THE NAVIGATOR

November 2026

Virginia Association of School Superintendents

Student Achievement, Accountability, & Continuous Improvement

Leading Instructional Improvement and Monitoring Impact

Improving student achievement is among the most important responsibilities of a superintendent. It requires more than understanding accountability results, reviewing performance data, or implementing school improvement plans. It requires a compelling vision for what students can achieve, a clear strategy for getting there, and the leadership commitment to turn aspirations into measurable results.

As Virginia continues to emphasize academic achievement and growth, superintendents have an opportunity to challenge their divisions to think beyond incremental improvement. What if we set goals based not simply on what seems achievable, but on what is possible when our entire organization is aligned around student success? That question is at the heart of this month's Navigator.

THE NORTH STAR CHALLENGE:

Secretary of Education Dr. Jeffery Smith's ASK:

Focus on Student Achievement and Success: Stretch Goals in Reading and Mathematics

Secretary Smith has issued a challenge to Virginia's superintendents: Think boldly about student achievement, establish ambitious goals in reading and mathematics, and identify what it will take to achieve them. His ASK centers on two powerful leadership questions:

What Is Your North Star? What ambitious, measurable stretch goal could you set for your division next year? What would it look like to challenge your team to achieve something that might feel out of reach today, but that you believe is possible with the right focus and support?

What Do You Need From Us to Get There? What do you need from the Department of Education and the administration to help you achieve your goals? Whether it's resources, technical assistance, greater flexibility, or removing barriers, they want to hear directly from you.

FROM NORTH STAR TO RESULTS

Know Your Starting Point — Analyze the Data

Establish the Destination — Define Your North Star

Align the Work — Focus on What Matters Most

Monitor the Journey — Examine Implementation and Impact

Lead With Accountability and Support

A North Star

A North Star is more than an accountability target. It is a shared commitment that guides instructional priorities, resource allocation, leadership conversations, and decisions throughout the division. As superintendent, consider:

- What would extraordinary progress in reading and mathematics look like for our students?
- Where do our achievement and growth data suggest the greatest opportunities for improvement?
- What stretch goals would challenge us to rethink current practices rather than simply work harder at the same strategies?
- How can we engage our school board, principals, teachers, families, and community in pursuing these goals?
- What evidence will tell us that we are making meaningful progress?

From Vision to Measurable Results

An effective North Star should be:

- **Ambitious:** Challenges the division to achieve more than current trends predict.
- **Measurable:** Defines specific student outcomes and a timeline for success.
- **Student-Centered:** Focuses on meaningful improvements in learning and growth.
- **Shared:** Creates collective ownership across schools and departments.
- **Actionable:** Guides instructional strategies, investments, and progress monitoring.

What Do You Need to Get There?

Ambitious goals require more than determination. They require the right conditions for success. Superintendents should identify the supports, resources, and flexibility needed to accelerate improvement. Consider what would make the greatest difference in your division:

- Targeted instructional resources and intervention support
- Professional learning and instructional leadership development
- Technical assistance in data analysis and school improvement
- Greater flexibility to address local needs
- Removal of barriers that limit innovation or instructional effectiveness
- Opportunities to collaborate with divisions demonstrating strong academic growth

The Leadership Opportunity

Secretary Smith's challenge provides an opportunity to shift the conversation from ***Where are we today?*** to ***Where could we be next year, and what must we do differently to get there?***

This Month's Leadership Takeaway

Know where you are. Be bold about where you want to go. Align your people and resources. Monitor what matters. Lead with purpose.

SIDEBAR: THIS MONTH'S LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

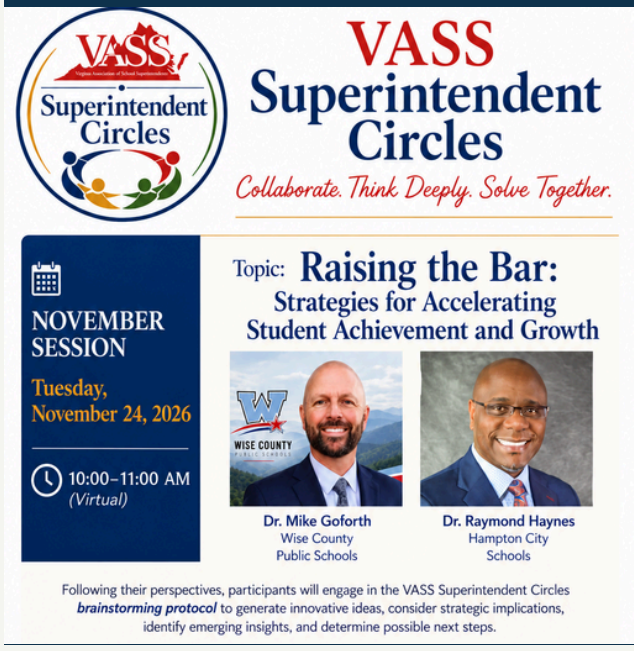
Am I challenging my leadership team to pursue ambitious student outcomes, or are we primarily focused on maintaining current performance?

How do I balance the urgency of improving student achievement with the time required for sustainable instructional change?

What will I need to prioritize, change, or stop doing to keep our North Star at the center of division decisions?

How can I create shared accountability without creating a culture of fear or compliance?

What support do I need as superintendent to lead this work effectively?

RESOURCES & TOOLS

- Secretary Smith's Presentation
- January 2026 Navigator
- Driving Academic Achievement
- VTLA Resource Library