



## SUPERINTENDENT'S END-OF-MONTH NOTES

September 2011

OUR MISSION is to provide educational excellence for all students.

### IN THIS EDITION:

- **Congrats! (Note #1)**
  - Mulligan Session on Professional Learning Communities—PLCs (Notes #2,3,4,5)
    - Schmoker Session on “First Things First” (Notes #6,7,8)
    - A Conversation with Harvard’s Tony Wagner (Note #9)
    - Projected Fiscal Picture Through 2013-14 (Note #10)
    - NCSS Authors (Note #11)
  - Georgia’s Early Learning Challenge Grant—Race To The Top (Note #12)
    - Answers to Note #6 (Note #13)
    - “A Call to Action” (Note #14)
1. **Congratulations** to our Newton County finalists for Teacher-of-the-Year! These outstanding professionals are: Karen Greene (East Newton Elementary), Rothell Lewis (Live Oak Elementary), and Aaron Robinson (Newton High). You make all of us very proud to be your colleagues!
  2. On September 8<sup>th</sup>, instructional strategist Dan Mulligan met with teams of teachers and administrators to further understanding and implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in each of our schools. *“To ensure high-functioning PLCs in each school with a definite time and place to meet and an agenda of work centered around instruction and its outcomes for students”* constitutes the primary building-level strategy of the school system-as-a-whole. Says Jim Collins in *Good to Great*, “It turns out that ‘simple plans’ work best—those with a direct focus on straightforward actions and opportunities.”
  3. Our **“straightforward actions and opportunities”** are certainly found in our school-based PLCs continuously focusing on answering key questions such as these below:
    - What do we want students to know, do, and understand?  
Connection: Georgia Performance Standards/Curriculum Maps/Lesson Plans
    - How do we best engage students in the learning?  
Connection: Research-Based Instructional Strategies, Building Background Knowledge, Technology Integration
    - How do we know if students know, do, and understand what we want?  
Connection: Common Assessments—Formative (could be a quick “Fast Five”) & District Benchmark Assessments [Assessments are meaningless unless results are discussed with students.]
    - What do we do when students don’t know, do, and understand what we want?  
Connection: Response to Intervention Steps / Instructional Focus Period in High Schools, etc.



## SUPERINTENDENT'S END-OF-MONTH NOTES

Sept. 2011 - p. 2 of 7

OUR MISSION is to provide educational excellence for all students.

4. Researcher Robert Marzano maintains that a “**guaranteed and viable curriculum**” is the main characteristic of an effective school [or school system, *my emphasis*]. Says Mike Schmoker, in *Results Now*, “You can’t ‘guarantee’ what you don’t monitor.” From this perspective, there can be little doubt that one of the main duties of an effective Professional Learning Community is to monitor what’s being taught, how it’s being taught, whether or not students are learning, and what to do about those who aren’t. (You can certainly add to the PLC agenda what to do for students who are on track and are mastering the intended curriculum. These kids deserve enrichment or acceleration opportunities or else they tune out and turn off. Some even drop out or leave the public sector.)
5. Per Dr. Mulligan’s PLC session with us, he offered the following key considerations related to PLC Norms and PLC Tools:
  - **PLC Norms:** In PLCs, “norms” represent protocols and commitments developed by each team to guide members in working together. Norms help team members clarify expectations regarding how they will work together to achieve their shared goals. Examples of Team Norms:
    - ~ We will maintain a positive tone at our meetings.
    - ~ We will not complain about a problem unless we can offer a solution.
    - ~ We will begin and end our meetings on time and stay fully engaged throughout each meeting.
    - ~ We will contribute equally to the workload of this team.
    - ~ We will listen respectfully and consider matters from another’s perspective.

Short of working norms in a PLC, Dr. Mulligan suggests that what emerges is “**co-laboration**” [not collaboration] which is exemplified by:

- ~ a chaotic pattern of conversation that does not advance much
  - ~ huge time wasted on minor issues
  - ~ groupthink (i.e., when people agree too easily and thoughtlessly on something).
- **PLC Tools:** Teachers can benefit from a PLC Notebook to help them remain focused on the critical questions of learning [see Note #2 herein]:
    - ~ Copies of grade-level standards (Georgia Performance Standards, ACT/SAT objectives/targeted content
    - ~ Curriculum maps
    - ~ Current data from Georgia, USA, Newton County as applicable, running



## SUPERINTENDENT'S END-OF-MONTH NOTES

Sept. 2011 - p. 3 of 7

OUR MISSION is to provide educational excellence for all students.

