfortable with this concept given that mastery often depends on further development after students leave school. Students and community representatives also voiced support for this concept of continued skill development after high school.

Community

As discussed earlier, several community members struggled with the verb “master” in the goal statement. As an alternative, some members proposed a different orientation to the goal statement that reduced the focus on mastering skills in favor of the concept that each student should reach their potential regardless of their ability. For those community representatives who championed this idea, every child, including the gifted

I have kids at both ends of the spectrum also. I have a daughter who's gifted. . . I have a son who has an IEP . . . He makes honor roll, but both of them are frustrated with school because they're not challenged enough. I've been thinking about the word potential a lot.

~A Parent

student and the student with cognitive disabilities, should be challenged and supported to reach their potential. They also recognized that “potential” looked very different for each child. For example, one community representative shared her opinion that there are many children who might have benefited from vocational education but are not accepted into the program. These children, she noted, *“are not going to meet some of your industry standard tests, so, at the least stop and all of the sudden, we're thinking sheltered workshop. We're thinking very low expectations. We've given up on these children in some cases.”*

Staff

While discussing the goal statement, VBCPS staff members in multiple focus groups expressed a need for more guidance on implementation in support of the strategic goal. For example, staff discussed the need for clear definitions of each 21st century skill, indicators associated with each skill, ideas for how they can be incorporated into instruction and assessed, and a common understanding of “what that looks like” for students at different grade levels. Multiple staff groups shared one staff member's concern that *“We need some indicators or definition of what we think these things are...and support for teachers in order to be able to develop those skills in their students.”* School division staff emphasized the need for continued conversation and training related to the goal statement and its associated skills in order to develop action steps. Staff members strongly emphasized a need to ensure that school division policies and practices are closely aligned with the goal.

Current Students

In their discussions, students articulated some unique ideas about reframing the strategic plan goal. For example, students shared their concerns that the goal statement should be important, achievable, and accessible for *all* students in VBCPS, and that the successful implementation of this goal starts with teachers and counselors. Community stakeholder groups also shared this sentiment. Students also articulated the need for an education that balances

I just believe that you do best what you love to do. If you don't love to it, then you probably won't do your best at it.

~A High School Student

the accomplishment of 21st century skills with “fun” and that ultimately prepares them to pursue their passion after graduation and lead balanced, “happy” lives. One student reflected on the

lives of her parents, who “aren’t happy,” seemed “overwhelmed with everything” and “stressed about going to work, taking care of me... and everything.” She saw her future as different—wanting a job “that I love to do” but questioning if it was financially viable. Other students shared this concern, commenting that happiness in their future career and balance in their lives was an important goal.

21st Century Skills

You need to be able to have critical thinking to get out of problems that are going to come up in life. You need to be globally aware and have good communications. I don't feel like this [list] should be changed.

~A High School Student

All stakeholder groups emphasized the overall importance of the entirety of the 21st century skills included in the strategic plan, in current times and in the future. The skills were referred to as “universal” and “foundational” for future success regardless of the path students might follow after high school graduation. One suggestion was to remove the “21st century” label, because some viewed these skills as timeless: “*Critical thinking hasn’t changed just because we have computers.*” Conversations with stakeholders emphasized the priority of some skills,

particularly critical thinking and communication. School division staff also expressed a strong interest in the desired learning outcome of responsibility.

All stakeholder groups considered critical thinking important. Business and community representatives identified it as a core skill. One business person noted that “*the Internet has disseminated everything, it has changed how we learn and I think . . . education has been responsive [in] recognizing that . . . it’s not critical to memorize stuff.*” Problem solving, another business representative noted, was essential. Teachers and administrators felt that critical thinking had been increasingly emphasized in recent years, primarily due to the changes in SOL testing but also because of the strategic plan. One employee noted that in the past, “*the only children who got any [instruction in] critical and creative thinking were the gifted kids. . . I do think that they’re spreading that out now to the other children.*” Despite staff’s perspective that critical thinking was more widespread, high school students expressed a lack of emphasis on critical thinking in early coursework, but noted that “it comes back” in AP classes.

Communication skills were often mentioned by stakeholders as important in life beyond high school. The ability to clearly communicate – whether verbally, in writing, or via technology – was seen as an important core competency by nearly all stakeholders. During the focus group discussions, staff often voiced a perspective that literacy was the basis for all educational experiences that followed. Without the ability to read and write, it was senseless to invest instructional time in other 21st century skills or even other subjects. Business and higher education representatives commented that communications in workplace settings were “extremely important.” Some community representatives expressed a concern with the

...Being an effective communicator and collaborator is a basic life skill that everyone needs. From elementary school to going to church on Sunday, to playing on your baseball team, that's a critical life skill that every person needs and I think that it needs to start in the elementary schools...I think we do..... It's built in, inter-weaved, through our curriculum

~A General Employee

communication skills of recent graduates, who did not communicate professionally via email, for example. Many stakeholders singled out face-to-face communication as a particular area of concern, including students themselves; technology was often blamed for students' increasing inability to engage peers and adults in effective face-to-face communications.

Stakeholders often spoke about the need to emphasize connectivity between the skills, thereby creating an integrated educational experience. *“In the workforce you have to be able to solve problems, so you have to be academically proficient to able to handle problems in the field and you have to put everything together. You can't just be*

academically proficient...you have to be able to analyze all the pieces and put them together” and “communicate your ideas.” Staff also spoke positively about the use of performance tasks and project-based learning, which enable this type of learning.

Staff

Personal responsibility was noted by teachers and other school-based employees as an important skill included in the current strategic plan. Teachers spoke with frustration about students who shirked personal responsibility for their own learning or behavior. A hindering factor that deterred personal responsibility, according to some teachers, was school policy. One teacher noted “there's no penalty if you aren't responsible.” “No-zero” grading, which is discussed later in Section 2, was pointed to as an example of an informal policy that contributed to this lack of personal responsibility. Almost all staff commenting on this skill felt that the school division was not making progress and that greater efforts had to be made to hold students accountable. Many shared the perspective that responsibility had to be instilled in students in elementary school, starting as early as kindergarten. Staff also recognized the important role parents played in supporting the development of this skill.

You've got a real fine line between the parent . . . enforcing, or reinforcing getting that done, and the child taking their own responsibility for their own education and doing those things themselves.

~A General Employee

Skills to Consider Adding

In addition to the current skills in the strategic plan, many stakeholder groups suggested the addition of life skills, a sense of collective responsibility with their communities, and personal accountability. While technology skills are implied in the current plan, there was discussion across stakeholder groups of making this skill set more explicit. Community representatives offered a unique perspective, advocating for the inclusion of workplace readiness skills.

Conversations across several stakeholder groups highlighted a need for students to be equipped with basic life skills. Life skills were described as the “everyday skills” necessary to successfully navigate the world independently, and included: financial skills associated with personal banking, household budgets, and credit; accessing resources such as health insurance; and work place etiquette, interview skills, and social media savvy. From the student perspective, some of these skills are learned in the required Personal Finance course, but they still expressed a need for “more of that.”

The kids need those basic life skills. Check booking, what bills are going to come in the mail . . .

~A General Employee

Students and community representatives both felt strongly that the school division should help equip students with basic life skills. Students felt a stronger emphasis on financial literacy would allow them to more confidently live independently, be productive citizens, and make smart financial decisions. Business/ community members also felt that students should leave school with a range of “daily” skills--balancing a checkbook, cooking, even changing the oil in a car. The business and community groups considered some basic skills, such as budgeting or financial literacy, as workplace skills. Business leaders emphasized that as employers, they do not have time to teach these basic skills to employees. Of note, some principals articulated a concern about adding life skills because “we have to be careful with how many of those things we take on.” Non-academic programming contributes to not being “able to get so deep into the curriculum.”

I think there's a sense of accountability and responsibility to each other. If somebody's not getting it next to you, you should be able to bring them up as well. It's more of a sense of community... I am responsible to the person to your left and right, you know, [to] bring them along.

~A Parent

Collective responsibility within communities was raised across stakeholder groups, although it was most strongly expressed by community representatives and students. While similar to collaboration, participants advocated for an ideal of individuals responsible for each other's success. One community representative discussed in depth an idea for re-envisioning the classroom as a team with the teacher as its coach. Students, he advocated, have to learn how to help and be responsible for each other as team members would. In another focus group discussion a parent described a learning activity in a Virginia Beach middle school in which a teacher had encouraged peer coaching in the classroom, pairing high-achieving students with low-achieving students so

that all students succeed. For students, this sense of responsibility for others began with understanding and empathizing with others. Students spoke about understanding the

uniqueness of others, including their cultural background and learning style. Knowing that there are other ways that people think, one student noted, “helps you actually relate to other people and work with them.”

VBCPS staff focus groups and community focus groups made a strong case for adding the concept of personal accountability to the strategic plan goal. Extending the concept of the existing 21st century skill of responsibility, personal accountability referred to students being “active participants” in their education, advocating for themselves and their needs, and included being responsible for their educational experience. Staff members felt that students are often too “passive and compliant,” rather than motivated, persistent in difficult tasks, and actively engaged at school. Furthermore, stakeholders argued that the concept of accountability should be extended to *all* stakeholders involved in a child’s education. Teaching kids, and their parents, to advocate for themselves and feel comfortable expressing concerns and their needs and also sensitizing school staff to be responsive to student and parent inquiries would ensure all stakeholders are equally accountable. Students echoed this concept, noting that opportunities are there for students who are motivated to pursue them.

Technology was a recurring theme in multiple conversations. Stakeholders emphasized that students must be adept with utilizing technology as a tool to enhance their work. Technology skills were viewed as “essential” and should be integrated into the skills in the current strategic plan. For example, students should be fluent in technology use for *appropriate* communication in multiple venues. It is important to note that these conversations emphasized students using *technology as a tool or resource*, which might be “implied” in the current strategic plan, but ought to be explicitly mentioned.

Community

A unique perspective offered by community representatives was a focus on work readiness skills. Work readiness discussed by community representatives did not include career-specific skills but referred to general preparation for the workforce.

Several business representatives shared stories of students or recent graduates in work settings who had behaved or dressed inappropriately or did not possess effective communication skills. One representative told a story about a female high school student that she worked with in a preschool setting who wore a tongue ring. She was shocked that the student did not consider

it inappropriate while working with young children. Another representative commented about poor writing skills. A business representative discussed the challenges of recruiting staff who were proficient in English. He noted that he would *not “hire a VP in my organization without making them take an English test now because I have people with college degrees who do not know basic English.”* While the comments were similar to the earlier discussion about life skills, the community representatives were specifically concerned about inappropriate behaviors or insufficient basic skills in a workplace setting.

I think that there is a level of professionalism that needs to be re-instilled into education in general. . . Because when we see college kids coming in, I see, and you may see it as well, it's not a given that they're going to dress appropriately for interviews.

~A Higher Education Representative

Section 2: Progress to Date on Accomplishing the Strategic Goal

When asked if the school division was meeting its strategic plan goal, responses by stakeholders were mixed. In general, stakeholders agreed there has been progress toward the goal, but not for *all* students. Stakeholders provided detailed examples of successes and challenges from their perspectives, which are examined below.

Successes

Multiple groups shared positive examples of school division successes that demonstrated progress towards the strategic plan goal. In general, the consensus was that VBCPS offered a large variety of courses, programs, and opportunities for students, with advanced and college preparation programs and courses being particular strengths. Overall student achievement scores on SOL tests, industry certification tests, and AP exams, in addition to a positive graduation rate, were also offered as examples of VBCPS student success. Also mentioned as indicators of student success: scholarships that VBCPS students earn and student acceptances to high caliber colleges and universities across the country. The infusion of technology into instruction was also noted as a school division success under the current strategic plan.

From the perspective of all stakeholders, VBCPS offered an “amazing” variety of interesting opportunities. Students who were involved in the AP courses, AVID, or IB programs stressed the skills they were learning in those programs, such as critical thinking, time management, organization, and communication, would support their future success, not just in other classes but also after graduation. Academy students appreciated more focused coursework to more fully develop their skills associated with their chosen career interest.

Being that Ocean Lakes has an Academy, it allows for more specialized education...it allows for a greater variety of classes we can take...If our focus is on science, we can take more science classes...It allows for less...cookie cutter, all these classes that you have to take. We're allowed to focus on the classes that we want to take in the areas that are interesting to us...It really allows for that more specialized education.

~A High School Student

Students involved in the Technical and Career Education program shared how powerful their experiences were in their programs and the positive impact on their futures. One student described her participation as *“one of the best things that has ever happened to me.”* Another student shared that he that felt “peaceful” and like he “fit in” on the job site where he could “hone his skills” under the guidance of mentors. The majority of student groups highlighted the importance of the Technical and Career Education program and articulated a desire for more students to access the programs. Other stakeholder groups also shared the students’ perspective. The positive impact of these specific, career-oriented programs that develop relevant skills is clearly a VBCPS success.

...Technical and Career Education, that’s a program that really helps you out. I mean, you graduate high school, you already have your license to go do whatever you want, and you can have your job, your dream job. I just think that’s a really good program, and they help you get on your feet, and out into the real world.

