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OTHER OPINIONS

Celebrating the success of our local schools

BY THERESA WHIBLEY

The old saying goes that you can't be a prophet in your own land. However, I was fortunate to be part of an event that may demonstrate this old saying isn't entirely true.

On Oct. 24, nearly 700 people gathered in downtown Norfolk to celebrate Norfolk public schools' recent Broad Prize win. Principals, Teachers of the Year and school administrators mingled with city officials and business leaders. It was a first in my many years as School Board member.

Each year, the Broad Foundation recognizes a school division that demonstrates significant progress in narrowing achievement gaps between groups of students while improving academic performance for all. This annual award has been dubbed the "Nobel Prize for Education," and the judges who make the selection



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It is an intensive process — and not one for which you can apply. Your work and your test results must speak for themselves. More than 80 of the largest school districts across the country are eligible for consideration. Only five are selected for review each year.

As I speak with community members, patients and friends, it saddens me to learn that most have no idea that we have been a finalist for this award for the last three years. And even though we won the top honor

include governors, former secretaries of education and Fortune 500 CEOs. They review a tremendous amount of data and consider reports prepared by teams of educators who visit each of the five finalist districts.

and were praised by the secretary of education, senators and others this year, there still is remarkably little buzz in Norfolk.

This is a tremendous milestone that our entire community should be celebrating. I commend the City Council for taking this cause to heart and hosting a variety of events to celebrate our success and recognize our staff. They believe, as the School Board does, that the health of the city and the health of the schools are inextricably linked. They recognize that education must come first among competing priorities.

Mayor Paul Fraim championed our cause and encouraged Norfolk businesses to play an active role in celebrating our success. Eight benefactors stepped forward: Norfolk Southern, the Economic Development Alliance, Bank of America, the Procaccianti Group, Towne Bank, SunTrust Bank, Wachovia and BB&T.

These visionary businesses understand one simple fact: Quality public education is vital to their success. Without quality graduates, they lack a quality work force.

We must stop viewing the students in Norfolk's classrooms as "other people's kids." Each of us is responsible for the success of every child. Today's students will be tomorrow's taxpayers and civic leaders. As a result, it's critically important that every student gets the type of education we would want for our own child.

And we must be prepared to be active participants in achieving that goal. That means lobbying our city and state leaders for necessary funding, volunteering in schools, spreading the good news about public education's successes, and advocating for all children.

Norfolk is the best urban school district in the country. But we have set our sights even higher. We want to be the best school system in the world by the year 2010. We will be a prophet for the possibilities of urban public education. And I hope our community will see the value of our efforts.

There is a revolution taking place in urban public education and its heart is here in Norfolk. Learn more about it. Celebrate its successes. Whether you are a business leader or community member, I urge you to get involved and take pride in being a part of it. After all, our children won't be the only benefactors of quality public education.

■ *Dr. Theresa Whibley is chair of the Norfolk School Board. A former teacher, she practices medicine in Norfolk and has announced her candidacy in next May's council election.*

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