



Superintendent's Summary Entry Plan Report

May 26, 2020



Entry Plan Goals



Leading the Darien Public Schools in partnership with such a talented staff, a supportive and engaged parent community and terrific student body is an incredible honor.

My entry plan to the District was designed to ensure my successful transition into the Darien Public Schools and to identify the District's next level of work. The plan focused on listening and learning with the Board of Education; staff; parents; students; community and business stakeholders; and, town officials about the strengths, challenges and opportunities for the Darien Public Schools.

The entry plan has and will continue to inform decision-making. It will culminate with the adoption of a Board of Education Strategic Plan. The entry plan had three broad goals:

1. Establish open and honest communication and trusting relationships with all constituents and stakeholders
2. Deeply understand the Darien Public Schools
3. Collaboratively plan for the future

Thank you to the Darien community for your warm welcome to the school District and town and for your participation in the entry plan. I look forward to partnering with everyone in the future as we complete the strategic planning process and continue to provide exceptional educational experiences to our students.

Entry Plan Strategies



*Leaders must
first seek to
understand, then
to be understood.*

~Stephen Covey

1. Listen & Learn: This strategy involved scheduling a series of events to listen and learn from the stakeholders of Darien Public Schools. The purpose of these events was to give me the opportunity to introduce myself to the Darien constituents and to engage all stakeholders in a discourse about the District's values, strengths, challenges and areas of opportunity. Members of the Central Services Cabinet accompanied me for some of these community events.

2. Share & Build: This strategy allowed me to get to know the Darien Public Schools community better by sharing my leadership story and my educational philosophies and core values. I strove to establish a passionate, trusting and positive tone and a sense of urgency about the work through communications and attendance at school and community events.

3. Analyze, Report & Plan: This strategy involved analyzing the data from listening and learning. The information was synthesized into this summary report to reflect the strengths and opportunities faced by the school District. The entry plan and the summary report are helping to inform decision-making and the commencement of the Board Education's strategic planning process. The Board of Education's strategic process will result in a District plan and may include a Vision, Mission, Values and Goals.

Entry Plan Events & Activities



Some of the entry plan events that occurred in order to implement the three strategies included, but were not limited to the following:

- ✓ Joined students on the school bus for the first day of school;
 - ✓ Hosted all-staff convocation to meet staff and establish focus and priorities for the year;
 - ✓ Individual Meetings with Board of Education members, civic leaders; District Directors, Committee Chairs, media;
 - ✓ Meetings with Central Services departments and their staff;
 - ✓ Regular school and classroom visits;
 - ✓ Visits to all schools and meetings with staff and students;
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- ✓ Individual and small group meetings with key stakeholders (principals, staff, students, parent groups and business organizations);
 - ✓ Administered a survey/held focus groups for the staff, students and parents soliciting strengths, challenges, opportunities and hopes for the Darien Public Schools;
 - ✓ Conducted a document review including, but not limited to an analysis of student achievement data, strategic plans, department plans, finances, reports and publications; and,
 - ✓ Commenced strategic planning efforts.

Data Analysis: Data from some of the entry plan processes were collected and triangulated using representative pieces of evidence to help determine and highlight priorities, discover insights and themes in the data as they pertained to the District's strengths and future opportunities.

Students

Our students are the heart and soul of the District. Students throughout the District were happy and felt safe in their schools. Students consistently expressed respect and appreciation for their talented and caring teachers. Students expressed appreciation for the caring relationships with their teachers and high quality of the educational experience characterized by the availability of a rich variety of academic, athletic and extracurricular activities. High school students commented on the pressure to succeed and their pride in rising to those rigorous expectations to succeed.