~A High School Student

The use of current technology in the classroom was also discussed as an indicator of success for VBCPS. The curricula were described as rigorous, “progressive” with integrated technology and instructional strategies. Technology has been integrated into classwork, ranging from the use of iPads during class to online textbooks. In recent years, instruction has become more student-centered, incorporated more critical thinking, technology, formative assessment, and performance tasks. AP courses were offered as exemplars of rigorous instruction that require students to be critical thinkers and problem-solvers.

Challenges

When discussing progress towards the strategic plan goal, stakeholders shared perceived challenges in reaching the goal. Foremost among these challenges was a concern that VBCPS was not successfully preparing *all* students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. Basic literacy issues in reading, writing, and mathematics also concerned staff and community representatives. Finally, staff members felt that accreditation issues forced an emphasis on academic proficiency, which often forced the placement of other 21st century skills as a lower priority. Staff raised concerns about the “no-zero” grading practice.

Multiple focus groups expressed a concern that VBCPS was not successfully preparing *all* students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. Academy students and IB students were reported to have greater exposure to high quality educational experiences that prepare them very well to be successful 21st century learners, workers, and citizens, while “core” students have a more limited experiences. These high-quality educational experiences included engaging instruction that incorporated 21st century skills such as critical and creative thinking, shadowing professionals in the community, and leadership workshops. A middle school teacher commented *“we are doing an amazing job with our kids who are enrolled in rigorous programs, all the Academy programs that are out there for high school . . . but our kids in the middle are just staying in the middle.”* Some GED students who had attended, and dropped out of, Virginia Beach schools also shared a concern that core students who were failing did not receive the

support from teachers and counselors they needed to succeed. One female student shared her story that a high school teacher had told her to “get a tutor” since she was “holding up my class.” Overall, stakeholders expressed concern that more resources were available for gifted and advanced proficiency students than for students “in the middle” or lower-performing students.

Community and staff stakeholders also discussed the differences among subgroups in learning outcomes. Low-income and African American students as well as students with disabilities were specifically mentioned across different focus group discussions as sub-groups that still saw significant achievement gaps. One assistant principal shared that there is still a “*pretty large gap between African-American students [and other sub-groups].*” Low-income students, including students who are homeless, face particular challenges. As one administrator noted, it is hard to focus on reading when a child is “just trying to find dinner tonight.”

I mean I was in hotels every other day thinking “Reading is the last thing on this kids’ mind.” He’s just trying to find dinner tonight and we don’t think of how huge that need is until you’re there because we keep it hidden pretty well.

~An Assistant Principal

Learning outcomes for students with disabilities was raised by several staff and community stakeholders as a significant issue. Community representatives raised several examples of students who had been guided by school division staff to “graduate” by accepting an “attendance certificate” without understanding the implications of the decision. They were “*very concerned that more . . . students [with disabilities] don’t graduate and don’t obtain proficiency at the standards that we set.*” While these problems exist, some staff and community stakeholders felt that the achievement gap was not discussed openly in VBCPS. As one staff member explained, “*sometimes I think that it’s just one of the things where you walk on eggshells with a lot of people who are not very comfortable talking about it.*”

Basic literacy issues in reading, writing and mathematics remained a challenge to not only meeting accreditation requirements but also to meeting the division’s strategic goal. Community members made several comments about poor math and English skills in the workplace. A business leader described her experiences dealing with students in community college that lack foundational academic skills and end up developmental math courses, making it “*more challenging to extend their training or education after high school.*”

As an employer I don’t have time to teach “John” how to add two plus two...If we’re not teaching them how to speak, write, how to do basic math, not triple integrals, then...we’re making it difficult for them to succeed.

~A Business Leader

Teachers spoke passionately about the literacy issues they faced in the classroom. For example, one middle school teacher shared that “these kids can’t read” and “*I don’t think they ever learned how to read in school . . . With the removal of phonics from the curriculum and poor support at home, there are significant numbers of children that can’t read.*” High school teachers explained that students enter high school less and less prepared each year, which

requires enormous amounts of time on remedial skills that should have been previously mastered. This concern was echoed by principals and assistant principals during separate focus group discussions. School administrators emphasized the need to provide strong support for reading from kindergarten through second grade, because, as one assistant principal noted, "If you look at students who are not on grade level by the end of second grade their struggles grow." Math was also noted as an area of concern. Ensuring early success with math enables students to "tackle that rigor that's going to come in math" during later grades.

Many focus group participants observed that accreditation issues forced an emphasis on academic proficiency, which often placed other 21st century skills as a lower priority. Community representatives and school administrators discussed the tension between planning instruction for 21st century skills versus meeting accreditation requirements. One principal described the current situation in which some schools are facing increased pressure to improve performance on mathematics standards of learning (SOL) assessments. While 21st century skills are not incompatible with improving math performance, the focus on improving math SOL test scores demands a strong focus that

The Virginia Beach Objectives (VBOs)

VBOs were consistently discussed among multiple staff member groups. The breadth and depth of the local curricula was a clear source of frustration for both teachers and administrators, as both groups described it as "a great barrier." The number of quarterly objectives within content areas was deemed "overwhelming" and "counterintuitive to differentiation." Participants described time as the "barrier" that resulted in the elimination of instructional activities that included 21st century skills in favor of "coverage." Students also commented on the "pacing" of their classes, feeling the pressure to "keep up" early in the year. They described the teachers' anxiety and sense of urgency to "not get behind." Principals shared "if we ask them to do too many things really well, all at once, the end result may be that they're not going to do well enough at any one of them in order to ultimately be successful with any one."

... We have so many standards to cover. It's just insane and thinking how can I take the time to make them global thinkers and give them this time to be creative when I have 130 standards I have to get in, in third quarter . . . I'm picking and choosing what science activities I'm going to do for sound because I have to get it done and we have to move on to the next thing . . . I have to tell this is how sound is made instead of them . . . figuring it out.

~An Elementary Teacher

I think that's what causes us not to be able to get so deep into the curriculum, to why we're just kind of glossing over it in checklist . . . There's so much to cover. . . There's not enough time in the day to get as deep as you want, to really explore some of these things that the kids are really interested in, because we got to move. We got to keep going.

~A Principal

What happens if the kids don't get it? You re-teach it right? ...No way. My pacing chart won't allow that. We'll spiral it and we'll get to it again, but I can't spend another day or I won't be able to teach my last lesson of the year. I can't.

~A Middle School Teacher

pulls attention away from aligning instruction with the strategic plan. One principal noted that the work the schools must do to raise math performance is *“going to be probably pretty far away from project-based and problem-based learning.”*

This focus on accreditation had several direct impacts that affected the school division’s ability to accomplish its strategic goal, according to staff stakeholders. Teachers and assistant principals commented on the demands of the curriculum pacing. *“We are always moving, always rushing through,”* one elementary teacher noted, which has caused them to eliminate opportunities for students to be creative, collaborate, and solve problems in order to save time. Elementary teachers described feeling overwhelmed by the extremely high number of instructional objectives assigned for each quarter, in some cases over 100, which must be taught and assessed. Middle school teachers described a similar scenario with high numbers of Virginia Beach Objectives (VBO; please see sidebar on previous page). Pacing was also an issue at the high school level, where students described being “rushed” through the content to prepare for the test, without ever developing a deep understanding of the content. A central office administrator, familiar with the VBO requirements placed on teachers, noted that *“you’re going to make a person who has 24 7-year olds in their room go insane” with the “75 standards [that] need to be met by the end of the year.”*

In subjects that have SOL tests and especially in schools that are facing accreditation pressure, the situation for incorporating 21st century skills may be worse. Business representatives acknowledged that *“the pressure that’s on the teachers to get these kids SOL proficient”* runs counter to encouraging teachers to focus their instruction on 21st century skills. School administrators discussed what they observed as “pockets” of successful implementation of the strategic plan, but typically in schools that were not under pressure or in programs or subjects that did not have SOL testing. Some principals reported that they were more likely to see project- or problem-based learning in advanced or gifted cluster classrooms, for example, or in a high school that did not face the pressures of not making accreditation.

Staff

Without exception, every teacher focus group repeatedly cited the “no-zero” grading practice as detrimental to student responsibility and accountability. Of the teachers participating in the focus group discussions, many but not all were discouraged by school administrators from giving zero grades to students who failed to turn in assignments. This is a controversial issue in Virginia Beach but also in communities across the U.S. The argument supporting the no-zero practice is that a low grade, such as a 50 or 60, is low enough to encourage students to change their behavior but not so low that it pulls down a student’s average that way a zero does. During the focus group discussions, some teachers negatively associated this policy with the strategic goal learner outcome of responsibility. By allowing students to continue to pass a class, they do not receive the full consequences of their actions and fail to develop the attitude of a responsible learner.

Why is our school failing? Because we’re giving them 50s and we’re not making them responsible to learn the material, so when they do go take those standardized tests at the end of the year they’re failing, and that’s why the school is failing.

~A Middle School Teacher

College Preparedness

When asked if VBCPS was preparing students for college, many stakeholders felt the school division offered an array of opportunities to students. Dual enrollment, Academies, and diverse course offerings were offered as examples of quality opportunities that prepare students for college. In general, groups felt there should be a higher level of awareness and more counseling to encourage more students to take advantage of available opportunities, and that inequity in academic preparation for college should be addressed.

Stakeholders discussed the impressive array of college preparation courses and programs that prepare Virginia Beach students to enroll and succeed in the nation's most competitive higher education institutions. Parents and students alike described high school coursework as "rigorous" with "lots of opportunities for Advanced Placement (AP)" and other advanced coursework for college-bound students. Students spoke glowingly of their Academy experiences across high schools. Academies, one student noted, help "you focus on what you want to do in the future" and "are very career focused." High school teachers commented that 21st century skills are very apparent in Academy instruction. A parent described one of the division's Academy programs as "phenomenal." Dual enrollment was also singled out as a strong component of VBCPS high school programs for college-bound students, enabling students to gain college credit prior to high school graduation and "bridge from 12th grade to community college or 12th grade to a four year university." One community representative shared, "the sky is the limit in terms of what an individual high school student wants to achieve within the school division. And I think that is remarkable."

I graduated from a school division that gets very high ranking nationally all the time, and they had nothing like we have here at the secondary level...The high school curriculum was great and rigorous and you have lots of opportunities for AP, physics, and calculus.

~A Community Representative

Multiple groups shared a concern about the unbalanced preparation of VBCPS students for college. Staff and community groups felt that not all students were prepared equally. Students enrolled in rigorous courses, such as International Baccalaureate (IB) or AP, are well prepared; however, as discussed in the earlier Challenges sub-section, multiple stakeholders indicated that many core students do not receive the same level of rigorous instruction. High school teachers did express a concern about a general lack of rigor for high school students preparing for college, specifically the elimination of mid-terms and final exams and no-zero grading were discussed. They also shared feedback from former VBCPS students. These former students described feeling "unprepared" and "coddled" in high school, and therefore were unprepared for the rigor of their college experiences.

For some stakeholders, guidance counseling provided insufficient course planning and college and career guidance for students and their families. Parents perceived that there was not a sufficient number of guidance counselors and that counseling was insufficient for guiding students to make appropriate course selections and plan appropriately for college. One parent conveyed a story of her child during his senior year that received very little assistance from his counselor. However, the need for improved counseling extends back as early as elementary school. A central office administrator suggested that decisions affecting high school course-taking start by 5th grade, but “*nobody was telling the parents [the impact of] making decisions about what Math class your child took in 6th grade.*” The central office administrator admitted that “*we were kind of making some of those decisions much earlier but we haven't communicated that [to parents].*”

[Students] are definitely tracked by the time they get to high school, and I always felt like a lot of the kids, guidance doesn't have time for you if you're not on the college track.

~A Community Representative

Workforce Preparedness

When asked if VBCPS prepares students to enter the workforce, most stakeholders felt quality educational experiences are available to students but highly under-utilized. Stakeholders shared that the school division is strongly focused on preparing all students for four-year college, which has led to under-emphasizing other options for students, including technical fields and the military. A related issue is a perceived insufficiency in career awareness activities and career counseling for students that may not be college-bound. Community representatives in particular expressed a need for increased student access to Technical and Career Education, pathways that did not lead to a four-year institution, and the use of community-education partnerships to increase awareness of career options. Students also expressed an interest in increasing the relevance of coursework so that connections to career pathways are more apparent.

Stakeholders praised the quality of the school division's Technical and Career Education offerings, including the Advanced Technology Center, co-op work experiences, and industry partnerships, such as Freedom Ford. Stakeholders described these opportunities as excellent opportunities for students to acquire specific skills to enter the workforce. Many groups felt that there is a demand for highly skilled trades, such as HVAC, plumbers, and mechanics, which VBCPS could more strongly address by broadening access to or expanding existing programs. Enhanced partnerships with local institutions, including Tidewater Community College, was suggested as a potential course of action for strengthening Technical and Career Education offerings; this topic is more thoroughly discussed in the Community perspective shared below.

The kid who's graduating and sitting next to each other and one of them is going, "I'm going to Virginia Tech," and he's proud. We really need to get to the point . . . that guy says, "And I'm going into the apprenticeship program at the shipyard and I am absolutely proud." . . . We get away from those old, "This is where the smart kids go, this is where the dumb kids go."

