

**Celebrating
America's
most improved
public school
districts.**

The 2013 Broad Prize

About the Finalist

Cumberland County Schools *North Carolina*

DISTRICT PROFILE

Superintendent

Dr. Frank Till became superintendent in June 2009, after leading the Boys & Girls Clubs in Broward County, Fla., from 2007 through 2009, and serving as superintendent of the Broward County Public Schools from 1999 to 2006. He assumed leadership from the interim superintendent, Tim Kinlaw, who stepped in when the former superintendent, Dr. William Harrison, resigned to become chairman and chief executive officer of the North Carolina State Board of Education in February 2009.

Governance

Nine-member school board, six of whom represent regions and three elected at large

Teachers' Association

North Carolina Association of Educators, Cumberland County Schools

\$430 million

Annual Budget

\$8,333

Per Pupil Expenditures

79

Rank among U.S. School Districts

52,778

Number of Students

3,470

Number of Teachers

87

Number of Schools

2%

Students Designated as English Language Learners

59%

Students Eligible for Free and Reduced-Price School Lunch

Student Demographics

2%

Asian/Filipino/Pacific Islander

12%

Hispanic

45%

African-American

33%

White

8%

Other

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Cumberland County's graduation rate increased twice as fast as other urban districts around the country.

Cumberland County's graduation rate, as shown by the average of three nationally recognized graduation rate estimation methods, increased an average of about 4 percentage points annually between 2007 and 2009, compared to an average 2 percentage point annual increase for the 75 Broad Prize-eligible districts between 2006 and 2009.

Cumberland County narrowed African-American and low-income achievement gaps.

In recent years, Cumberland County narrowed achievement gaps between its African-American and white students, and between its African-American students and the state's white students in elementary,

middle and high school reading, math and science. Cumberland County also narrowed gaps between its low-income students and the state's non-low-income students in elementary, middle and high school math and science.

A greater percentage of African-American students are reaching advanced academic levels in Cumberland County than in other districts in North Carolina.

In 2012, the percentage of Cumberland County's African-American students performing at the highest achievement level (advanced) in high school reading, math and science, in middle school reading and science, and in elementary school reading and math ranked in the top 30 percent statewide compared to other African-American students in North Carolina.

EXEMPLARY PRACTICES RELATED TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

The district ensures organizational coherence, and the Cumberland County Schools (CCS) have transitioned from a system of schools to a school system.

In 2009, district leaders reviewed all board policies—many dating to 1985—and dropped or changed those that did not support a move toward creating a coherent school system rather than simply a system of schools.

Cumberland County educators believe that creating great classrooms requires collaboration and sharing of best practices. Although teachers have some choices in designing what they believe is best for their students, district educators believe students are better served by a common curriculum, assessment system and similar sequencing of instruction. This is particularly important with the presence of nearby Ft. Bragg—students from military families represent 30 percent of the student body—which leads to high student mobility in the district.

Toward creating coherence and collaboration, CCS introduced “True North,” a mantra that reminds all staff they have a responsibility to help every child grow academically every year. The emphasis on growth has replaced the focus on proficiency, prompting a different way of thinking in CCS. Educators are asked to work collaboratively to reach district goals and be transparent about their strengths and challenges so colleagues can help one another. Till also made school and teacher performance data transparent district-wide to spur both collaboration and “friendly competition.”

One way this is evident is at a district-wide celebration at the beginning of the school year that brings together all 6,600 CCS employees to cheer the successes of the district’s 87 schools at Fayetteville’s Crown Center Coliseum. The celebration doubles as a district-wide professional development session, which is viewed as very powerful and positive by staff. The event helps the district to “reset” its focus to True North.

Both horizontal and vertical coherence is promoted through cabinet meetings, principal meetings and the Instructional Council, a representative group of principals selected by peers to alert leadership to issues, provide input on leadership agendas, and give feedback on system-wide initiatives. Decisions made by Instructional Council ensure teachers have all the tools needed to deliver aligned and effective instruction. Every school is placed in a vertical team, which meets

monthly to bring issues and ideas forward, establish professional development, ensure that policies are not hindering progress and discuss procedures. Leadership meetings are held two times each month. One meeting is dedicated to instructional topics, while the second one focuses on managerial topics. During the leadership meetings, grade-level meetings focus on issues that require discussion at one level of the organization, such as high school graduation requirements or elementary reading programs.

As a result of this structure, CCS has resolved issues with the middle school schedule, K-2 assessment decisions and the implementation of Common Core State Standards. Other supports and forums that promote coherence include Principals’ Council, Technology Advisory Team, Federal Programs Advisory Team and various committees and task-force teams that are formed as needed to study time-sensitive innovations and decisions.

The Principals’ Council, made up of peer-selected principals from each vertical team, meets monthly to discuss concerns that impact system-wide effectiveness and morale.