- records, and common assessments
  - ~ Effective teaching strategies [e.g. RBIS, BBK, TI] as gleaned from professional Development, book studies, research, and team discussions
  - ~ Common formative assessments [e.g., “Fast Five”]
  - ~ Results from district benchmark assessments
  - ~ Grade level/department **SMART** goals [Strategic, Measurable, Attainable, Results-Oriented, Time bound]
  - ~ Effective lesson plans from staff members
  - ~ Team norms
6. On September 7<sup>th</sup>, high school English teacher-coach-administrator and author Mike Schmoker made a presentation at Griffin RESA entitled “Focus: First Things First for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” Among the “first things,” asked Schmoker, was “Which three of the following are the most important when it comes to test scores and college and career readiness:
- Laptops for all/Smartboards in every classroom?
  - Common, content-rich curriculum?
  - All commercial Math/literacy “programs”?
  - Differentiated instruction?
  - Smaller classes?
  - Cold calling (and other “checks for understanding”)?
  - Various small/school-within-a-school academies?
  - 90-120 minutes—purposeful reading/writing a day?
  - “Turnaround” strategies (new faculty; school design, etc.)?
  - Cognitive/concept mapping; graphic representations?
- Note:** The top three identified by Dr. Schmoker can be found in Note #13 herein. (If you’ve read one or both of his books over the past year—*Results Now* and/or *Focus*, the answer to his question is an easy one ...)
7. Other “First Things” according to Dr. Schmoker:
- **Guaranteed & Viable Curriculum** [can be “guaranteed” through effective PLCs, *GSM emphasis*]—a content-rich curriculum is learned primarily through purposeful reading/writing
- a “viable” curriculum = more time for reading, writing, and discussion = gains in reading and college or other post-secondary outcomes
- **Authentic, College-prep Literacy** [read, write, discuss]



## SUPERINTENDENT'S END-OF-MONTH NOTES

Sept. 2011 - p. 4 of 7

OUR MISSION is to provide educational excellence for all students.

- **Effective Lessons** [1. a clear learning objective with effort to provide background knowledge/create interest in the topic, 2. teaching and modeling, 3. guided practice, 4. checks for understanding/formative assessment, 5. independent practice/assessment]
  
- 8. **Still More “First Things” from Schmoker:**
  - According to cognitive psychologist and researcher David Conley in his work entitled *College Knowledge*, curriculum content learned for “real” literacy purposes via reading, writing, and discussing can best be accomplished in the following modes:
    - ~ draw inferences and conclusions
    - ~ analyze conflicting source documents
    - ~ solve problems with no obvious answer
    - ~ support ARGUMENTS with evidence
    - ~ multiple 3 to 5 page papers and “far more books, articles, and essays”

**Pretty good “college prep” curriculum!** Yet, I wonder how much of this is actually done on a regular basis in classrooms be they in NCSS or elsewhere? According to Schmoker, schools should do more of the above and less of everything else ... Provocative, he is, as always ... Says Dr. Schmoker: a “faux” or false literacy can be found in the new 8<sup>th</sup> grade Common Core Curriculum in Reading. To wit: “Compare and contrast structure of texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.” We may want to really give the new Common Core a once over to see if we can identify a lesser, more meaningful, more powerful set of standards for us to teach, i.e., real “Power Standards.” While most experts are now suggesting that the new Common Core Curriculum in language arts is better than what we have now [and the new Math Common Core they worry more about], it challenges us, I think, to be quite discerning as we go forth ...

- 9. **On September 20<sup>th</sup>**, Executive Director for Elementary Education Ken Proctor and I attended a professional development session held in Fayette County at the invitation of Superintendent Jeff Bearden featuring Harvard Professor Tony Wagner, author of the award-winning book, *The Global Achievement Gap*, which I’ve made reference to in these notes and in newspaper columns. Via webcast, we could see and hear Dr. Wagner over the Internet, we were able to ask him the following question:

**Is college ready the same thing as career ready? If not, how are they different?**



## SUPERINTENDENT'S END-OF-MONTH NOTES

Sept. 2011 - p. 5 of 7

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Dr. Wagner's answer was as follows: They are increasingly the same thing. Both require the "3 C's": Critical and creative thinking; Collaboration; and Communication (oral and written). They are different in so much as students choose certain paths to go down in using the 3 Cs. For example, some students will opt for a professional certificate or license from a vocational college. Some will seek an Associate degree in the arts or science from a community college. Some will seek a 4-year college degree from a university. Regardless of the choice, a student, to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, will need to master the 3 Cs for optimal work and life success. And, according to the "Top 10 Soft Skills for Job Hunters" (see <http://jobs.aol.com/articles/2009/01/26/top-10-soft-skills-for-job-hunters/>), employers are looking for: (1) strong work ethic, (2) positive attitude, (3) good communication skills, (4) time management abilities, (5) problem solving skills, (6) acting as a team player, (7) self-confidence, (8) ability to accept and learn from criticism, (9) flexibility/adaptability, and (10) working well under pressure. Concluded Dr. Wagner, in this webcast, "In the future, students will need the right skills and intrinsic motivation." Dr. Wagner's new book, out soon, deals with the topic of what characterizes innovators in our society. It should be most interesting! But, if you haven't read Wagner's *The Global Achievement Gap*, you may want to find some time to be fascinated by the picture he paints of today's world and the challenge to the United States and its educational system.

