



## Dr. June Atkinson

### DISTINGUISHED PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

Few know leadership and education like Dr. June Atkinson, North Carolina's former state superintendent of public instruction and first woman elected to the post. When it comes to leadership, she offers clear and profound advice: value others' opinions by patient listening versus interrupting. Mentor and allow others to mentor and encourage you. Never underestimate your students—they'll always surprise you. And think big about your future; but develop (with others' input) the small steps to get there.

"It is a waste of breath to say: 'We must change,'" Atkinson says. "People are the best part of our organization, and if you say 'change,' you wear them out and irritate them."

This methodology—and Atkinson's determined, focused nature—served her well in her 12 years as state superintendent. Under her leadership, North Carolina's high school graduation rate grew from 68 to 86%—an

all-time high. Schools began calculating graduation rates more consistently and recognizing more schools with high rates, creating healthy competition among the districts.

Atkinson and her team also developed a resiliency software to help schools better identify and create interventions for students at risk of dropping out. These efforts paid off: educators better understood the need to increase the numbers. And North Carolina moved from among the nation's lower graduation rates to above the national average.

Few in her rural, Bedford County, Virginia hometown would feel surprised that Atkinson went on to such success. Atkinson herself attributes any strength to her supportive, girlhood community and a childhood encouraging freedom, curiosity, and exploration of the gentle land.

Her mother was 19 when Atkinson was born and her father fondly shared she was breach birth and "came into this world on her feet." An only child until age 14, Atkinson explored



# “Explore, experiment, and create.”

the forests with her childhood friend Linda, where they launched several ventures including producing and bottling poke berry juice in cap-less Coke bottles. “My mom shut things down before we got the resulting product to school,” she recalls. “I cherish my childhood where I could explore, create and observe.”

It was Linda’s older sister—a business education teacher—who enlightened a young, grade school Atkinson that such a career existed. The shorthand, typing and bookkeeping fascinated her. From Charlotte and Roanoke, Va., Atkinson taught business education to high school students for several years and helped her students gain vital job skills. Impressed supervisors asked Atkinson to speak at national conferences and build curricula—skills which later served her well.

She began consulting for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction next and continued as a chief consultant and director for 28 years. The work built her confidence and expertise, and friends encouraged her to reach high—to apply to become, for instance, president of the National Business Education Association. She succeeded each time. All the while, Atkinson remained a visionary, a big thinker.

Public office wasn’t always on her radar, but Atkinson recalls exactly when that view changed. At a business education conference in Virginia, she walked Marguerite Crumley wearing a baby blue suit and sky high heels. Her executive presence and confidence stopped Atkinson in her tracks. A friend confirmed to Atkinson: This was Virginia’s state business education supervisor. “I absolutely knew right then—I want her job one day,” she says. “I admired her sense of confidence, warm personality and her passion for students.”

Atkinson feels proud of what she achieved as superintendent but admits being the first woman in the position had its challenges. Her opponent contested her winning, called for a recount even when Atkinson won by over 7,000 votes. She also found she must build the trust of those around her before she could lead them, whereas “people trust a man as a leader until he makes a mistake.”

Atkinson now happily juggles three part-time jobs alongside piano lessons and more frequent visits to Virginia. She enjoys mentoring men and women and serves as a spring fellow for the UNC Institute of Politics. She coordinates seminars about the future of education and helps students become informed citizens (and voters) of education issues. She wants to encourage others to pursue public office, too. “We’ve got a way to go. We still seek funding for quality preschool for families in poverty and must ensure all kids gain access to reading materials at home, especially over long summer breaks,” she says. “We must continue focus on each student being college, career, and citizenship ready.”

Asked what’s next, Atkinson says she aims to enjoy each day. “I am enjoying the work I do. When not working, I may revert to what I did as a child: explore, experiment, and create.”