~A Community Representative

Stakeholders shared that the school division is strongly focused on preparing all students for four-year college study, which has led to under-emphasizing other options for students, including technical fields and the military. Stakeholders commented on the shift in the division's perspective, which in one community representative's view had *"changed from every kid can go to college to every kid will go to college."* Community and business representatives particularly expressed concern about this mindset and its effect on students. One business representative shared a story about his own child, who chose to go into retail instead of college and now makes "pretty good money." In his words, *"there's so many dreams that each child has and I think some of the focus we need to pay attention to is helping them live out that dream and not put so much pressure on the fact that you got to go to college."* Military careers, another community representative noted, were on the decline. For students who choose a trade or other career pathway that does not require college preparation, stakeholders articulated that they should not be made to feel that this is an inferior choice or, as one community representative stated, that non-college options are for the "dumb kids."

Stakeholders perceived that there was insufficient career awareness activities and counseling for both students and parents. Student and community group participants heavily emphasized the need for relevant educational experiences for students that encouraged the exploration of careers as early as middle school. Students also voiced a desire for earlier and more frequent interactions with school counselors. Those interactions would provide information about relevant career options, as well as associated educational opportunities in VBCPS. Students also described a widespread lack of awareness of potential opportunities, particularly those associated with vocational programs, a concern also shared by parents and community members echoed this concern.

Community

Community representatives expressed a need for increased student access to Technical and Career Education and pathways that did not lead to a four-year institution. Focus group participants believed that the school division's philosophy was to prepare every child for a four-year college. Students, they felt, were being pressured to focus on college goals

only to their detriment, especially when there were well-paying career opportunities available that did not require a four-year degree. One participant shared, for example, that skills trades could be lucrative; in her industry, a meat cutter could earn \$60,000/year following a two-year training program. While the "Vo-Tech" program was praised across stakeholder groups, many focus group participants believed it was not accessible enough to all students. Community representatives noted that access to Technical and Career Education was limited. The program *"has prerequisites, so you've got a group of kids you're missing because if you don't get a recommendation, if you don't have the grades and you don't get a recommendation, you're not going to our 'Vo-Tech' classes in Virginia Beach."*

We need schools to say...it's okay not to go to college.

~A Business Representative

Community representatives also advocated for building more bridges and opportunity from the workforce to the classroom. In addition to recommending online resources for career guidance, participants suggested inviting community members to participate in career day events and classroom visits. Businesses and community organizations could also host workplace experiences for students. Participants in a business focus group discussion agreed that VBCPS has a very good Partners in Education program, but one participant suggested that they *“enhance that program and put a little bit more effort into it to get to where industry people are coming into the classroom and working with the kids.”* Overall, there was strong enthusiasm among Business stakeholders for greater involvement with the schools.

I'd like to see Virginia Beach humble themselves a little more and work with the other educational partners in this area, because I think some really fantastic things would come if they stopped trying to just work in isolation.

~A Community Representative

Students

Students also expressed an interest in increasing the relevance of coursework so that connections to career pathways are more apparent. Students felt a need to more deeply understand the relevance of their coursework, how it is “used in the real world” or “how we use calculus in physics.” Some students gave a few examples of encountering relevance in their classwork. A pre-calculus student described a take-home project in which the teacher challenged students to find a real-life application for sine and cosine. Working with a partner, they applied these mathematical concepts to weight lifting. For the student, this real-life application really made the *“knowledge come alive”* and helped him see how math skills could be used in career fields. When used as an instructional strategy, discussions about “current events,” according to students in one focus group discussion, helps them see the relevance of classroom topics, yet one student conceded that *“no teacher makes time to talk about current events.”* Several students felt a decided disconnect between classroom experiences and career paths that made the learning less relevant, interesting, and connected to future career pathways. This theme will be revisited in *Actions to Support 2021 Student Needs*.

Section 3: Addressing the Needs of the 2021 Learner

Skills Needed

The most frequently mentioned skills that students in 2021 should have were communication skills, global awareness/understanding, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability. The capability of communicating in a second language was also identified by some students and community representatives as essential. It is important to note that when discussing skills needed in 2021, the dialogue often returned to the 21st century skills in the VBCPS strategic plan. Collaboration and teamwork, critical thinking, and communication were deemed even more necessary for the work place in the future..

Of these skills, communication skills, in particular the ability to interact with others in a face-to-face setting, was most frequently mentioned. Effective interpersonal communications, as one student pointed out, is important because it is the basis for collaboration. Business stakeholders also pointed out the importance of interpersonal communications in the workplace, including exercising “politeness” in interfacing with co-workers and customers. Students spoke with concern about their peers, who “aren’t really good at . . . holding a conversation with somebody.”

Parents and staff also echoed this concern. Some respondents pointed to technology as a potential cause, with one staff member noting, “technology is wonderful but every once in a while we need to put that [device] down and just talk.”

I think on the flipside of that with the technology, they don’t know how to talk to each other anymore. People don’t know how to talk to each other. They don’t know how to communicate, they don’t know how to look somebody in the eye and have a conversation because they’re sitting next to each other texting each other.

Global awareness and cultural sensitivity were highlighted as important skills for students in 2021. Stakeholders described an increasingly global economy in the future. In order to collaborate, problem-solve, and communicate effectively in a more global workplace, students will need an increased level of cultural sensitivity and additional language skills. Students and community members recognized that working in a global marketplace sometimes meant the need to interface with global colleagues in their native language. One student, who was planning to study business after his high school graduation, explained that a lot of American businesses “do business in China.” He explained that the Chinese representatives “learn English so they can do business with us, because you rarely find people in America who learn the Chinese language so they can do business.” Americans that take the time to learn “even a little bit of Chinese: will earn the respect of their Chinese counterparts and, as a result, their interactions with Chinese businesses will be more successful.”

Stakeholders described the world as “constantly changing,” creating a need for adaptability. Students in the future must be able to adapt quickly to changing circumstances in order to be successful. Community members and students described a feeling of “not knowing” what the future world would look like, but emphasized that students will have to be flexible and “adaptable” in order to effectively navigate the world independently.

I think that the economy will hopefully be better. I’d say that students should be able to know how to take the initiative in becoming a successful citizen and whether or not it’s worse, adapting to the economic situation.

~A High School Student

Challenges Students Might Face

There were several recurring themes when participants were asked to describe the biggest challenges that students might face in 2021. Communication and adaptability topped the list, followed by tolerance, engagement, and economic issues.

As described in the previous section, *Skills Needed in 2021*, the ability to communicate effectively face to face and in professional settings was thought to be an even more significant challenge in the future. Again, the influx of communication technologies was considered a reason for “more and more minimalistic” communication. “Getting those literacy skills back” was offered as a bigger and bigger challenge over time.

The ability for students to rapidly adapt to changes in a “progressively more competitive” world was also described as a challenge in 2021. This dialogue mirrored the conversation related to future skills needed in 2021 for students to be successful in an increasingly global economy with rapidly evolving technology. One student shared his fear about adapting to a changing world in the future. He described a paradox between school and society: *“[At school] we all have the same guidelines. We get a student code of conduct of what is acceptable, but literally it's like they're explaining our lives in every step we have to take.”* Our society is becoming more and more “free-spirited” and “individualized,” but school, the student explained, becomes “more and more structured each year.”

Three additional challenges emerged from the focus groups: tolerance, engagement, and economic issues. Students were highly concerned about tolerance for others and often described peer pressure and bullying as issues of concern, particularly if these issues become even more prevalent, both in Virginia Beach schools and in society in general. Several groups expressed concern over the high number of students who experienced mental health issues as a result of this pressure, and predicted this may be a larger challenge in the future. *Students “face a lot of challenges in just being able to get along with each other” and “younger and younger these kids are battling it out with fists.”*

Community, staff, and student groups shared the belief that keeping students engaged would be even more challenging in 2021. From the student perspective, they often struggle to stay engaged during class; sometimes the cause was the technology, which was referred to as “a help but also a distraction.” The other factor can be their classmates, particularly in large classes. Students felt that both of these factors would increase in the future and make staying engaged in class even more challenging in 2021. Students also shared their concerns related to instruction that was “too focused on the SOLs” and not relevant to “the real world.” A further discussion of this theme can be found in the *Educational Activities for Students* section.

The economy was mentioned often during the conversation about challenges in 2021. Stakeholders described a marketplace that is increasingly global in nature; therefore, students will have to be even more “competitive” with a marketable skillset to access opportunities. The concept of competition was often related to the need for students to develop better communication and critical thinking skills, and global awareness.

I think global competition is going to be a big challenge...We already are in a global economy. Our children are going to be competing for jobs with people from all over the world.

~A Parent

Actions to Support 2021 Student Needs

Focus group participants offered many insightful suggestions on what VBCPS could do to prepare students for the future. The suggestions are organized into two major strands below, educational activities for students and strategies for the school division.

Educational Activities for Students

As participants described educational activities to support 2021 skills, several themes related to students emerged:

- Classroom instruction is engaging, relevant, flexible, and differentiated to meet individual student needs.
- There is an increased emphasis on attaining proficiency in English-language arts and mathematics.
- Quality experiences are offered outside of the classroom, including activities that promote global awareness.

Students also identified support activities, such as career counseling and student/teacher relationships, as important to contributing to a sense of connectedness to the school.

I think they should focus more on the individual and what they want to do. I'm not artistic at all, I can't play an instrument, I can't draw, why do I need to take a fine arts class? It has nothing to do with what I want to do with my life...

~A High School Student

The most significant theme that emerged was the need for classroom instruction that is engaging, relevant, flexible, and differentiated for individual student needs. Students defined un-engaging instruction as “too focused on the SOLs,” “rote,” and “not relevant.” Many of the classroom experiences described emphasized maintaining “the pace” to prepare for the SOL test, which students felt was “just

learning for the test” rather than “really understanding.” In contrast, students described learning best in classes where the instruction is “fun” and connected to their career and personal interests, and teachers differentiated instruction to support them at their learning level. For high school students, relevant instruction included connections to real world experiences and careers.

There was a strong desire for more flexibility in course selections, scheduling, and pathways to graduation. Students described extensive course requirements as “barriers” to more specialized study and opportunities. More flexibility would honor their individual interests and strengths. Overall, multiple stakeholder groups acknowledge a greater need for “individualized learning pathways” for students in the future.

Not like base everything, what you're learning, on the SOLs. Because some people need time to actually learn things, but teachers are always speeding through things, because they need to be in time for the SOLs. And, that sometimes doesn't help people.

~A High School Student

VBCPS staff suggested that instruction should include an increased focus on mathematics and language arts. Staff and community groups referred to this as a “return to the basics.” One teacher summarized, “...we will never be ahead of the curve, truly be ahead of the curve, until we get all of our students reading and writing and able to do the math.” Teachers again highlighted the extensive breadth and depth of the curriculum and VBOs as factors for students who have not mastered the fundamentals.

Quality experiences outside of the classroom were also suggested as important educational experiences for students in 2021. “Quality” refers to activities in which a student is actively and regularly involved. “Outside of the classroom” could include extracurricular activities or community based activities. Such activities enhance a student’s sense of “connectedness” at school and in the community. Given the prior emphasis on global awareness, it is not a surprise that activities to support its development were also suggested.

Student support in and outside of the classroom was also identified as important. Students emphasized a need and desire for earlier and more consistent exposure to counseling in order to explore career options and coursework that is relevant to career choices. Having teachers and counselors who take the time to provide career guidance, scheduling options, and available courses was considered by students to be beneficial. Students also suggested that one on one interactions with “caring” school staff made them feel “encouraged” and “confident.” For many stakeholders, more of these interactions would assist students in developing stronger skills and

build a sense of connectedness to the school, particularly for those students without a strong support system at home.

School Division Strategies

As participants described actions to support 2021 skills, strategies for the school division to consider also emerged:

- Teacher support and staff professional development to support 21st century learning;
- Alignment of school-level practices with division-wide policies and strategic plan; and
- Less “regimented” or “rigid” curriculum that allows for greater instructional flexibility for teachers.

There was extensive dialogue surrounding school division strategies to support 21st century learning. One message that overshadowed all others was to *support the adults who support the students*. Support was defined as professional development and resource allocation. Teachers relayed a strong desire for professional development that included more collaboration, communication, and resource sharing with their colleagues. In addition, elementary teachers desired more professional development related to technology. Assistant principals felt there was a general absence of professional development for their job category, particularly in the area of instructional supervision to ensure alignment of instruction with the intended learning outcomes of the strategic plan. All staff groups described professional learning as a means for developing a “common understanding” of the skills in a strategic plan. Professional development would

Site-Based Management

Site-based management was introduced to VBCPS in the early 1990s. During the focus group discussions with staff, site-based management was often referred to as a reason for inconsistency in instructional approaches and fidelity issues in implementing the strategic plan. While there are many strengths of this management approach, staff and some community representatives voiced frustration at the challenges posed by decisions made at the school level. Below is a sampling of quotes from focus group discussion participants that are relevant to this discussion.

