

Virginia’s “Southside”

Chase City is located almost exactly midway between Bangor, Maine and Miami. In Virginia’s “Southside” rural center, it is 75 miles southwest of Richmond, the nearest cultural center. Like many small towns in rural Virginia, Chase City is struggling to adjust to a changing economy, as small manufacturing operations downsize or move away entirely. According to the National Institute of Family Literacy, some 38% of the adults in the Chase City area

Chase City Elementary School
Chase City, VA

514 Pre-K—5 students

African American	52%
White	47%
Hispanic or Latino	1%
Students receiving free or reduced price meals	63%
Students receiving SPED services	15%
Limited English Proficient students	0%
Student-teacher ratio	18:1
Student turnover rate:	12%
Teacher turnover rate:	12%

read at only the most basic levels. Chase City Elementary School has made its mission to provide educational opportunities for the 515 Pre K-5 students despite the economic, cultural, educational, and social barriers.

Its mission is succeeding. Chase City Elementary School has made outstanding academic progress over the past four years. One of seven elementary schools in Mecklenburg County, it was the first to become fully accredited,

meeting the state’s standards of proficiency in 2000. In addition to earning the status of full accreditation, Chase City Elementary School has also met the provisions for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) as set by the No Child Left Behind Act for 2003 and 2004.



Chase City Elementary has made great strides in student achievement. School scores for fifth grade reading increased from 71% in 2000 to 92% in 2004, while fifth grade math scores increased from 56% in 2000 to 91% in 2004.

Gains were also evident in the student subgroup scores. Reading scores for African American fifth graders progressed from 63% in 2000 to 87% in 2004 and math scores increased from 43% to 85% from 2000 to 2004, respectively, a gain of 98%. Less dramatically but still significantly, fifth grade White students increased their reading proficiency from 78% in 2000 to 98% in 2004; math totals show comparable progress from 68% in 2000 to 98% in 2004.

A close bond ties the school and community together, the result, in part, of its home-grown staff. Principal Hilda Puryear, a former Chase City teacher, named principal 13 years ago, proudly points out that many of the teachers—and a few of the senior staff—grew up in Chase City and were once students here. Puryear herself attended Chase City Elementary School as a white student before it was integrated in 1967. Today, the student population is almost evenly balanced between 52% African American and 47% White students.

Assume Every Child Is An Einstein

Asked the secret of their success, Principal Puryear simply says, “Hard work! These teachers teach every child just like they are Einstein—like they are very smart.” She also points to another factor behind her school’s dramatic turnaround. At a conference three years ago, the school’s reading specialist learned about the Riggs multi-sensory approach to beginning reading and spelling instruction, an early reading method featuring direct instruction and a concentration on phonics. Part of the generation that was not taught phonics in their own schooling or during their teacher training, the first-grade team knew they needed to revise their approach, and proposed trying the Riggs program.

The school board gave Puryear and the teachers one year and Puryear contacted a school in Florida that was using the Riggs approach. Teachers from the Florida School came up to introduce the approach and to train the Chase City primary grade teachers, and served as mentors the first year, encouraging their new colleagues at Chase City not to give up.

After 30 days, Chase City teachers were concerned that they might have made a bad choice, but Puryear encouraged them, promising that “if we mess up, it’s my fault not yours. So keep working at it. If it doesn’t work out it will be on my shoulders, because we’re not turning back!”

Before the school adopted Riggs, Chase City first graders were struggling to get through all their assigned basal readers. After the first year of the new program, students were not only completing their basal readers but were into second grade books. By second grade they continued to work on comprehension but, teachers realized with some surprise, the students were really reading! Now, Chase City teachers cover all the phonemes and sounds in Kindergarten and in first grade have 30 spelling words which become the sight words.