10. **Attached** to the e-mail with these notes, please find a pdf entitled: **NCSS Budget Forecast as of 9-8-2011**. In short, I believe you will find this "running record" (see notes 1 thru 8 in attachment) to be self-explanatory as well as the projected Ending Fund Balances for 2011-12, 2012-13, and 2013-14. In a Special Called Meeting of the Board of Education on October 10, 2011, in the Clamp Board Room, Board members will begin taking up budget matters and how to best apply recent savings. More following this BOE meeting ... but not now ... In short, we all hope for better budget days ahead but, at the same time, we must be prepared for where the economy is and may be headed given the most up-to-date information available. So, as we go forward, the numbers on the attached document may change as economic conditions change and impact the respective bottom lines. If only we had that crystal ball ...
11. Also this month, I had the privilege and pleasure to honor some local NCSS authors while visiting Oak Hill Elementary School: OHES teacher Juanita Stephens who wrote *Martha the Multiplying Magician*, AuthorHouse, 2011, and OHES teachers Andrea Dowdy, Bettina Martin, Nicole Benton and NHS teacher Peter Card who wrote *Whiz Kidz Devour the Dancing Blues*, Xlibris, 2011. Outstanding work by outstanding professionals!



## SUPERINTENDENT'S END-OF-MONTH NOTES

Sept. 2011 - p. 6 of 7

OUR MISSION is to provide educational excellence for all students.

12. **Work on Georgia's Early Learning Challenge Grant continued yesterday at the Loudermilk Center in Atlanta.** A "Race-To-The-Top" component, Georgia stands to gain over \$70 million in possible funding to further early care and learning activities throughout the state. The work group I have served on dealing with the further development of an outstanding workforce through professional development completed its work and will add this component to the 100 plus page grant application due on October 12, 2011. Our fingers are certainly crossed given that 39 other states will compete for just a few grants!
13. **Answers to Schmoker question found in Note #6 herein:**
  - Common, content-rich curriculum
  - Cold calling (and other "checks for understanding")
  - 90-120 minutes—purposeful reading/writing a day
14. **Yesterday government, college, business, and media leaders gathered at Triple Horse Productions in Covington to hear the results of an economic development study recently commissioned by the Chamber of Commerce and others.** Professionally done, the report outlined both positives and challenges to the county's future economic development. In short, the consultant was very clear that academic improvements in the county's K-12 school system are much needed. More specifically, he pointed out that when businesses look to locate in a community, they examine the level of educational outcomes, especially those related to "college readiness." SAT scores were shown for NCSS versus the state, Nation, and benchmark communities. As was also noted, improvement in SAT scores is not a "short-term" proposition. It is more "long-term." As we continue on our journey to work "smarter," let this be a further **call to action** that we in the school system can actually turn these numbers around sooner-than-later if we, for example, use our Professional Learning Communities as true problem-solving and "best practice" forums wherein we hold each other accountable for the "right stuff" when it comes to excellent classroom instruction ... Meanwhile, our parents, too, can help us and we are looking for ways to further that conversation (action) ...

"You must never cancel reading. I will cancel anything else in my day, but not reading, because I want my students to understand their ability to read and write is a matter of life and death ... Our children today are not reading as well as they should, and it's not because of their abilities—it's because we don't read with them as often and with the *intensity* needed to develop fine young minds."

■ Rafe Esquith in *There Are No Shortcuts*, Anchor Books, 2003



## SUPERINTENDENT'S END-OF-MONTH NOTES

Sept. 2011 - p. 7 of 7

OUR MISSION is to provide educational excellence for all students.

### Esquith's Favorite Books to Read with His Inner-City 5<sup>th</sup> Graders:

- Of Mice and Men (John Steinbeck)
- The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (Mark Twain)
- The Autobiography of Malcolm X (as told to Alex Haley)
  - Native Son (Richard Wright)
  - The Joy Luck Club (Amy Tan)
- Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee (Dee Brown)
- Treasure Island (Robert Louis Stevenson)

GSM  
9/29/11