I'm still frustrated . . . by . . . site based decision-making; that there are some things that seem to be negotiable and a principal can decide whether or not we're going to do small group instruction and language or it's whether or not we're going to allow gifted units to be taught ... If all 56 elementary principals can make a different decisions, we have altered the path of every single child and we are not providing equity across because everybody can choose to listen to the curriculum directives or listen to what's being recommended and make a decision based on a teacher's comfort level or a community comfort level or a student population piece.

~A Central Office Administrator

Sometimes I think we fall too quickly behind “it's a site based decision,” but is that in the best interest of every . . . kid we're getting ready to go from elementary to middle school, and where are those vertical articulation conversations?

~A Central Office Administrator

I think in every school it's different. Every school pushes a different thing...

~A Middle School Teacher

. . . We are talking about fidelity. Every teacher in Virginia Beach needs to know what is proficient, and they need to know what mastering means so that we're all shooting at the same target.

~A Community Member

build “consistency” among all instructional staff around high quality instruction and “what it looks like” in the classroom.

Bridging the gap between the division-wide strategic plan/policies and school-level implementation was a frequent topic in staff focus group discussions and therefore an important consideration for any future plan implementation. As was discussed earlier in the Findings section, VBCPS staff members in multiple focus groups suggested improved guidance on implementation in support of the strategic goal to ensure fidelity of implementation. Tactics suggested to support implementation included clear definitions of each learning outcome, indicators associated with each skill, ideas for how they can be incorporated into instruction and assessed, and a common understanding of “what that looks like” for students at different grade levels. Assistant principals also advocated for division-wide training and support to monitor instruction in support of the strategic plan to ensure fidelity.

For staff stakeholders, part of the current concern with fidelity of implementation stemmed from inconsistency in instructional approaches across schools. Staff described a situation in which students often move between schools, both horizontally and vertically, which causes transition issues. One staff member described the situation as “56 elementary schools rolling into X number of middle schools rolling into X high schools.” That is, middle schools and high schools receive students from multiple locations. This perceived lack of consistency in instructional approaches between locations was attributed by some staff and community stakeholders to the division’s use of site-based management (see sidebar on previous page).

Are the administrators who are supervising the instruction...are they on the same page about what is quality instruction?

~An Assistant Principal

Teachers felt they needed more flexibility related to instruction and should be empowered to choose the instructional strategies that are effective with their students. The constantly changing curriculum, high number of VBOs, and required instructional strategies were a source of stress and anxiety for instructional staff at all school levels. By maintaining continuity in curriculum, reducing the number of learning objectives, and allowing teachers to adapt instructional strategies, some stakeholders believed that teachers could offer instruction that was more aligned with the spirit of the strategic plan—more engaging, relevant, flexible, and differentiated. Flexibility was emphasized by some teachers and assistant principals as key to success. One middle school teacher shared, “I get that they want all the kids to be learning the same thing and be at the same level, but they’re not all going to teach it the same way and if this kid is going to learn better from a teacher like this than a teacher like this, they should be able to do that.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, VBCPS stakeholders support the ideals represented in the current strategic plan and offered minor suggestions to modify the goal focus or augment the learning outcomes. Stakeholders generally agreed that VBCPS offered a large variety of courses, programs, and

opportunities for students, with college preparatory and Technical and Career Education programs singled out as particularly successful. The infusion of technology into instruction was also highlighted as a positive outcome of the strategic plan.

During the focus group discussions, factors such as geographic location, socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, disability, or school were raised as issues that possibly impact students' access to opportunities. Participants stated that all students should be consistently encouraged, supported, and counseled to acquire 21st century skills that can be applied in their chosen paths following graduation.

Factors inhibiting strategic goal success revolved largely around issues with fidelity of implementation. Stakeholders perceived that the strategic plan has been applied inconsistently across the school division leading to descriptions of "pockets of success" evident throughout all stakeholder conversations. Some of the issues raised by stakeholders included inconsistent policies and practices, insufficient professional guidance and professional development on core plan concepts, a strong focus on preparing all students for college to the detriment of other career pathways, and an over-emphasis on academic proficiency has limited the overall success of the strategic plan.

Looking ahead to 2021, stakeholders generally recommended that VBCPS stay on course with the current strategic plan. They emphasized that 21st century skills such as collaboration and team work, global awareness, critical thinking, and communication will be even more necessary for the workplaces of the future. Adaptability was also identified as a skill that might be considered for a future plan.

In re-visioning the school division in 2021, stakeholders imagined every classroom with instruction that is engaging, relevant, and differentiated for students' needs. They also recognized the importance of introducing greater flexibility into curriculum and instruction, including providing students with greater flexibility in course selection and allowing teachers greater flexibility to teach according to their students' needs and interests rather than a "huge checklist" of objectives. While a strong focus should be retained, and even increased, on attaining proficiency in English-language arts and mathematics, they also recognized that student support activities, including career counseling and a caring student-teacher relationship, should be part of the vision. Quality experiences outside of the classroom that connect students to community and career experiences and enhance their global awareness are also essential.

Undergirding this vision is the need for teacher support and staff professional development to support fidelity of implementation. Stakeholders also voiced support for aligning school-level practices with division-wide policies and strategic plan, including placing greater emphasis division-wide on instruction focused on the 21st century skills and a less "rigid" curriculum that allows for greater instructional flexibility for teachers.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Research Methods

The researchers utilized appropriate qualitative analysis methods² as the framework for data collection and analysis. The methods consisted of data preparation and organization, followed by systematic coding, condensing of codes, and subsequent development of themes.

Virginia Beach City Public Schools provided the focus group protocol and discussion guides customized for individual stakeholder groups, identified and invited a sample of individuals for each of the 18 focus group discussions, and arranged for discussion sites on school division properties across the city. A Shaffer Evaluation Group staff member moderated each discussion using the provided protocol as the discussion guide. In addition to the question items included on the protocol, probes and clarifying questions were also asked. Clarifying questions helped to clarify what a respondent has said and to help get more detailed information on topics of interest. Probes allowed the respondents to offer additional information to enrich the original response. In some cases the order of question items asked was varied to align with the flow of a discussion.

The focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researchers reviewed the transcripts to ensure accuracy. Initially, the researchers used a priori codes representing the interview questions as a method for organizing the early analysis. Qualitative coding software, DeDoose[®], was utilized to organize and analyze transcripts. Dedoose[®] is a tool that standardizes the coding process to increase the overall validity and reliability of the process.

The transcripts underwent several subsequent coding procedures. First, each researcher separately reviewed transcripts and made notes in the margins related to initial findings. This process is referred to as “memoing” and is used to gain an overall perspective of the data as whole prior to a more detailed analysis. These initial findings were used to triangulate³ the existing a priori codes and individual researcher subcodes codes for what Creswell refers to as “lean coding.” The researchers reached consensus and analyzed transcripts a third time utilizing the updated a priori codes and emerging codes.

The data generated from the focus group interviews were organized and analyzed to closely examine the patterns and themes discussed in the summary findings. Through the use of descriptive codes applied to the original transcripts in the qualitative coding software, frequency data and excerpt analysis revealed conceptual themes. These emergent themes were analyzed by major stakeholder groups in addition to being examined in the aggregate.

² Creswell, John W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

³ Triangulation in this study refers to the researchers initial and separate findings used to corroborate initial themes before continuing with detailed analysis.

Appendix 2. Focus Group Protocols

VBCPS Staff Groups

Principal, Assistant Principal, Teachers, Central Office Administrator, Classified

Section 1: Introduction/Review of Purpose

Welcome to this focus group with [insert audience group] to discuss your opinions and ideas about Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS). Thank you for taking the time to participate in this activity. My name is [insert name], and I will be facilitating this focus group. Currently, VBCPS is in the planning phase for developing a new strategic plan that will guide the school division's focus through 2021. The purpose of this focus group is to gather your thoughts about how VBCPS is preparing students to be successful in school and beyond after high school graduation. We are also interested in learning what you think students will need to know and be able to do to be prepared seven years from now in 2021 and what the school division can do over the next seven years to ensure that students are prepared for their future. Your input today will help guide the development of the next strategic plan.

This focus group will include 12 questions and will last no more than 90 minutes. Please know that there are no "right" answers to today's questions, and we are interested in all feedback. The focus group discussion will be audio-taped so that we can transcribe your comments for analysis. However, you will not be identified by name and your responses will not be attributed to you individually. Feel free to speak at any time, just wait until a person is finished talking before beginning.

Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

Section 2: Strategic Goal and Student Learning Outcomes (Pulse Check)

The goal of the school division's current strategic plan is that students will graduate having mastered the skills needed to succeed as 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. These skills are defined as students being academically proficient; effective communicators and collaborators; globally aware, independent, responsible learners and citizens; and critical and creative thinkers, innovators and problem solvers. [Suggest having this written out for reference.]

1. Do you believe that the school division, with support from the community, is successfully preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens? Explain why.
2. Do you believe that the skills listed will still be important for students in the future? Why or why not?
3. Are there other skills students will need that are not already listed?
4. Do you believe that preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens is a worthwhile goal for VBCPS to pursue or would you suggest a different focus for the school division?

Section 3: Knowledge and Skills/Supporting Educational Experiences

5. Do you believe that the educational experiences students receive in Virginia Beach prepare them for continuing their education after high school? Explain why.
6. Do you believe that the educational experiences students receive in Virginia Beach prepare them for entering the workforce? Explain why.

[Facilitator's Note: Please note to participants that the questions regarding preparation for the workforce could also include plans to enter the military.]

7. What should students in 2021 know and be able to do so that they are successful in school and prepared for the paths they take after graduation?
8. Describe the educational experiences you think are necessary to support student learning and prepare them for paths they take after graduation.
9. What should VBCPS be doing to help prepare students for the future?
10. What should VBCPS stop doing that is not helping to prepare students for the future?

Section 4: Identifying and Addressing Challenges

11. What do you believe the biggest challenges will be for students in 2021?
12. How might the school division, in collaboration with the community, help students overcome these challenges?

Section 5: Concluding Remarks

Thank you for your participation in today's focus group. The valuable information you provided will be summarized and used to guide the development of focus areas for the school division's next strategic plan. If you have other thoughts and want to provide additional feedback, please visit the website listed on this bookmark to contribute further. Also, this website will provide information about the progress of the strategic plan's development over the next year. [Hand out the bookmarks.]

Current Students & GED Students

Section 1: Introduction/Review of Purpose

Welcome to this focus group with [insert audience group] to discuss your opinions and ideas about Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS). Thank you for taking the time to participate in this activity. My name is [insert name], and I will be facilitating this focus group. Currently, VBCPS is in the planning phase for developing a new strategic plan that will guide the school division's focus through 2021. The purpose of this focus group is to gather your thoughts about how VBCPS is preparing students to be successful in school and beyond after high school graduation. We are also interested in learning what you think students will need to know and be able to do to be prepared seven years from now in 2021 and what the school division can do over the next seven years to ensure that students are prepared for their future. Your input today will help guide the development of the next strategic plan.

This focus group will include 8 questions and will last no more than 90 minutes. Please know that there are no "right" answers to today's questions, and we are interested in all feedback. The focus group discussion will be audio-taped so that we can transcribe your comments for analysis. However, you will not be identified by name and your responses will not be attributed to you individually. Feel free to speak at any time, just wait until a person is finished talking before beginning. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

Section 2: Strategic Goal and Student Learning Outcomes (Pulse Check)

The goal of the school division's current strategic plan is that students will graduate having mastered the skills needed to succeed as 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. These skills are defined as students being academically proficient; effective communicators and collaborators; globally aware, independent, responsible learners and citizens; and critical and creative thinkers, innovators and problem solvers. [Suggest having this written out for reference.]

1. Do you believe that the school division, with support from the community, is successfully preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens? Explain why.
2. Do you believe that the skills listed will still be important for students in the future? Why or why not?
3. Are there other skills students will need that are not already listed?
4. Do you believe that preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens is a worthwhile goal for VBCPS to pursue or would you suggest a different focus for the school division?

Section 3: Knowledge and Skills/Supporting Educational Experiences

5. What should students in 2021 know and be able to do so that they are successful in school and prepared for the paths they take after graduation?

6. Describe the educational experiences you think are necessary to support student learning and prepare them for paths they take after graduation.

Section 4: Identifying and Addressing Challenges
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7. What do you believe the biggest challenges will be for students in 2021?
8. How might the school division, in collaboration with the community, help students overcome these challenges?

Section 5: Concluding Remarks

Thank you for your participation in today's focus group. The valuable information you provided will be summarized and used to guide the development of focus areas for the school division's next strategic plan. If you have other thoughts and want to provide additional feedback, please visit the website listed on this bookmark to contribute further. Also, this website will provide information about the progress of the strategic plan's development over the next year. [Hand out the bookmarks.]

Parents, Community and Higher Education

Section 1: Introduction/Review of Purpose

Welcome to this focus group with [insert audience group] to discuss your opinions and ideas about Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS). Thank you for taking the time to participate in this activity. My name is [insert name], and I will be facilitating this focus group. Currently, VBCPS is in the planning phase for developing a new strategic plan that will guide the school division's focus through 2021. The purpose of this focus group is to gather your thoughts about how VBCPS is preparing students to be successful in school and beyond after high school graduation. We are also interested in learning what you think students will need to know and be able to do to be prepared seven years from now in 2021 and what the school division can do over the next seven years to ensure that students are prepared for their future. Your input today will help guide the development of the next strategic plan.