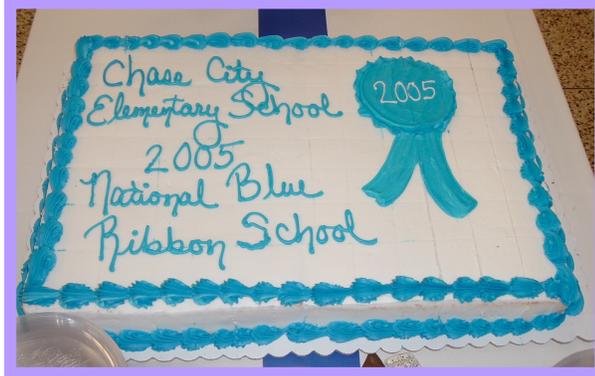
Puryear says the Riggs approach has worked for their students, especially students with learning disabilities, and sums up the turnaround experience this way: “The more you do, the more you want to do. You have to want it work in order for it to succeed. We had the desire to change and we stuck with it.” The Riggs program goes through eighth

grade, but Chase City backs ease out of it in 3rd grade in order to prepare students for the Virginia state assessments.

The “Secret” of Chase City’s Success: Demystifying Test-taking

It doesn’t take a visitor to Chase City Elementary School long to understand the secret of the school’s well-documented success on state assessments. Students, faculty, staff, parents, and community members are extremely focused on doing well on the spring assessments. Although there is a laser-like focus on skills and content knowledge, the real driver of Chase City’s approach is the precise study and test taking methods that all students learn every day.

Third-grade classroom teachers are constantly telling the students to “slash the trash” and “jail the detail.” Students aren’t at all confused by what seems to be code language, but are instead prompted by it to re-examine word problems they are



working on, eliminating unlikely choices among the possible responses (“slashing the trash”) and circling key phrases and information (“jailing the detail”) in the narrative. Blue and pink pencil-shaped decals on every desk remind them of these critical steps in this reading / study strategy. And the strategy works—helping students, and even their parents, unravel a test question confidently and skillfully isolate the important content.

“We encourage the students to mark up their test booklets,” a teacher says. “We emphasize trying your best and always stress the test-taking strategies—jail the detail, slash the trash and the ‘pink and blue pencil’ methods.” Students who use the test-taking strategies during the state assessments are rewarded with an annual spring Secret Adventure. For seven years Chase City has been using this whole-school field trip to reward student effort on the state assessments. The destination is always a surprise—students have gone to the Natural History Museum in Raleigh, visited the Swift Creek Playhouse, spent a fun day at a state park, and taken a limousine ride that ended at a restaurant where students ate at tables with white table cloths. The Secret Adventure has become an important part of the school culture, and students and parents eagerly anticipate the year’s adventure. Principal Puryear emphasizes, “We don’t reward on the basis of the test results—we don’t have the results back for a few months. We reward the students for using the good test-taking strategies that they have been taught.”



Tests are scheduled carefully at Chase City. Math tests come first, followed by a rest day during which teachers hold a “subject camp” (review) for the subject of the next day’s tests. If a teacher sees a child is not using the strategies, or not marking his or her test book, or seems tired, the teacher will call the child’s parents, letting them know that their help is needed to encourage their child to use the strategies and to make sure he or she gets enough sleep that night.

Every year Principal Puryear goes into each third grade classroom before testing begins. She reads William Steig’s *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* and gives each child a glass marble to help them focus on doing their best on the tests. For the older children, Puryear reads Dr. Seuss’s *Hooray for Diffendoofer Day* to remind them to forget their nerves and remember the good things they have been taught. For the writing test, teachers pass out magic “writing wands” and peppermint chewing gum. Every student has a snack bag and a bottle of water on their desk on test day. These are a few of the many little touches that focus on the positive while letting the students know how special test days are. The parents and students are told that the school will do everything they can to make them successful.

The test preparation strategies are introduced to students, teachers, and parents early and daily throughout the year. Prior grade-level teachers proctor the tests of the grade level above, so they can become familiar with the assessment focus of the next grade level. Teachers practice testing accommodations two weeks before the test in order to implement them effectively. In an audit of school assessment practices, the Virginia Department of Education identified Chase City as a model site for best practices in assessment.

