The right steps for Norfolk State

Norfolk State University's persistent struggle to overcome longstanding challenges has been complicated this year by the introduction of new problems.

But Gov. Bob McDonnell and the university have made significant changes recently to stabilize Virginia's largest historically black school and secure its future.

The latest moves, announced Thursday by the governor's office, involve the appointment of three new members to the university's governing board: Retired Army Lt. Gen. Michael Rochelle, former Tidewater Community College President Deborah DiCroce and Bryan Cuffee, a vice president at Gold Key/PHR Hotels and Resorts in Virginia Beach. Rochelle and Cuffee are NSU graduates.

They will replace three members - Henry Light, Julian Patterson and Wade Perry - who resigned in the weeks after former Virginia State University President Eddie Moore was hired on an interim basis to lead Norfolk State.

McDonnell also appointed two special advisers to the board and president: Jim Dyke, former state secretary of education, and Ervin Jordan, an NSU alumnus and research archivist and professor at the University of Virginia.

The governor made a similar move last year at U.Va., when he appointed two special advisers to help improve communications and strategic planning at the campus after the forced resignation - and subsequent reinstatement - of President Teresa Sullivan.

At Norfolk State, the new appointees will find a campus already in transition. Moore is well-equipped to deal with the challenges facing NSU, and his successful efforts to turn around a beleaguered Virginia State, another historically black university that faced intractable problems, have provided ample reason to hope for similar results here in Norfolk.

Indeed, in his first weeks on the job, he identified about $1.6 million in additional, unbudgeted funds that the university had failed to tap.

Moore succeeded Tony Atwater, whom the board fired in August amid mounting scrutiny over unfinished financial audits, his management style and a series of academic problems, some of them predating his arrival in 2011. One of the university's signature academic programs, the associate degree in nursing, was barred from accepting new students this year after graduates failed to meet the minimum pass rate on a standardized national licensing exam.

The school also is the subject of an investigation by its accrediting agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which is due to report later this year.
Still, Moore and the governing board are making progress toward righting the ship. The 2011 financial audit, long overdue, has finally been completed; the 2012 and 2013 financial audits are expected to be completed in the coming months. The associate in nursing program is likely to be abandoned in favor of a more comprehensive bachelor's program. The university's dearth of administrative policies and procedures is being addressed, critical work that Moore has said he hopes to complete by summer.

The latest efforts by the governor should help ensure further progress on those goals, and others.