This focus group will include 10 questions and will last no more than 90 minutes. Please know that there are no "right" answers to today's questions, and we are interested in all feedback. The focus group discussion will be audio-taped so that we can transcribe your comments for analysis. However, you will not be identified by name and your responses will not be attributed to you individually. Feel free to speak at any time, just wait until a person is finished talking before beginning. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

Section 2: Strategic Goal and Student Learning Outcomes (Pulse Check)

The goal of the school division's current strategic plan is that students will graduate having mastered the skills needed to succeed as 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. These skills are defined as students being academically proficient; effective communicators and collaborators; globally aware, independent, responsible learners and citizens; and critical and creative thinkers, innovators and problem solvers. [Suggest having this written out for reference.]

1. Do you believe that the school division, with support from the community, is successfully preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens? Explain why.
2. Do you believe that the skills listed will still be important for students in the future? Why or why not?
3. Are there other skills students will need that are not already listed?
4. Do you believe that preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens is a worthwhile goal for VBCPS to pursue or would you suggest a different focus for the school division?

Section 3: Knowledge and Skills/Supporting Educational Experiences

5. Do you believe that the educational experiences students receive in Virginia Beach prepare them for continuing their education after high school? Explain why.

6. Do you believe that the educational experiences students receive in Virginia Beach prepare them for entering the workforce? Explain why.

[Facilitator's Note: Please note to participants that the questions regarding preparation for the workforce could also include plans to enter the military.]

7. What should students in 2021 know and be able to do so that they are successful in school and prepared for the paths they take after graduation?
8. Describe the educational experiences you think are necessary to support student learning and prepare them for paths they take after graduation.

Section 4: Identifying and Addressing Challenges
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9. What do you believe the biggest challenges will be for students in 2021?
10. How might the school division, in collaboration with the community, help students overcome these challenges?

Section 5: Concluding Remarks

Thank you for your participation in today's focus group. The valuable information you provided will be summarized and used to guide the development of focus areas for the school division's next strategic plan. If you have other thoughts and want to provide additional feedback, please visit the website listed on this bookmark to contribute further. Also, this website will provide information about the progress of the strategic plan's development over the next year. [Hand out the bookmarks.]

Section 1: Introduction/Review of Purpose

Welcome to this focus group with [insert audience group] to discuss your opinions and ideas about Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS). Thank you for taking the time to participate in this activity. My name is [insert name], and I will be facilitating this focus group. Currently, VBCPS is in the planning phase for developing a new strategic plan that will guide the school division's focus through 2021. The purpose of this focus group is to gather your thoughts about how VBCPS is preparing students to be successful in school and beyond after high school graduation. We are also interested in learning what you think students will need to know and be able to do to be prepared seven years from now in 2021 and what the school division can do over the next seven years to ensure that students are prepared for their future. Your input today will help guide the development of the next strategic plan.

This focus group will include 10 questions and will last no more than 90 minutes. Please know that there are no "right" answers to today's questions, and we are interested in all feedback. The focus group discussion will be audio-taped so that we can transcribe your comments for analysis. However, you will not be identified by name and your responses will not be attributed to you individually. Feel free to speak at any time, just wait until a person is finished talking before beginning. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

Section 2: Strategic Goal and Student Learning Outcomes (Pulse Check)

The goal of the school division's current strategic plan is that students will graduate having mastered the skills needed to succeed as 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. These skills are defined as students being academically proficient; effective communicators and collaborators; globally aware, independent, responsible learners and citizens; and critical and creative thinkers, innovators and problem solvers. [Suggest having this written out for reference.]

1. Do you believe that the school division, with support from the community, is successfully preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens? Explain why.
2. Do you believe that the skills listed will still be important for students in the future? Why or why not?
3. Are there other skills students will need that are not already listed?
4. Do you believe that preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens is a worthwhile goal for VBCPS to pursue or would you suggest a different focus for the school division?

Section 3: Knowledge and Skills/Supporting Educational Experiences

5. Do you believe that the skills and knowledge students receive in Virginia Beach prepare them for continuing their training or education after high school? Explain why.

6. Do you believe that the skills and knowledge students receive in Virginia Beach prepare them for entering the workforce? Explain why.

[Facilitator's Note: Please note to participants that the questions regarding preparation for the workforce could also include plans to enter the military.]

7. What should students in 2021 know and be able to do so that they are successful in school and prepared for the paths they take after graduation?
8. Describe the educational experiences you think are necessary to support student learning and prepare them for paths they take after graduation.

Section 4: Identifying and Addressing Challenges
--

9. What do you believe the biggest challenges will be for students in 2021?
10. How might the school division, in collaboration with the community, help students overcome these challenges?

Section 5: Concluding Remarks

Thank you for your participation in today's focus group. The valuable information you provided will be summarized and used to guide the development of focus areas for the school division's next strategic plan. If you have other thoughts and want to provide additional feedback, please visit the website listed on this bookmark to contribute further. Also, this website will provide information about the progress of the strategic plan's development over the next year. [Hand out the bookmarks.]

Appendix 3. Participant Demographics

Stakeholder Group	Participants
Current Students	Adult Learning Center [Students working on a GED (6) Bayside High School (4) Cox High School (2) First Colonial High School (6) Green Run High School (5) Kellam High School (5) Kempsville High School (4) Landstown High School (8) Ocean Lakes High School (3) Princess Anne High School (3) Renaissance Academy (4) Salem High School (3) Tallwood High School (2)
Staff	General Employees (5) Central Office Administrators (9) Principals (8) Assistant Principals (8) High School Teachers (9) Middle School Teachers (9) Elementary School Teachers (10)
Community	Community & Higher Education (14) Business and Military Leaders (13) Parents (7)

Appendix 4. Focus Group Summary Reports

Assistant Principals

The assistant principals generally felt that the school division was making progress toward preparing students to be 21st Century learners, workers and citizens. While the skills listed in the current strategic plan were viewed as valuable, assistant principals expressed a concern about students first learning the basics of reading in the early elementary grades. By learning to read and, some assistant principals added, basic mathematical literacy in elementary school, students gain a “strong foundation” that “unlocks the door which then leads to being able to . . . tackle that rigor that’s going to come in math and their content areas.”

Assistant principals raised an issue about the supervision of instruction. While they acknowledged that there had been considerable teacher professional development in support of the strategic plan, one participant noted that assistant principals had not received sufficient training on what these skills look like in the classroom.

There was a recent example where administrators were training . . . and [the instructors] showed a video of a teacher and they have all of the assistant principals in the room rate this teacher. The ratings were so different. It went from they said an A, B, C, D, E, give this teacher an A and you have people that were at Bs, Cs, it was interesting. We’re all watching the exact same thing coming from the exact same school system and [the ratings were] all over the board.

Division-wide training on supervision of instruction to calibrate with strategic plan learning outcomes, the assistant principal explained, would help the assistant principals supervise classrooms to assess progress in the four skill areas. Some assistant principals recalled training offered early in the plan implementation period that offered a framework to identify learners’ implementation of the skills from novice to expert, reporting that it was a “great tool to monitor instruction.” The training was not repeated; therefore new assistant principals had not been made aware of it. There was some frustration expressed that a common framework was not emphasized as a monitoring tool.

Assistant principals felt that the school division had mixed results in preparing students for college. While there were pockets of rigorous courses in high schools, there was concern that instruction across the division was not promoting deep, engaging learning or differentiated instruction. Several assistant principals cited the “checklist” approach to teaching that had emerged in response to the large number of learning objectives that had been developed by the school division.

We’re asking [the teachers] this year with our standards-based approach where we have pages of [learning objectives]—I mean our teachers are counting them and ‘I have 150 objectives’—to cover not only objectives but to assess all of them multiple times. . . It’s really unfortunate and we are simply now checking the box in elementary more than I’ve

ever seen and I've been in school for 10 years. I've never seen it like this when we are checking objectives like this.

Looking ahead to 2021, assistant principals envisioned students as increasingly independent and moving along their own developmental pathways. Some students, they felt, could leave high school much earlier, since they are leaving high school with large numbers of college credits already in hand. If these advanced learners could leave the school division earlier, it would allow school staff to shift their attention to learners that need greater support. They also identified communication as a critical skill, ranging from written expression to greater cultural sensitivity in face-to-face communications. Keyboarding was also mentioned as a skill supporting communication that has been overlooked in instruction. A specific challenge that was discussed was access to technology for all learners.

Business Representatives

When asked whether the school division, with support from the community, was successfully preparing students to be 21st century learners, the business community representatives in attendance expressed a mixed response. For one participant, the answer was multifaceted: "I'm going to say yes as learners, yes as workers, [and] no as citizens." Other participants also shared what they perceived as strengths and weaknesses of the school division, including praise for the division's use of technology and concerns with graduates' communication skills. When discussing the learning outcomes associated with the strategic plan, participants made several suggestions. "Globally involved," rather than globally aware, was recommended, since it moves students from being passive observers to individuals who take action. Leadership was also suggested as an additional skill, although the concept of leadership also embraced the ideas of self-leadership and serving as a change-agent. The goal statement was also discussed, with this group recommending against the use of the word, "master," and recommending instead the use of the term, "leading."

What would it look like 60 years from now? Let's just pretend we're all dead in 60 years, 60 years from now and all these students are learners, workers and citizens; so what does a country of learners, workers and citizens look like? Chaos, it looks like a crazy indebted chaos right? We need leaders.

The business representatives felt strongly about workforce preparation issues. While the group felt that students had strong academic proficiency, they expressed concern that students were not sufficiently aware of career pathways and often did not have basic workforce readiness skills. Many participants advocated for the inclusion of workplace experiences in the high school curriculum. Career day events were also suggested. To facilitate these activities, participants recommended working closely with community partners. One representative commented that the current partners in education program is "very good" and suggested that the program be enhanced "to get to where industry people are coming into the classroom and working with the kids." Participants also recommended making online resources available to students that could help introduce them to different career pathways.

Looking ahead to 2021, business representatives discussed the importance of being technologically proficient and globally aware. Participants also discussed the importance of

students being locally involved, including mandatory community service experiences during high school. Professional communication skills and ethics were also raised as matters to address. In regards to challenges that will be faced by students in the future, participants raised a concern about students' tendency to seek instant gratification and not to take responsibility for themselves. Violence in public spaces, mental health issues, indebtedness, and the demise of the 40-hour workweek in favor of 24/7 engagement were also raised as issues for individuals in the future. In addressing these challenges, they encouraged the school division to continue to engage community partners, ranging from community volunteers in the classroom to business partners that could participate in career events or provide work placements.

Business and Military Representatives

When asked if VBCPS was successfully preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers and citizens, the community leaders felt that VBCPS was meeting this goal for most students. The group noted that academically proficient was listed first, and felt that it should remain the top priority. Mastery of foundational academic skills is necessary for the workforce, regardless of career choice. Business leaders shared examples of young workers who are unable to quickly make change or perform basic mathematical functions, which as employers, they consider fundamental and do not have time teach those skills. One leader shared her experiences in the community college sector. Some students score so poorly on math placement tests that they end up taking multiple remedial math courses and often eventually drop out. The group reinforced the emphasis on high quality communication skills, persistence, and leadership as important for 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. One business leader summarized her thoughts on how leadership is connected to the skills in the strategic plan:

The effective communications we hear from employers, no matter which school the workforce is coming from that in the younger group there is that lack of emotional intelligence and by that I mean all of the components...the self assessment, self - regulating team work....If there is a way for us to be teaching the effective communication, collaboration we're actually showing and teaching the students to become great leaders and then they will be able to plug into the workforce exemplify those leadership skills which we don't seem to have in the population coming out right now.

The group agreed that providing more leadership opportunities within the classroom, such as giving presentations, working in a team, or advocating for a cause, could provide support for students to develop leadership skills. One business leader described the role of these skills in work place and the importance of emphasizing these skills at school:

...Everything we do is team- oriented...you need to be able to work and collaborate with a group and bring your skill set there, but be able to make your point in that group effectively communicate it, and we need to teach this generation that the language of texting is not the language of business and that's fine for slang or informal conversation but it is not going to get you anywhere on the corporate ladder... if we tolerate it...we're not really being fair to those kids because we're allowing sloppy habits.

When asked about educational experiences that prepare students after high school, the group felt there that college is often promoted as the best choice for all students, where realistically “we need to recognize that vocational work” can also be a pathway for students. However, there seems to be a stigma attached to “vocational” training and VBCPS needs to do a better job of balancing that focus for students and families. One business leader offered the following:

We have to change the definition and the view of what vocation [vocational education] is because that's kind of got a negative connotation....I will tell you the skills that it takes now to be a topic mechanic...are pretty darn complex.

The group discussed that in the future, students will need “real skills” related to specific trades. “Skilled” workers are in great demand (IT, HVAC, plumbers, mechanics) and are often very well compensated. This could be an avenue for the school division to improve educational experiences for students in the future. A continued focus on communication skills and foundational academic skills were discussed as the most important skills necessary for students to meet challenges in the future.