Strengths

- Quality education
- Talented and caring teachers
- Wide variety of classes and extracurricular activities
- Excellent preparation for post secondary education
- Strong sense of school pride, spirit and community
- Students individual learning needs are met

Opportunities

- Improve access to Wi-Fi and more consistent use of technology
- Increase student voice and communication regarding school policies
- Discuss rigor and high expectations to succeed
- Equity of funding between athletics and the arts
- Increase authentic learning experiences
- Improve the quality and options of the cafeteria food

“We have great teachers who are very supportive.”

“The school has lots of classes and activities. We are well prepared for college. Teachers are always willing to help.”



Staff

Darien has exceptional teachers, support staff and administrators. The staff is talented, dedicated and has great pride in the District. The community and student body recognize the professional expertise, commitment and efforts of the staff to support all students. The staff exhibits a high level of commitment to professional learning and are experts in pedagogy. They also support the students and one another via caring relationships and personalized learning environments. Teachers highlighted the need for more autonomy in decision-making and planning professional development activities.

Strengths

- The student body
- High caliber and work ethic of teachers
- Overall quality of education provided to students
- Exemplary student achievement
- High level of collaboration among staff
- Availability of resources
- Parent involvement
- Variety of athletic and extracurricular activities

Opportunities

- Ongoing collaboration with parents to support students' social, emotional and academic learning
- Create more opportunities for staff autonomy and decision-making
- Celebrate the good work of the staff
- Provide more supports for the average student
- Increase the opportunities to collaborate PK-12 across disciplines
- Increase the reliability and coherent use of technology
- Better utilize professional development and the Teacher Evaluation Plan to support teachers' professional learning and practices



“The staff is raging with competence.”
“The teachers are high caliber with a strong work ethic.”

Parents & Community



The parents and school community are highly involved and play an important role in the life of the schools. Parents and community organizations are tremendously supportive of the schools with their talents, finances, resources and time. Parents and community members are involved in decision making and seek additional opportunities to partner with the schools to support student learning.

Strengths

- High level of support and engagement of community and parents
- Strong staff and administrators
- Academic achievement and performance of students
- Overall quality of the educational experience
- Provision of athletic and extracurricular activities
- Coordination and revision of PK-12 curriculum
- Opportunities to collaborate with administrators
- Excellent return on investment

Opportunities

- Expand social and emotional wellness programming
- Continued improvement to elementary school facilities & removal of portables
- A desire for lower class sizes
- Explore alternate school start times
- Increase authentic learning experiences
- Revisit transportation policies and practices
- Improve and simplify communication

“We have an amazing community with wonderful teachers and highly educated and engaged parents.”
“I am really impressed with the way the school encourages the children to be good citizens/community members.”

Other Emerging Themes



1. Vision, Mission & Goals
2. Equity & Diversity
3. Teaching and Learning
4. Communication
5. Culture & Organization

Next Level of Work



Vision, Mission & Goals

Presently, the Board of Education establishes annual District Goals and Objectives as part of its strategy to promote District improvement. The absence of continuity in leadership and longer term visionary documents contributes to a lack of system coherence around priorities and the future direction of the District.

- Complete and implement a *Strategic Plan (Vision, Mission, Values & Goals)* to provide a blue print and evaluation metrics for future priorities and the allocation of resources.
- Develop a *Vision of the Graduate* to provide a pathway toward deeper learning opportunities for students.

Equity & Diversity

District work is guided by decision-making that is in the best interests of ALL students.

- Ensure that all learners are challenged, engaged and represented regardless of ability and background.
- Explore and address any inconsistencies in performance among schools and/or populations of students.
- Seek learning experiences through coursework, curriculum, and programming in order to prepare students for a diverse world.
- Explore how best to use resources to support the differentiated needs of students with learning differences and exceptionalities, English Language Learners, students requiring tiered supports and students from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Implement policies and practices that support equity and diversity.

Next Level of Work

Teaching and Learning

District curriculum is a PK-12 strength that provides an exceptional foundation for teaching and learning.