Strong Instructional Support

Teachers are not only successful because of the support of their principal and the building leadership team; they have many other effective instructional supports as well. Principal Puryear explains that Chase City was disaggregating test results prior to NCLB. “Teachers do a lot of examining of student work... after all that’s where it all comes from.”

The school conducts three rounds of benchmark testing to gauge student progress on the curriculum units. The district provides 4th grade benchmarks; Chase City teachers wrote the 5th grade benchmark assessments. The

benchmark tests are scanned so teachers get online reports and can conduct item analyses of student responses. The teachers then determine what knowledge the students have mastered and what needs to be re-taught.

An Instructional Support Teacher (IST) helps teachers review the benchmark assessments and think critically about instruction, and models effective teaching and re-teaching strategies. Puryear gives lots of credit for the school's success to this key player, saying "She is an instructional leader that the other teachers respect." Formerly a third grade teacher at the school, "she knows instruction, she knows every child that is in trouble and knows the best way to reach them. She helps every teacher help every child." As a result, the IST does a lot of the in-house, on-the-job professional development using individual, small, and whole-group strategies.

The computer lab is not a once-a-week special, but is integral to the school's learning system. It provides individualized instruction, starting at the students' own levels and supporting them as they progress. Students in grades 2 - 5 go to the computer lab for 30 minutes five times a week. On Friday, students are given some



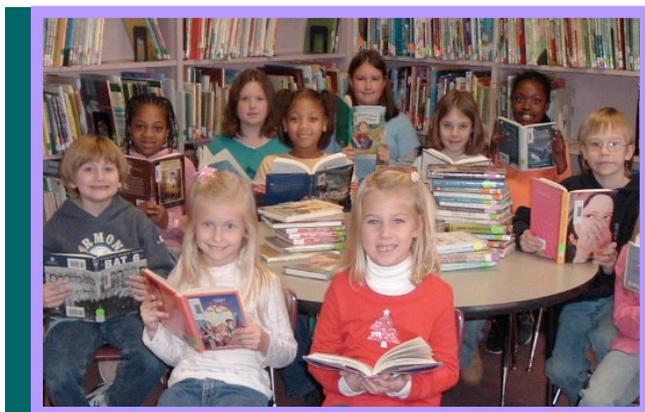
leeway and allowed to play instructional computer games. The computer work is considered part of the curriculum and teachers work with the computer lab teacher to target children's learning needs in math and reading.

An after-school Power Hour offers extra help to students who are below grade level prepare for state assessments. Students attend the Power Hour, which meets twice weekly in the spring, by teacher invitation. Transportation is provided, resulting in a 60-70% attendance rate. There is also an after-school science club taught by a 4H extension agent, who helps review 5th grade science prior to the state science assessment.

Everyone is Special at Chase City

The school counselor plays a unique supporting role in preparing students to learn and succeed on state assessments. She was hired two years ago because she possessed intriguing credentials—she cared passionately about making every child feel special and had a degree in marketing and a business background. She has since gained her counseling credentials. As a result, Puryear says, "She can sell the children on their strengths." The counselor goes beyond the school doors to find beds for children, food for families, and teaches yoga to the school staff. She also organizes a Thanksgiving dinner, where the students help set the table, learn how to hold a fork, and fold napkins. It is a special event for the children.

The counselor explains that she was extremely motivated by her principal's support and caring for every child: "I am attracted to the genuineness in this school—[they are] unwilling to give up on a child. Nobody is out of the scope of helping. Even the janitor is willing to help." She adds, "The kids feel safe. They know their needs will be met. They know the rules and the boundaries. High expectations are held for them, but they see a work ethic in the role models that surround them."



In the year leading up to spring testing, the counselor works with each child to set test goals—one for reading, one for math, and one for something of the student's own choice. They write the goals on a special pink sheet that each student and his or her parent signs. These personal plans guide students as they prepare to take the tests. The students and counselors form strong bonds and each student knows an adult that cares about him or her. The

counselor has a secret wave that doesn't disrupt students when she sees them but does remind them that they are special.