Central Office Administrators

When asked if VBCPS was successfully preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers and citizens, central office administrators felt the school division has made gains, but “we’re not there yet,” stating “there is always room for improvement.” Administrators shared multiple indicators of VBCPS successes: curriculum is “progressively changing,” the high rate of student scholarships and acceptance into good colleges, industry testing that significantly exceeds the state average, Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) and technology tools available in classrooms. Several administrators felt the definition of “academically proficient” has shifted in recent years, with less emphasis on SOL testing and more emphasis on curriculum and instruction. When asked if these skills will still be important in the future, one administrator summarized the significance of these learning outcomes:

I think that what I always thought about the 21st Century skills is they weren't even 21st Century skills, they're universal skills, so it's not only that they are important in the future but that they were important in the past. What changes across time, is what you define them as or what's important about them. I think moving forward, we all have a general sense of the importance of these, but we need to get more specific about how we're actually going to accomplish it.... I think that we need to be more mindful of how do we do them for all kids at all levels and all subjects. And not just all kids, but all teachers and all administrators and ...say, “What matters here?” and then “How are we going to define it?” “And what are purposeful steps that we can... go, “Okay, good, we’ve met that step. Now we need to move on to this one. We’ve got that step,” because I think we're shooting too far in advance without breaking it down incrementally of how do we get there.

Also highlighted in the conversation was the importance of associated professional learning, resources, and support for teachers, who work directly with students to reach these goals. “We

want our students to be effective communicators and collaborators. We have to start with our teachers, getting them to be effective communicators and collaborators.” In order to do so, administrators emphasized the need to study current practices and allocate resources in a manner that reflects the school division’s priorities. Administrators acknowledged this process could be difficult and potentially contentious. The discussion emphasized engaging stakeholders in an open dialogue around traditional practices, such as the annual printing of curriculum guides, is an important step towards transparency and a deeper understanding of prioritizing resources.

In terms of preparing students for college, administrators shared the perspective that there are multiple opportunities, such as AP courses, dual enrollment, and Academies. Dialogue around college preparedness revealed several barriers for students who could be on the path to college: lack of early counseling, site based management, parent communication, and flexibility. Administrators suggested that students need more “flexibility” and “autonomy,” particularly in their junior and senior years, rather than a prescribed path of in courses. Involving parents earlier would ensure they were more aware of the paths and how the decisions in 5th grade can impact choices later down the road. Students in “the middle” can get lost in the shuffle, and experience challenges “navigating” and miss out on opportunities.

When asked about preparing students for the workforce, administrators felt there is a heavy emphasis or “push” for students to go to college in VBCPS; “we define academic proficiency too narrowly sometimes” rather than “cultivating the universal skills for workplace readiness and college readiness.” Administrators did share multiple “authentic experiences” currently available, such as industry certification, internships, ATC, partnerships with local industry like Freedom Ford, and robotics competitions. Better communication and counseling would encourage more students to pursue these options, which should be expanded in the future.

Educational experiences for students, regardless of their path after graduation, should include core curricula that “infuses all the critical thinking and problem solving, all the performance tasks,” those skills should not be reserved for just the AP classes. A more purposeful integration of authentic experiences, technology, and career counseling into the curricula would enhance the educational experiences of all students. In order to do this successfully, administrators felt “we need to respect that we’re all in different levels of readiness ourselves as learners” and reconfigure resources in order to provide professional development. Clearly defining 21st century skills, adding specific indicators, and developing an action plan for implementation would create a common understanding for all stakeholders.

Community and Higher Education

This group of community and higher education representatives generally agreed that while the school division did an excellent job of preparing average to above average students, it missed the mark with students from certain at-risk subgroups. One participant stated that “we’ve got to figure out how to get . . . *all* children educated . . . for whatever level they’re going to, whether that be college or whatever.” A recurring phrase during this focus group was that a classroom was only as strong as its “weakest link.” The solution this group discussed throughout its discussion was re-envisioning the classroom as a team with the teacher as its coach. One participant described this model as follows:

Take a football coach and he could take the worst team in the world and . . . make them champions. . . . A teacher is like a coach and she has a team. Now she's got to get that team to work together. It's goes back to the weakest link syndrome, that the [football coaches] take the kids that have the strongest skill set in this department and work with the kids that have the weakest and they would make it work somehow.

The group agreed with the current set of learning outcomes reflected in the school division's strategic plan, but expressed concern about the over-emphasis placed on academic proficiency. This group placed strongest emphasis on communication, collaboration and critical and creative thinking. They also emphasized that students needed to be globally competitive, not just aware, and they also needed life skills. The participants also made several suggestions about modifying the goal statement to shift the focus away from mastery and the 21st century to other concepts including life-long learning, partnership with community, and focusing on the whole child.

While discussing how educational experiences prepared students for the workforce or college, participants discussed the importance of introducing students to multiple pathways they could take after graduation, including the military and vocational training in addition to the traditional four-year college track. The messaging is very important – it is important that the school division communicate that no pathway is superior to the other. One participant described the importance of this messaging:

The kids who are graduating and sitting next to each other and one says, "I'm going to Virginia Tech," and he's proud. We really need to get to the point that the other student says, "and I'm going into the apprenticeship program at the shipyard and I am absolutely proud." . . . We need to get away from that old perspective that "This is where the smart kids go, and this is where the dumb kids go."

When asked to identify the skills needed by students in 2021, participants emphasized the need to be "competitive, to be efficient, to be independent and able to work and be successful in whatever walk of life that they have." The group noted the restrictions the school division had to work under given the state curriculum and testing requirements, but they also emphasized the need to involve parents and members of the community in educating the city's children and to engage 2- and 4-year institutions in partnerships to expand Technical and Career Education programs. By working together as a community, all children could be supported in the educational pathway of their choice.

Community Group

This group of community representatives shared that the school division has demonstrated success in preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. However, they felt that not *all* students were prepared to the same level. One participant described how his children, who attended advanced or gifted programs in the division, had developed "reflective practice and critical thinking." Their math assignments, he added, "go beyond the scope of a simple math problem, applying the concept or math problem to a real-life application or scenario." His children's daily experiences differed from the students with disabilities described by another participant, who shared her concerns about the low graduation and achievement

rates for this population. Overall, this group agreed that the skills currently included in the strategic plan were still relevant, with special emphasis given to communication, collaboration, critical thinking and global awareness. They also emphasized the need to address other desirable student attributes, including self-worth, reflectiveness, and workplace readiness skills. Participants also discussed the inclusion of “core values,” which they defined to include commitment, honor, courage, and persistence.

A prominent issue raised during discussion of preparedness for college and the workforce was students’ mathematical ability. One participant brought up a statistic that only 4% of students entering university are ready for college-level mathematics. This comment sparked a discussion about math instruction in Virginia Beach. Another participant recalled a public comment made by a math teacher at a School Board meeting, in which he argued against the use of “assistive technology” since students didn’t understand the “premises of math.”

Technical and Career Education, or “Vo-Tech,” was of particular interest to this group as it offered other pathways than a four-year degree. In addition to recognizing the important role of community groups to support the school division in preparing students for college and the workforce, this group also spoke about the importance of parents getting involved in their child’s education in order to help them navigate toward college or a career pathway.

The parents might not realize they really need to be looking at this stuff when the kids are in middle school and planning things out, you know, and having an A plan and a B plan – if we don't pass this class or this doesn't work, or we're not happy, what are we going to switch to? I don't know how schools can encourage parents to look at it.

Looking ahead to 2021, group participants asked that the school division pay attention to some implementation issues related to the current strategic plan. They indicated that the classroom teacher was paramount to the success of any plan. Community members also indicated that 21st century skills should be embedded in the curriculum, and teachers should model the 21st century skills in addition to teaching them. Group participants also shared that parents can play a vital role in accomplishing the plan; one participant suggested that the school division help “equip” parents to support their children on their academic path.

Current Students (Bayside, Princess Anne, Renaissance Academy)

When asked if the school division was meeting the current strategic goals, students initially focused on academic proficiency. They described several programs, such as after school tutoring, summer school, expedited re-takes, IB, and AVID which promote on-time graduation. However, students felt there was not a focus on becoming effective communicators and have very few opportunities to collaborate with peers during class; students often work independently rather than in groups. Students also described a need for more collaboration amongst student groups; for example, Academy students and core students are often completely separate within a school. Students described their classes as “straight from the book,” “very rigid,” “focused on SOL tests” with little time for creativity or innovation. Students conveyed a need for classroom instruction to include these skills if the strategic plan states that all students will be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. Students agreed that the skills outlined in the strategic plan are important, and will continue to be important for students in the future, emphasizing the

importance of communication and collaboration as a means for mastering the other skills in the strategic plan.

When asked about what educational experiences are necessary to support learning, students said that Virginia Beach does a good job preparing college prep students, but opportunities are not equally available for all students. They described several examples of opportunities that are limited to “Academy” students and felt that more students should have access to opportunities, such as shadowing professionals in the community and leadership workshops. Students expressed a need for easier and more frequent access to guidance counselors for career interest assessments, career options, and more transparent access to student applications and pathways to graduation (technical centers, Academies, and programs). Students felt this access is often limited, difficult, or in some cases, non-existent which negatively impacts their learning. Students suggested that 1:1 interactions with teachers and counselors made them feel “encouraged” and “confident.” More of these interactions would assist students in developing stronger skills and build sense of connectedness to the school, particularly for those students without a strong support system at home.

Students shared that their schools emphasize college prep coursework but would like more flexibility and student choice. One student elaborated, “I want to be a chef and the classes I am taking are not helping me.” The need for more flexibility learning opportunities was emphasized throughout the conversation, often connected to relevant career options.

In the future, students felt that challenges might include developing a global perspective, citizenship responsibilities, and a rapidly changing environment. Students in 2021 will need to be adaptable and more globally aware in the future. Students suggested that educational experiences will need to be more focused on career, job related skills, experiences in the community, and infused with technology in order to prepare for students for the challenges of the future.

Current Students (Landstown, Green Run)

When asked if VBCPS is successfully preparing 21st century learners, workers, and citizens students cited several examples of programs like AVID and Technical and Career Education that support this goal. Students spoke at length about classroom instruction, its wide variability, and that classroom activities did not always align with these goals. Students shared similar “rote” classroom experiences; one student described a class in detail: “we take notes from a PowerPoint, we talk about it for 30 minutes, then do busy work, every single day.” Students look to their teachers to model communication and collaboration. Students felt the skills in the strategic plan are important, and will continue to be important, no matter what career you choose after graduation. They agreed there is a need for more opportunities to foster those skills at school. In summary, one student stated, “it is not about what’s on the list but how they execute everything on the list.”

Based on their current experiences, students felt the largest measure of success is academic only, such as GPA. Educational experiences in the future should include other definitions of success and not push all students to enter the college prep track. Students expressed a need for more flexible learning paths in order to honor their individuality and choice. Lengthy course

requirements were described as a barrier to pursuing areas of interest, in-depth studies, and career options. Students felt an earlier exposure to relevant, real life careers would be valuable for students. For example, a student that wants to go into engineering really should explore what an electrical engineer might do everyday vs. a mechanical engineer.

Students shared a belief that vocational and academic experiences should be more widely available to everyone, not just limited to specific “Academy” classes, “Vo-Tech” classes, or school sites. One student described his field experiences to the job site as “peaceful and fun, you fit in there” because I’m “learning skills...and the teacher guides you...helps you out...if you have a problem, they will help you.” Mentoring students, instead of “directing” was viewed as positive and respectful of individual differences. More consistent, one-on-one communication with counselors focused on career counseling, scheduling options, and available courses, would also be beneficial.

Participants felt a significant challenge facing students in the future is the rapidly changing technology and the subsequent impact on career fields. Students felt that in 2021, students will need current technology skills in order to be competitive for those jobs. Students also described “adaptability” as a challenge, explaining: “when a student is leaving a really structured, prescriptive school environment and entering the world or the workforce or society that is very much unstructured and open.”

Current Students (Salem, Tallwood, Kempsville)

The majority of students believed that the school division was successfully preparing students to be 21st learners, workers, and citizens. Several students cited student support programs, including freshman programs, as contributing to the school division’s success at graduating students. Many students were enrolled in “Academy” programs and spoke very positively about academies preparing students to attain their goals. There was some discourse on how the high school experience differed for non-Academy students, with one student speaking frankly about feeling socially isolated at a school where many students were enrolled in an academy while non-Academy students were not provided with the same opportunities. Leadership also arose as a skill supporting successful preparation of students; students shared that leadership opportunities had been offered to them. One student commented on how her educational experiences had taught her how to be responsible and independent, which had helped her on her first job. Another student gave an example of how interpersonal skills she had developed at school had contributed to her early success in a retail position:

I remember my first [job] and I had no training. They threw me on Black Friday and I was absolutely terrified of what happened in there. . . . You see certain characteristics or things that you notice at school, like the customers who come up to you and they really don’t have the positive attitudes like some people do at school. . . . You have to figure out how to react to them in a positive way, without coming off as giving advice but without coming off as negative at all because you always want to help them. That’s what you strive to do at school or teachers try to get you to do at school.

