

HISTORY OF REFORM EFFORTS IN NASHVILLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

During the past two decades, "reform and accountability" have been the leading cries in a national call for comprehensive public school improvement. The catalyst for this steadily building reform movement was the landmark publication *A Nation at Risk* (United States Department of Education, 1983), which was followed by numerous, impassioned calls for meaningful reform, including the widely embraced middle school report *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Corporation, 1989). During this era of "reform and accountability" officials throughout the country adopted state-wide instructional and curricular standards, developed and implemented state developed testing, and adopted new instructional practices based on grounded research. Simultaneously, widespread interest in adopting national standards and corresponding achievement testing has surfaced and gained momentum. This call for national reform continued into the 21st century as evidenced by the enthusiastic passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* during the early months of President George W. Bush's new administration.

The commitment to educational reform in Tennessee gained momentum with the adoption of the *School Improvement Act* (1992), a comprehensive legislation package designed to bring "reform and accountability" to Tennessee public schools. High expectations continue today, both throughout the country and in Tennessee, for comprehensive school improvement and documented increases in student achievement. Nashville, in particular, has been swept up by the cry for needed improvement. What follows is a brief review of the major steps towards improvement taken in the last decade.

- During the 1996-97 school year, Dr. Richard Benjamin, Director of Metro Schools, and his staff produced the document *Commitment to the Future*, an ambitious proposal that prescribed efforts to upgrade facilities as well as implement strategies and programs to bring about school improvement. In addition to numerous initiatives, the *Commitment to the Future* included a call for over \$350 million dollars in capital improvements. This call, however, was not funded due to widespread community concern that it was more of a wish list than a strategic plan for improvement.
- Following the appointment of Dr. Bill Wise in February, 1997, as Director of Metro Schools, Mayor Phil Bredesen proposed the adoption of a plan, *A Commitment to Excellence* to the Metro Board of Education and the Metro Council. This plan included provisions for implementing a "core curriculum" based on E. D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Program. This plan included funds to employ music, art, and physical education teachers in every elementary school, additional funds for materials and supplies, and a variety of capital improvements spread over a three-year period.
- Corresponding to the unveiling of *A Commitment to Excellence*, Dr. Wise and the Metro School Board adopted *The School Improvement Plan* (SIP) to implement aggressively a court ordered desegregation plan and to address concerns about the future direction of the Metro schools. SIP centered on a reorganization of the school system into three tiers (K-4 elementary schools, 5-8 middle schools, and 9-12 high schools). It also included proposals for extensive capital improvements, provisions for students to attend

neighborhood schools, opportunities for families to have more choice regarding the selection of schools to attend, and the creation of "enhanced option schools" and "design centers." With agreement from the plaintiffs, the Metro Board of Education approached the court for relief from supervision. In September 1998, the court declared the Metro School System unitary. Subsequently, the Mayor and the Metropolitan Council approved the five-year capital plan included in the SIP, beginning with the 1998-99 school year. In accordance with this plan, it is anticipated that approximately \$206 million dollars will have been earmarked for capital improvements by the end of the 2002-03 school year. It should be noted, however, that the SIP funding package contained an inadequate monetary allotment for instructional and programmatic improvements.

- In 1998, with the assistance of local business and community leaders, including several members of the Citizens Panel for a Community Report Card, Dr. Wise and his staff produced *An Accountability Framework*, a report which was subsequently approved by the Board of Education. This report was designed to serve as a blueprint for school improvement and included measurable goals for improving student achievement. It was anticipated that the Director of Schools would use this framework to review the progress of the school system in an annual *Accountability Report* to the Board of Education and the community.
- In the fall of 2000, Mayor Bill Purcell and the Metropolitan Council approved an allocation of \$55.3 million dollars for school improvement, followed by an additional \$62 million allocation the following year. While these funds were earmarked primarily for capital expenditures (including deferred maintenance, technology, buses, and access to buildings for individuals with disabilities), provisions were made to address significant operational needs such as copiers and paper, additional bus drivers, etc.
- Dr. Wise retired from the Metro School System at the end of the 2001 school year with the SIP in its fourth year of implementation. However, while new schools were built, existing schools were reorganized, and school clusters were designed to promote neighborhood attendance, student achievement did not demonstrate appreciable improvement.

In July 2001, Dr. Pedro Garcia was hired as the Director of Metro Schools with a directive from the Board of Education to implement standards-based reforms and increase student achievement. During the first year at his new post, Dr. Garcia led a dramatic and significant change effort giving hope to the community that improvement in achievement was, indeed, possible. New personnel were hired, a detailed *Strategic Plan* was developed, a standards-based K-12 curriculum aligned with state standards was developed in two critical areas (reading and writing) with plans to tackle other disciplines in the immediate future, training programs for administrators and teachers were implemented, principals were given new assignments, and attention was given to literacy improvement in the primary grades. To the delight of the community, some improvement in standardized test scores was attained.