

2015 Achievement Awards Virginia Association of Counties

APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 1, 2015.** Please include this application form with electronic entry.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

Locality: Henrico County

Program Title: The Un-Initiative

Program Category: Communications

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

Name: John A. Vithoukas

Title: County Manager

Signature: 

Overview/Summary of the Program

Henrico County Public Schools employees were invited to suggest ways that the school division could operate more efficiently and effectively, while still delivering the high level of service that students and their families have come to expect.

HCPS Superintendent Patrick C. Kinlaw promised to write personal checks to three individuals who came up with the winning ideas. A school division parent also volunteered to match the award money.

Problem or Challenge

While school systems frequently add initiatives, they rarely retire the ones that are no longer relevant. This can result in wasted time and expense for procedures which have outlived their usefulness. In order to function as effectively as possible, Henrico County Public Schools needed to identify and strip off old initiatives. Doing so would not only free up precious resources, but also had the potential to improve staff morale.

In the 1960s and '70s, sales of 7-Up soared as it proclaimed itself “the Uncola,” a citrusy soft drink with no caffeine or artificial colors. Henrico County Public Schools decided to follow that less-is-more approach with a contest for faculty and staff called the “Un-Initiative.”

Dr. Patrick C. Kinlaw, HCPS superintendent, noted that while school systems frequently add initiatives, they rarely retire the ones that are no longer relevant.

“We asked all current employees – teachers, cafeteria workers, bus drivers – to send us their ideas on things that we were doing that they thought we could stop doing and still be an efficient and effective organization.”

The division announced the program at its annual August convocation before the 2014-15 school year. The deadline for submissions was set for Nov. 4.

The Henrico County Public Schools Communications and Public Relations Department created an amusing explanatory video, which was shown at the convocation. The superintendent also emailed a link to the video to all employees, along with a call for submissions. The video can be viewed at the HCPS website:

<http://henrico.k12.va.us/hcpstv/internal/convo2014/un-initiative.html>

As an incentive, the superintendent pledged to write personal checks to the winners.

The Communications and Public Relations Department set up an online portal for current employees to make submissions.

The department also sent out a news release about the Un-Initiative, prompting stories in local media. One division parent who learned of the idea pledged to support it by matching Kinlaw’s reward money, doubling the number of prizes and increasing enthusiasm for the project.

The HCPS Division Leadership Team was responsible for choosing the winning ideas. In most cases, many different HCPS employees submitted the same winning ideas. The ideas chosen were evaluated suggestions for value, content and clarity. In order to ensure fairness the judges selected the winning ideas anonymously, with no knowledge of the names of the submitters.

Many other ideas were received; these were kept and will be reviewed in a continued effort to become more efficient as an organization.

The winning ideas and submitters, announced Jan. 29, 2015, were:

First prize (\$100 apiece): Eliminate “Interims” at middle and high schools

- Phil Bucska, Deep Run High School
- Connie Walters, Varina High School

Previously, the school division required that teachers produce paper copies of interim grading reports during the middle of each marking period as a way for parents to track student performance. However, the school division’s current PowerSchool parent portal allows parents to track grades 24/7, with instant online access any day of the week.

“By the time interims are printed and distributed, or made available as an official report, the grades may already be out of date if new assignments have been added,” wrote Phil Bucska, a teacher at Deep Run High School.

Varina High School teacher Connie Walters' entry said the reports divert school resources: "A great deal of time is spent by the teachers and administrators to produce interims. This is time spent on an activity that is not necessary since parents can see the grades in real time."

The school division will continue to provide paper copies to any parent who requests that format. Teachers also will continue the practice of contacting the parents of struggling students by phone.

Second prize (\$75 apiece): Eliminate "Essentials" duplicate documentation

- Sarah Arthur, Shady Grove Elementary School
- Kari King, Dumbarton Elementary School

The Virginia Department of Education requires school divisions to document annually that each student has received instruction on a very long list of essential skills. Elementary teachers spend considerable time completing a standalone checklist of "Essentials" for every student in his or her class. This involves properly printing, signing and filing the paperwork in a student's cumulative folder. HCPS has created an alternative that will allow staff to devote more time to instruction; existing report cards will now be used to fulfill the "Essentials" requirement, combining two tasks.

Third prize (\$50 apiece): Eliminate printed Central Office forms

- Walter Boswell, Department of Construction and Maintenance
- Maria Wyman, Budget Office

The school division has hundreds of forms associated with day-to-day work that staff must access depending on their individual needs and professional requirements. The forms are occasionally hard to locate and cumbersome to update and complete. The school division will now work to consolidate all forms in one place that can be accessed electronically. Staff members will be able to go to one location to immediately access the latest versions of most forms. This will eliminate inquiries, requests and time-consuming searches for needed forms. These winning ideas are being implemented during the current school year.

Response to Economic Downturn

Continued economic challenges make it imperative that Henrico County Public Schools make the best use of its resources. These ideas will save staff time and in some cases, money. This allows staff time and resources to be used in other ways, and has the potential to raise public trust in the division as good stewards.

Use of Technology

- Video
- Internet submission portal

The Cost of the Program

There were minimal costs to the program, which used existing staff and resources.

Results

The removal of redundant and inefficient methods of doing business resulted in an immediate wave of positive attention, most notably from the school division's internal stakeholders such as teachers and principals. In addition, the school division and the winning entries received coverage in the Richmond Times-Dispatch:

http://www.richmond.com/news/local/education/article_09218200-0ad7-5b12-8a54-66e2e1d2787c.html

Rather than complete time-consuming reports, school division employees were immediately freed up to focus more on the teaching and learning process.

Positive results from the Un-Initiative will be measured over time, including the retention of teachers and other employees who feel valued and appreciated when their good suggestions are implemented.

The Un-Initiative is a unique and memorable example of a school division engaging its employees in ways that make the organization more effective and efficient. By soliciting ideas from outside of the Central Office "bubble", the organization was able to tap into new methods of improving the work environment for its largest and perhaps most impactful employee base: teachers.

The Un-Initiative is proof that counties can successfully “take things off the plate” and discover the existence of redundant or outdated tasks that allow an organization to better deploy its human and financial resources.

Program Category: Communications

Submitted By: Andy Jenks, director of communications and public relations, and

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