Students agreed that the skills the school division has currently identified for 21st learners, workers, and citizens were still important for students. There was some discussion about the

term, “academically proficient,” and in particular the relevance of coursework to students’ future career paths. A music student, for example, commented that “having to find what solution of Sodium Chloride does things to make Science isn’t really important to how [I] play my instrument.” Other students shared that achieving academic proficiency meant being “pushed to be like, “You need to get this A, you need to get it, you need to pass this class... and it just goes by so fast to the point where you’re just not really absorbing it as you should.” The students also recognized that with different learning styles and abilities in every classroom, not all students could achieve the same level of proficiency in the same manner. The students added a few additional skills to the list. Of the skills discussed, life skills, living cooperatively with others, leadership, and leading a balanced life were important additions.

In discussing the knowledge and skills required by students in 2021, students emphasized the need to be strong communicators using all methods, including technology, but also expressed a concern with younger students who seemed less comfortable communicating face to face. Tolerance and sensitivity to different personalities and learning styles in collaborative settings were also noted. Among suggestions for improving the educational experience to meet the needs of the class of 2021, students suggested the continuation and strengthening of extracurricular clubs and activities, which help students feel part of the school community.

I guess, it, for me, it makes high school bearable. Obviously no one’s super-duper in love with school so I feel like by [participating in] the clubs and stuff like that it’s [getting] involved with your school. By doing things you learn more about your school, you start to love your school.

Students identified the biggest challenges facing students in 2021 as drugs and the nature of instruction in schools. In discussing instruction, students noted their concern that teachers are focused on covering content necessary for testing and not mentally challenging students. They also pointed out that there were classes that were exceptions, led by teachers who were engaging and passionate about their subject.

Current Students (Kellam, Ocean Lakes)

The majority of students did not believe that the school division was successfully preparing students to be 21st learners, workers, and citizens. Students generally agreed that the school division was preparing them to be “21st century learners and to [be able to] adjust to technology in our lives.” They emphasized how technology had been integrated into their classwork, ranging from the integration of iPads during class to the use of online textbooks. Students also praised the variety in course selection, which allowed students “to focus on the classes that we want to take in the areas that are interesting to us.” This positive perspective on how the school division prepared students to be 21st century learners was shared by both Academy students and those students who did not participate in academies. Students generally did not agree that the school division was preparing them to be 21st century workers, specifically mentioning the recent results of the College Work Readiness Assessment and the need for more work readiness classes. They also pointed to the recent introduction of the Economics and Personal Finance course as a helpful addition to the curriculum, which will “prepare [students] for something that [they] have to face in the future.”

While students agreed that the skills the school division has currently identified for 21st learners, workers, and citizens would still be important for students in the future, they added a few additional skills to the list. Of the skills discussed, cooperation with others and tolerance had the strongest support within the group. When discussing the appropriateness of the current goal, students generally associated the term “21st century” with technology, and several students voiced a concern with maintaining a strong focus on technology.

Students are becoming more dependent on technology than they should be. So, even though it's good that we're adapting to the rise of technology and viewing change in the twenty-first century through that technological lens, I think it's important to create a sense of independence from technology and not just, not just totally rely on it.

In discussing the knowledge and skills required by students in 2021, students emphasized many themes raised in the earlier discussion. From their perspective, students in 2021 will need to have a global perspective and to practice tolerance. They will need to apply their learning in real-life contexts, demonstrate initiative, and be adaptable to changing environments. Students will need to be prepared to address real-life situations in the adult world, such as making decisions about health insurance. Students had many suggestions for improving educational experiences to support the development of these skills, including improving the relevance of learning through stronger connections to the real world and providing students with more opportunities to pursue their interests through course selection, use of technology, and deeper engagement with subjects of interest in class. Increasing the “fun” of school was a popular theme. One student described how one teacher encouraged his class to take a “brain break” in the middle of class to play games, stretch, and relax. As a result, the student concluded, students were more engaged in and enjoyed his class.

Students identified the biggest challenges facing students in 2021 as interpersonal communication and cultural understanding in a global economy. Interpersonal communication, particularly face-to-face communication, was singled out as an area of concern. One student commented:

You can see it in the kids today already that there is just such a lack of like face to face communication. . . . You'll hear kids say, 'I know what I'm saying, but I don't know how to say it.' Well, you know why? You spend half the time just typing out. No wonder you can't form the words. You don't talk as much as you used to talk. . . . It's not that you don't know how to say it. It's just that you don't practice speech enough.

Among students' suggestions for addressing these challenges, they emphasized the need for more cultural experiences in instruction, including interactions with exchange students, study abroad programs, and cultural sensitivity/tolerance training for teachers. Students also stressed the need for teachers and students to improve their communication and for teachers to be more flexible in accommodating individual students' needs.

Current Students (Cox, First Colonial)

When asked if VBCPS is successfully preparing 21st century learners, workers, and citizens, students unanimously said “yes.” Students described a wide variety of opportunities in

coursework, programs, community connections, and support from teachers and counselors as positive factors that enable students to be successful. One student specifically described, the Technical and Career Education center, which assists students in obtaining job skills and/or licensure while in still high school. Personal connections with guidance counselors, assistant principals, and teachers were identified as important while students are choosing courses and potential career paths. Students generally described their teachers as “supportive” and tied to the community, even assisting students in gaining employment.

When asked if the skills in the strategic plan would still be important in the future, there was a universal “absolutely!” Students felt strongly the focus of VBCPS strategic plan should continue because “You are always going to need those skills, for anything” and had no suggestions for skills to add to the strategic plan.

To improve educational experiences for students, one suggestion was to lessen the emphasis on the SOLs. “Teachers are always speeding through things” because of the pacing required for the SOLs, which was described as “not helpful.” Students felt one weakness of their current educational experience was “there is not much room for creative thinking” because of “being stuck on such a timetable” and the push to “stay on schedule.” Students described the return of creativity and critical thinking once you enter AP courses, which helps with “actually learning the material.” More flexibility in the schedule and smaller class sizes would allow for more individualized learning. Current graduation requirements were described as “hindering” students’ ability to enroll in courses that are better matched with their skillset and potential career path.

In the future, students described increasing competition is one challenge that students will continue to face. The group shared that students will need more specific career skills, not just general academics to be competitive in the future. The need for students to have a better understanding of economic and financial management in the future was also discussed. To assist students in meeting these future challenges, earlier exposure to career options and better communication to build awareness of learning opportunities were suggested. The group also discussed wider access to programs and opportunities, such as leadership workshops, that would also ensure more students are prepared to meet the challenges of the future. Experiences outside the classroom were also deemed important; field trips and community ventures connected to career choices would assist students in making the classroom learning more relevant to career choices.

Current GED Students (Adult Learning Center)

The GED students gathered for this focus group discussion had dropped out of high schools in Virginia Beach but also in neighboring cities. For those that had spent time in Virginia Beach high schools, they shared the opinion that the school division had failed them. While the students acknowledged that personal issues, including drug use, violence, peer pressure, and disabilities, had played a role in their failure to finish high school, they also criticized the high school staff for not caring enough to work with them on a one-on-one basis or provide them with good guidance. What would have made a difference, most students articulated, was a school staff member who had cared about them. Smaller class sizes were recommended by one student. After reading the skills listed in the current school division strategic plan, one student

commented that the reason he returned for his GED was to obtain a job—"employability" was the skill he sought.

The students spoke about the differences and similarities in instruction between their high schools and the Adult Learning Center. For most students, their experiences with instructors had been positive. Instructors took time to work with students one-on-one to ensure that they understood the content needed for testing. The computer-assisted learning programs also provided good support, although some students had challenges with Internet and technology access necessary to use these programs off premises. The students did express strong concerns about two aspects of their GED coursework: the nature of the tests and the class attendance policies. Several students noted that the tests were very challenging, with one student describing a test that involved reading a passage and responding to 25 questions in 25 minutes.

With me . . . and a lot of other students, when I do read passages, I want time to be able to comprehend what I'm reading in order for me to be able to answer the questions. If you're going to rush me through the passage, then I will have a hard time understanding. You're only giving me 1 minute to answer so I may just pick the wrong answer because I have not had enough time to read.

The Adult Learning Center also has a strict attendance policy that several students discussed during the discussion. According to the students, they are not allowed to be away from school for three consecutive days. On the third day absent, they must "restart everything all over again." It was challenging for many students to honor this policy because of family and work commitments.

Two of the GED students were also parents of young children currently enrolled in Virginia Beach schools. They spoke of some of the challenges they felt would affect their children across their school careers. These parents expressed concerns with bullying, weak teaching that was focused on testing, school staff that didn't demonstrate sufficient caring for their children, and systemic policies, such as zero tolerance policies, that discouraged addressing individual children's needs. There was concern expressed about the continued lack of cultural sensitivity demonstrated by teachers, with one student noting that "some teachers do stereotype... they look at your color or your age or whatever and [think] 'Oh, he [is] black so he [is] not going to do [any] work.'" One GED student, who was the mother of five children, also expressed concern about the strong focus on testing that seemed to diminish the quality of teaching and the importance of other class activities:

Like you pass, you did good throughout school and just one little SOL test...Like what is grading papers, what is all [their] projects throughout the year? What [do they] mean? What is [their] homework, them staying up late nights trying to finish a paper? What [does] all that mean? Nothing pretty much. It's like you're just pretty much doing all that so you can fail throughout the whole year and just pass the SOL and you're good.

Elementary Teachers

When discussing the current goals of the strategic plan, elementary teachers felt there is an “unbalanced emphasis” amongst the skills on the list describing an “over-emphasis” on academic proficiency, which is detrimental to the other 21st century skills. Teachers felt the large number of instructional objectives required each quarter severely limits their ability to plan and implement instruction that includes significant opportunities for students to collaborate, create, and be innovative. Teachers felt their focus was continually on “covering” the objectives to maintain required “pacing” which, in turn, negatively impacts students reaching “mastery” of foundational literacy and mathematical skills. Teachers suggested the pacing requirements do not allow for enough processing time or reflection, for students or teachers, which is a barrier to developing mastery. One teacher summarized:

The demands of the pacing, especially in elementary school, are the things that are restricting the opportunities for creativity and problem solving.... there seems to little time to let students explore and do the things they need to do to reach those goals because they are not having an opportunity because we are always moving. We are always rushing through. We are always looking at the end goals.

Teachers felt students were making gains in critical thinking, citing the shift in SOL testing expectations as the catalyst for this change. There was overwhelming agreement that the development of communication and interpersonal skills is a significant weakness for students. In the future, students will need “fluency with the types of communication technologies” but we “don’t put the technology in the kid’s hands much.” Teachers consistently referred to time, specifically the constraints of the pacing guide and number of instructional objectives, as the largest barrier to their ability to support students in their development of 21st century skills. They felt the skills are important for all students now and will still be important in the future, with a special emphasis on communication skills particularly in a global community. One teacher described the pressure she feels:

We have so many standards to cover. It's just insane, and thinking “How can I take the time to make them global thinkers and give them this time to be creative when I have 130 standards I have to get in, in third quarter?” I don't have time for them to be creative. I have a science concept for them to learn. It's horrible. I'm picking and choosing what science activities I'm going to do for sound.... They don't get to be creative. I have to tell [students] this is how sound is made, instead of them learning...figuring it out.

Based on the conversation throughout the session, teachers feel the school division’s goal is worthwhile, but in order to support students in the development of 21st century skills, teachers would like more guidance. “We need some indicators or definition of what we think these things are...and support for teachers in order to be able to develop those skills in their students.” The desire for real and relevant examples of “what that looks like” in various grade levels was a clearly articulated need as teachers try to facilitate the development of 21st century skills in their students. Resources, such as professional development, division-wide access to math programs, instructional coaches, and a “user-friendly” website for sharing resources were all suggested as a means for supporting teachers so they can support students.

We are expected to make them critical, and creative thinkers, but yet I don't think a lot of teachers know where to go with that and we are not often given the guidance to help guide our children.

In terms of preparing students for college or the workplace, teachers emphasized a proficiency in basic skills would ensure students “will be successful in middle school which will lead to high school which will lead to college.” Teachers suggested additional experiences for students that include community partners who can assist students connecting math, literacy, and communication skills to career options.

When sharing what VBCPS should do in the future, teachers suggested additional time for collaboration and professional development, easier more consistent access to tools and resources, flexibility in the use of instructional strategies that they find effective for students, and limiting the number of initiatives and/or changes that are implemented. In closing, teachers expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to provide feedback. They stressed their intention was not to be negative, rather to engage in a dialogue to improve the educational experiences for their students.

General Employees

This group of general employees generally agreed that the school division had been successfully preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. There was several staff present from elementary schools, who discussed how skills such as critical thinking and responsibility had been infused into instruction. Responsibility was particularly important to inculcate in young learners, and this topic was discussed in greater depth. “Being a responsible learner academically is,” according to one staff member, “when you give a child a homework assignment to do, read pages nine through ten, and then it’s up to them to read the pages.” As school staff, “we have to teach them how to do that.” The group also raised interesting examples of cultivating other 21st century skills, including global awareness through participation in a World Math Day event in which Virginia Beach students competed with students from across the globe.