Chase City's special education services exemplify this attitude. The school's approach has been "push in" rather than "pull out." The teachers "celebrate the student's smartness"—highlighting each student's strength and building upon it. Teachers report that the collaborative approach seems to work well for Chase City students; the students all learn from each other in the classroom. Puryear admits, "If you had asked me five years ago how to handle special education, I would have argued for special classes. I see it differently now and how much better it is for both the students and teachers."

Making Good Use of Limited Resources

Chase City's 1950's building (an addition was built 1980) is maintained with great care and pride. Resources are scarce, so the prevailing attitude encourages hard work, thrift, and wise spending. One night a month administrators and teachers volunteer as hosts and waiters at a local restaurant and encourage parents and students to stop by for dinner or a snack. In return, the school receives 10% of the profits for the evening, which amounted to \$1,500 last year. While not a great deal of money, the monthly activity generates fun for staff, students, and their families. And the funds are used for some program or activity that supports learning.

Another win-win situation involving little money is the school garden. With a \$500 grant, the school purchased seeds and tools for a garden. A neighbor living on an adjoining property offered to let the school plant the garden in his yard and even plowed the ground. Then classes of students planted seeds and nurtured the plants throughout the spring. The neighbor got to harvest the garden after school ended. In the end, to paraphrase the popular ad: seeds + tools + material = \$500; hard work + inquisitive students = student learning; happy neighbor + community goodwill = priceless!

Success Breeds Success

In 2001 Chase City was one of six schools in the country selected as a National Change School in a process sponsored by Pearson Learning, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and Fordham University. Twenty eight Chase City staff members went to New York City to attend the award ceremony at Lincoln Center and pick up a check for \$2,500. While the money was appreciated and well used—and teachers fondly recall their trip and their time in New York City—more important was the recognition of the efforts by teachers, staff, and the community to improve their school.



Realizing that Chase City could be successful in other recognition programs, Principal Puryear later that year applied for a VH1 “Save the Music” award, and the school became the first rural school in the country to win. MTV and VH1 officials came to Chase City to present the award at a big evening event, and with the \$25,000 prize money the school purchased 40 musical instruments. The community raised money for music stands and the district has contributed sheet music and instrument repair. That helped Puryear lure the current music teacher to Chase City from New York. Says Puryear, “She works to make a joyful noise!” The music teacher leads the band after school as well as a guitar club and a song-writing club.

At a Title I STARS meeting in Williamsburg, Virginia, Principal Puryear heard Jean Blades from Texas speak on “Rhythm and Music,” an approach Blades explained was especially effective with African American males. Some Chase City staff traveled to Prince William County to attend an in-service demonstration with Blades. Returning home with the videos and songs, they now play them over the intercom every morning to get the students awake and ready to learn. Whether the day’s choice is *Shake Your Brain, Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes*, or classical music from *Mozart for the Mind*, Chase City uses music effectively to set a tone that helps students have fun while learning. The

teachers feel supported in leading up-beat classrooms. As Puryear says, “I realized that not every classroom has to be quiet like mine was!”

Puryear’s leadership has encouraged a strong dose of recognition and the school celebrates its achievements heartily. On the last day of school, administrators, faculty, and staff members don blue and pink wigs, slip on chicken feet, and do the “chicken dance” as the students leave the school. The principal uses this end-of-the-year celebration to honor the hard work students and their parents have done and the school’s successful results on the state assessments. As one teacher put it, “Everybody leaves on good note and wants to come back next year. We have a lot of fun here—people learn when they are having fun.”

% Students at or Above Proficient				
Grade 5 English Language Arts				
	2001	2002	2003	2004
% students tested	85	86	99	100
All students	77	77	89	92
Low income	NA	68	89	89
African American	68	66	83	87
White	82	90	94	98
State average	82	77	82	85
Grade 5 Math				
	2001	2002	2003	2004
% students tested	85	87	99	100
All students	74	89	79	91
Low income	NA	80	73	88
African American	64	85	61	85
White	80	94	94	98
State average	72	71	75	78