The district has a cohesive, comprehensive and user-friendly system for assessing and reporting student performance and ensures that all administrators and teachers develop appropriate skills and tools for analyzing data to improve instruction.

CCS’ comprehensive and coherent assessment system requires regular administration and analysis of state assessments, district-wide benchmark assessments and formative assessments. State assessments are administered according to requirements, and all 11th-grade students also take the ACT. In 2011-2012, based on a recommendation from teachers and administrators, the number of yearly district-wide assessments was increased from three to five for elementary schools and middle schools. Students are given a pre-test, and then a test following each nine-week grading period. High school students are assessed three times during the semester.

The district also has added growth-measure calculations to the proficiency ratings. Kindergarten through second-grade students are given the Reading 3D assessment to determine growth. In 2008-09, teachers created a paper and pencil database of test questions that later became an

online tool. These questions are used for formative assessments, as is ClassScape, a statewide question bank for interim assessments for grades kindergarten through eight, and End of Course, the state tool for grades nine through 12. Teachers also use multiple types of progress monitoring tools. Most teachers use audience polling clickers to instantly gauge how many students understand a concept and whether to re-teach the lesson.

Meanwhile, the district used most of its \$8 million Race-to-the-Top funds to modernize teaching and learning by providing wireless technology, SMART Boards, laptops, SMART response systems and other equipment to all schools. That helped to boost student, teacher and administrator acumen on the use of technology and data.

The district provides all teachers and instructional staff with a variety of ongoing, differentiated professional development to help them achieve district and school goals.

Professional development is differentiated at the school and individual levels. To give new teachers and principals a strong start, the district offers up to three days of county-wide professional development each year, typically devoted to instructional methods, use of data for decision-making and/or instructional leadership. Schools provide monthly professional development based on the needs of their teachers and staff. Educators also participate in classroom-based or online professional development opportunities, which include nearly 300 content and pedagogy courses. Prior to 2011, the district’s professional development offerings were focused heavily on pedagogy—including differentiation, rigor, student engagement and emotionally positive classrooms—and in 2011, the focus shifted to Common Core State Standards. All teachers are required to complete a formal yearly professional development plan, aligned with North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards. Each school’s school improvement team develops and delivers training based on an annual needs assessment, which includes analysis of student achievement data, school climate data and input from coaches or area superintendents. CCS also provides coaching and mentoring for beginning teachers that can extend up to three years. The district hired retired educators to work with struggling staff members and new teachers. For example, the Beginning Teacher Support Program includes Intensive Care through the Assistance of Retired Educators (iCARE), which assigns each new teacher an iCARE coach, who meets with them weekly for a year.

New teachers are also mentored by colleagues at their school. In addition to being paired with retired educators, new teachers receive coaches from the same school, often the same department or grade level, with guidance on instruction, classroom management and disciplinary problems. Some beginning teachers also observe same-subject or grade-level teachers at other schools. Peer Assistant Learning Specialists (PALS) are also available to help any teacher who is struggling. Administrators typically assign PALS to struggling teachers, who then receive 40 hours of intensive support over four to six weeks. Beginning principals are also assigned mentors for two years, and principals working in turnaround schools receive coaching on a weekly basis by school support directors.

The district has cultivated an effective balance between cooperation and competition among schools and personnel that serves to improve district, school and classroom performance.

District schools engage in friendly competition to see which school will have the best growth. When a school is recognized, principals from other schools visit, replicate practices and innovate to try to do even better than the recognized school. As the district moved to focus more on student academic growth, CCS released school-related performance data. As a result, teachers could see the past, present and predicted performance of their students, while principals could see the performance of their teachers. Meanwhile, everyone could see overall performance of individual schools.

The district has improved student performance by focusing on individual student academic growth.

The district’s vision for instructional effectiveness is driven through its “True North” philosophy. The vision stresses student academic growth rather than proficiency so that all students are expected to accelerate their progress. Expectations and instruction are aligned with the philosophy. When district officials looked deeply at the data, they realized—based on North Carolina’s ABC Accountability model for schools—that some students who had an increase in proficiency did not reach their expected growth. Students who just maintained their developmental scale score each year could not reach growth. As a result, CCS officials shifted the emphasis to student academic growth.

The district focused on each student’s expected improvement, and teachers and principals were provided with student performance data, a wealth of professional

development support and forums in which to cheer on those schools that were successful. The district included staff in decision making. For example, all schools have school improvement teams that meet monthly to make decisions about school-level improvement strategies, track progress and assess needs. These school improvement teams include one teacher from every

grade level or department, administrators, one parent and one student.

The move from specific achievement targets to growth has given principals and teachers new energy, infusing them with a sense of purpose and accomplishment that they could help each student improve, even if they did not immediately achieve mastery of a subject.