- Ensure the curriculum provides the skills students need to compete in a globalized world.
- Increase access to rigorous curricula for students with learning differences and exceptionalities, English Language Learners, students requiring tiered supports and students from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Integrate the use of technology into teaching and learning including distance learning opportunities.
- Review STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts & Math) opportunities and personalized learning experiences to engage students at the highest possible levels.
- Explore the elementary curriculum with an interdisciplinary lens including an integrated approach to social emotional learning.
- Utilize the expertise of the staff to recognize teacher voice to promote innovation, action research, job embedded professional learning and inquiry when engaging in collaborative settings.

Communication

Stakeholders have high expectations for District performance, transparency and excellent communication.

- Seek ways to improve communications with staff and with the greater school community.
- Explore strategies to improve systems technology for effective communication.

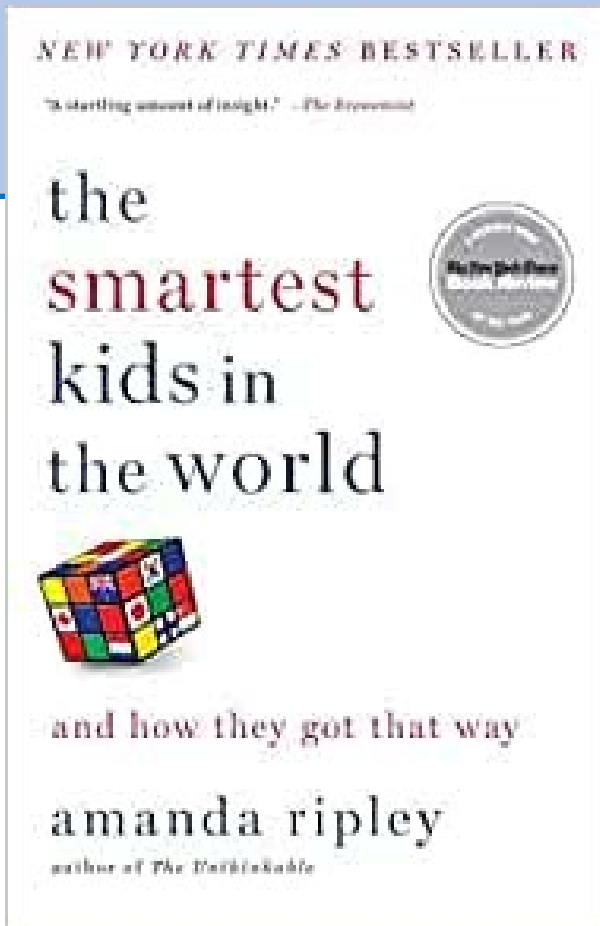
Next Level of Work

Culture & Organization

Student safety is always the top priority and prerequisite to District success. Enhancements and constant progress monitoring in this area is essential.

- Review and enhance factors contributing to students' social-emotional, intellectual and physical safety.
- Address the pressure for students to succeed juxtaposed with the need for learning experiences that encourage perseverance, integrity and the reality of consequences.
- Evaluate and improve the reliability and access of technology.
- Empower administrators and teachers with greater autonomy in decision-making.
- Differentiate resources to support the individual needs of administrators, schools, teachers and students.
- Improve facilities in the elementary schools.
- Update District policies.
- Review staff evaluation systems to ensure support for the professional growth of all staff.
- Seek additional opportunities to celebrate and share the accomplishments of the teachers and students.

The Smartest Kids in the World



On the surface, the differentiating factors were teacher quality, local autonomy, and trust. Yet it was *rigor* that separated the smartest. These schools were solely academic environments preparing students not only with the skills they needed to compete in a globalized world, but with a taste of failure so that students learned about perseverance, hard work, integrity and consequences in advance of facing it in the real world.

“History shows us that great leaders matter, and so does luck. Politics are critical, as is power. All major shifts, though, also require a feeling that spreads among people like a whispered oath, kitchen table by kitchen table, until enough of them agree that something must be done.”

Amanda Ripley