General employees also identified other skills that they felt were desirable for students to have. Some skills were functional, such as keyboarding and handwriting. Other skills, including life skills, were of higher priority.

I'm all for the math, science, we all need that, I understand that, and I know that we probably can't add another thing but going back to these life skills that we talked about, some type of class to just be able to do the minimum when you get out in the world. We talked about the communication thing, even down to . . . banking, checking account things.

Staff felt that the school division was doing a good job preparing students for college. Staff spoke about dual enrollment and other college credit options and the specialization provided by the academies. There was concern expressed, however, about the other students: “I don’t want

to feel like we're focusing too much on the kids who are better students, or who are a little brighter, or who can get to college easier, but it seems like there's a lot of courses for them . . . but we can't lose these other kids in the process." In terms of improving what the school division is currently doing, employees suggested providing a greater emphasis on differentiated instruction, providing needed resources for classroom instruction, not "restrained" or "required" to use particular instructional methods with all students, and striving for greater consistency in approaches across schools.

Looking forward to 2021, employees emphasized that students should be independent, responsible individuals as they left the school division. They anticipated among the challenges in 2021 would be parent involvement, interpersonal relations and communications among students, and self-regulation. The concern with interpersonal relationships was strongly expressed and based on current issues observed by several employees.

I think that they're going to face a lot of challenges in just being able to get along with each other, almost conflict resolution. Younger and younger kids are battling it out with fists. They do not know how to interact with each other at all. 'If you're not getting exactly what you want, I'm going to take it from you.' That's their whole mentality so they don't know how to ... they just don't know how to grow with each other and be in a room and know I'm not the most important person here.

High School Teachers

When asked if VBCPS was preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens, the high school teachers' initial responses were "no." High school teachers suggested that too many students have not mastered foundational skills; therefore, lack the background knowledge to be critical thinkers, innovators, and problem solvers. Throughout the conversation, teachers repeatedly described students with a lack of proficiency on "the basics" of "reading, writing, and communicating" and described students entering high school each year with decreasing levels of proficiency. Teachers believed that the skills on the current strategic plan are important, but "don't mean anything without foundational academic skills." One teacher summarized:

"The nice thing about academically proficient, it's an umbrella... I think what we don't see is how those words match with our policies."

One such policy discussed at length was "no zero" grading, which was cited as a significant contributor to the loss of academic rigor, lowered expectations, and lack of student accountability, persistence, and motivation. "All of the responsibility or the accountability is on us [teachers]." Several teachers shared specific examples of former students, and in some cases their own children, have shared that "VBCPS coddled them" and they are "not academically prepared for the rigors of college" and cited the lack of midterm and final exams as a possible contributing factor.

Teachers felt the skills on the strategic plan are “being introduced” through classroom instruction, but not mastered. When discussing the concept of mastery, teachers felt that when a student is able to translate that skill set “from an academic setting into the real world setting or job” that would indicate mastery; as teachers, they do not know definitively if students are able to do this after graduation. The teachers emphasized that the strategic plan should more clearly define the skills and include indicators for how the skills will be measured in order for the teachers to purposefully integrate the skills into classroom instruction.

While discussing VBCPS preparing students for paths after graduation, teachers shared that high achieving students come to high school already on the college prep path and continue on that path. When describing education experiences that support students preparing for college, one teacher shared: “I don’t think I had a big part in that...they came pretty insightful, pretty much self-reliant, and knew the learning happens within themselves...and I’m the facilitator.” While on the hand, teachers described many students who lag behind the top achievers and require so much remediation that courses are longer rigorous and the curriculum feels “watered down.” For example, 11th grade students reading on a 6th grade level are simply not prepared to meet the 11th grade English curriculum standards. An emphasis on college readiness for *all* students overshadows any emphasis on mastery of foundational skills, career readiness, or encouragement to explore alternative avenues beyond graduation.

In closing, teachers suggested that in the future, VBCPS should focus on fundamental skills in “reading, writing, and arithmetic and push our students to be more responsible” and “start motivating them to take ownership of their education.” Additional suggestions included: more teacher professional development with an emphasis on relevant, real world connections that teachers can incorporate into their curriculum; holding students, teachers, parents, and administrators all accountable for their share of the educational process; and continue offering vocational opportunities for students.

Middle School Teachers

In discussing the current strategic goal and learning outcomes, middle school teachers focused their initial discussion on critical thinking and responsible learners. The issue of “no-zero grading” was raised during the discussion regarding its impact on creating responsible learners. This discussion was prompted in part by a recent School Board discussion sparked by a parent angry about a zero her child received and a subsequent newspaper article that was published on the matter. Teachers explained that this was not a formal policy, but many were “strongly encouraged” by school administrators to not give students zero grades. What concerned teachers was the influence of this policy on the learning outcome of responsible learners. One teacher explained that “if we are giving the kids 50% for doing absolutely nothing, they are not being responsible learners.” Furthermore, it is harmful toward cultivating responsibility over time since students understand that “I don’t have to do anything and I’m still going to get a 50.” Overall, teachers indicated that the most progress on learning outcomes had been made on critical thinking and explained the use of the IPT assessment to measure students’ ability to exercise this skill.

In discussing the goal statement, teachers recommended deleting the phrase, “21st century.” For one teacher, the term was too vague and inaccurate. In his words, “somehow there seems

to be a concept that a 21st Century learner is different from a 20th Century learner, is different from a 19th Century learner. Critical thinking hasn't changed just because we have computers." Instead, they advocated for an adjective such as "successful."

Teachers throughout this discussion voiced a concern about inadequate student preparation in reading, writing, and mathematics. They questioned the financial investment in academies, for example, when students were entering middle school without grade-level proficiency in math and language arts. Large classroom sizes, especially for inclusion classrooms, were a significant concern for the group. They spoke about teaching basic reading skills to eighth-graders who were reading on a third or fourth grade level. It was critical, participants stated, to address these fundamentals before working on other learning outcomes, such as critical thinking. One teacher shared his perspective on this issue:

I'd like to say that I think we're losing sight of what we are. We are a public school. We are not a college. The function of college has been to allow students that are grounded in the basics of proceeding through life to then go out and start to find out who they want to be and what they want to do. We're putting all of this funding, and time, and energy, and resource into Academy programs, and this, and this, and that; and they don't know how to read. They don't know how to write.

While discussing the questions about preparing students for college and the workforce, teachers said that the school division was "doing an amazing job" with students enrolled in rigorous, college-preparation courses, noting in particular the high school Academy programs. Several teachers articulated a concern for the visibility of pathways that did not necessarily include a four-year college degree. One teacher explained, "Not everyone is going to be college-driven, and there is a need for students to know that there's a different life besides college." Technical schools were specifically mentioned.

During their final sharing session, teachers reflected on the earlier discussion and offered some strategies for improvement. Ideas were shared about modifying the current middle school schedule to allocate additional time for math and English-language arts. Another suggestion was to make an effort to consolidate approaches in subject matter teaching approaches across schools, particularly in math, since teachers shared that they often worked with students who had learned the subject in many different ways in Virginia Beach schools. A suggestion was made to reconsider the advanced math programs in middle schools for which students were not developmentally prepared to study. The topic of VBOs was raised, with one teacher questioning:

Why does Virginia Beach write their own curriculum when there's a state curriculum that we're accountable for? Our social studies, SOLs ... there's the state SOLs and then there's Virginia Beach objectives. The Virginia Beach objectives are 25 more percent to teach than state, and the only thing we're accountable to is the state SOLs.

Teachers also articulated concern about overall teacher morale due to the issues raised during the discussion and also a sense of resignation that their contributions would not make a difference.

Parents

In discussing whether the school division was successfully preparing students to be 21st century learners, workers, and citizens, there was general consensus among parents that average to gifted students were thriving but low-achieving students, including students in special education and alternative programs, were not. Parents expressed concern for students who did not have basic access to the curriculum or who were struggling to keep up in class. In discussing the goal statement, parents debated the use of the term, “master,” tending to favor a perspective that all children should strive to reach their potential. Participants identified several skills or attributes as learning outcomes, including curiosity, technological skills, and mutual accountability. One participant described a collaborative learning project at a Virginia Beach middle school that for him exemplified this idea of mutual accountability:

. . . The group was challenged to complete the activity, and one of the kid's body language said 'I really don't want to be here.' And another student was just all over, 'Hey, man. Let's go. Let's go.' He was trying his hardest to get his energy into that kid. And the other kid was just like, 'Whatever, man.' I watched them. As the block went on, he started to get a little bit more engaged because that kid did not give up. . . And slowly but surely you see his body language change. . . He saw his contribution contribute to the instruction and after he finished, his counterpart didn't give him a high five but he looked at him with that, you know, that sense of fulfillment on his eyes or whatever. It just lit him up. From there on out, he was engaged.

Parents discussed the school division's success in preparing students for college and the workforce, particularly noting the strength of the academies program. They discussed the importance of differentiating support for students—finding the spark in individual students, which might be college preparation but might also be a vocational-technical program. There were particular concerns raised about the limited enrollment in the Technical and Career Education program and stories shared about the challenges of students getting accepted into that program.

Parents envisioned that students in 2021 would be very adept in using technology for communications and collaboration. Challenges participants anticipated for students in 2021 included equity in access to technology, challenges in interpersonal, especially face-to-face, communication, a need for self-regulation in a world that increasingly encouraged multi-tasking using multiple technological platforms, and an increased need for global awareness and greater facility with world languages. Parents also expected the higher education experience to significantly change as more colleges and universities introduced online learning programs, including Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). One parent believed that “students are going to be having opportunities to go maybe not . . . just to a university but to go here, there, everywhere, and put together classes.” This would require students to “be savvy enough to find what they want and what they need.”

The parents perceived that the school division would need to address the technological equity issue by ensuring access to devices for all students. Support for expanding world languages into the elementary level was specifically recommended by one parent, who shared that “every other first world country [is] teaching their students English from a very young age so that they can speak the language of the world, and we are doing none of that.” Parents also expressed concerns for students enrolled in special education and alternative education programs that are still struggling to access the basic curriculum and often lacked vocational opportunities.

Principals

Principals generally felt that the school division was making progress toward preparing students to be 21st Century learners, workers and citizens. However, compared to other school districts across the country, particularly in the areas of problem-based learning or technology, Virginia Beach City Schools “paled by comparison.” Several principals emphasized that progress was being made in reconfiguring instruction to focus on 21st century skills, but this progress was evident only in “pockets” in individual schools and across the division. For example, one principal commented that 21st century instruction could be found in advanced or gifted cluster classrooms and increasingly in math and science classes. Schools that struggled with accreditation were less likely to risk experimentation with innovative instructional strategies, while schools with strong SOL scores were more likely to adopt innovative strategies.

While the skills listed in the current strategic plan were viewed as valuable, principals expressed a concern about adding life skills to the school division’s focus. One principal explained that the community often has high expectations as to what the school division should provide. Another principal cautioned that “we have to be careful with how many things we take on” since “demands [such as] D.A.R.E. eat in significantly to our academic time.” These competing activities took up valuable instructional time, leading one principal to comment that “I think that’s what causes us not to be able to get so deep into the curriculum . . . there’s not enough time in the day to get as deep as you want, to really explore some of these things that the kids are really interested in.”

Principals felt that the school division had mixed results in preparing students for college. The academies were touted as excellent preparatory programs for higher education. One principal reported that their school had received “anecdotal data from our Academy graduates, or from the survey that they complete after they’ve left us, [that] college is so much easier than anything I experienced at [the Virginia Beach high] school.” These student comments attest to the high degree of rigor in the division’s Academy and advanced coursework. On the other hand, the same principal noted, “your Joe Schmoe, regular student, I’m not so sure.” For those non-Academy students, “data about postsecondary enrollment, whether they enrolled in a two-year or four-year [institution], then if they stayed . . . was surprisingly low.” One administrator suggested that perhaps not all students should be focused on attending college.

I’m not sure college is right for every single kid. . . You know, I think that there’s great honor in a military career, there’s great honor in TCC, going into the work place. There’s a place in this country for all kinds of people with all kinds of skills, in all kinds of affinities. I hate to be totally locked into the college mindset.

Thinking about what students will need in 2021, principals raised many themes, including proficiency in using technology, physical health, interpersonal communications, and a tendency toward instant gratification. Many administrators felt that there needed to be a stronger emphasis on literacy at the elementary level. “The data [are] saying we have to get them at grade level,” yet, according to one principal, “we don’t provide the structure within those elementary schools to put them in intensive reading all the time.” The problem, according to one principal, was a lack of resources, including staffing. Recommendations to improve literacy included universal pre-Kindergarten, the use of intensive summer school programs that are not reading at grade level and reallocation of instructional time from other subjects, including 3rd grade social studies and science. Middle school math was also identified as an area to improve. One principal expressed his view that “time [would] be better spent giving these kids a really strong, rigorous grade A, general math curriculum, rather than push them ahead into Algebra.”

The principals also made additional recommendations on improving conditions to support student achievement. Large class sizes was seen by some principals as a factor affecting student achievement and teacher morale. Principals also stated an interest in being able to retain their most effective teachers, expressing their frustration with priority transfers and other division policies that give preference to teachers with the most seniority.