



WESTPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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To: Westport Board of Education Members
From: Thomas Scarice, Superintendent of Schools
Re: Strategic Planning Update: Initial Inquiry and Synthesis
Date July 22, 2021

The following strategic planning update is being provided to the Board as a summary of an initial inquiry conducted with comprehensive focus groups of faculty, support staff, parents, and students across the system in May and June. The information has been synthesized into broad themes for the Board's consideration in response to the various questions asked of these stakeholder groups.

In May, I proposed a schedule for Board consideration which began with inquiry and synthesis, prior to a point of opportunity for Board reflection, feedback and input, and the development of a strategy map. I will share this information in writing below and help facilitate a discussion by expanding on the recurring themes identified at the July 27 Board meeting. Board member reflection, feedback, and input is expected in response to this information at the meeting in order to provide overall governing direction for this process and the entire school district.

As I advocated in May, small group discussions, where those closest to the work can express their insights, thoughts and feelings, not only provide critical "bottom-up" information to the Board as we embark on long-term planning, but it conveys a strong message about an inclusive professional culture that values the individuals at all levels of the system. Additionally, this process enabled me, as a leader new to the district, to finally have "face time" with teachers, support staff, parents, and students, at the end of an extraordinary and restrictive first year. This proved invaluable as I received significant positive feedback and appreciation for the process, while availing myself of the opportunity to begin to develop meaningful relationships across the district.

Baseline Information

The initial inquiry and synthesis stage will provide the Board with baseline information that could inform the strategic direction of a long-term plan. The information in this stage will need to be tested and verified with a thorough survey process to confirm the accuracy of my findings. In addition, the values, beliefs, and objectives identified in the 2017 strategic plan will also be tested to determine if these core components still apply, and if certain strategic objectives were achieved during the life of that plan.

I have secured the services of Education Consultant and retired superintendent, Judith Ives Wilson, former superintendent of Princeton (NJ) and Woodbury (NJ), to facilitate the testing and verification process. Judith will serve in an objective capacity to ensure that the information gathered represents the views and insights of the district stakeholders. In addition, Judith will assist in the subsequent training of a core team of educators that will lead the design and implementation of the strategic planning work. Once the findings are tested and verified, this information can then be packaged with the data collected on the list of sources attached at the end of this memo. These sources were cited at the June 14 Board meeting. The depth of this baseline information will provide a solid foundation to advance the strategic planning work.

The Process of Inquiry and Synthesis: Focus Groups

Over a period of nine full days (8:00 a.m.- 3:30 p.m.), I met in small groups with a total of approximately 50 individuals at each school and the Stepping Stones Preschool, an aggregate total of over 400 faculty, support staff, parents, and students. The meeting dates were as follows: May 25, 27, 28, June 2, 4, 7, 11, 14 and 16. This significant investment of time was worth every minute as I gathered critical insights while beginning the process of developing professional relationships with a wide range of stakeholders.

I asked a set of core questions for each group. I have found that sometimes in groups of 8-10 people air time can be difficult to share. To mitigate this effect, I used a process to enable reflection and shared air time. After an introduction and warm up, I posed a question, gave a moment for reflection, and had each participant write their responses on "sticky notes" that were then placed on large pieces of chart paper. Each idea warranted its own "sticky note" which I would eventually use for sorting and interpreting. I then read aloud each "sticky note" response to the group, asked for

clarifications, questions, additions, etc. We then proceeded to the next question. At the end of the meeting I summarized the overall strategic planning process, how this information would be used, and how the school community would learn about my findings (i.e. in a summary preceding the testing and verification survey to be administered in the near future).

After some revisions during the process, the following questions were asked of each group (edited for the purposes of this document):

- Faculty and Support Staff
 - What do we do well?
 - Describe the culture.
 - What two top -priority areas/bodies of work should we address together in the next 3-5 years?
 - What's one change we should make right now?
 - What should we never change?
 - Summarize your expectations for school/district leadership in one statement.
- Parents
 - What do we do best for your child?
 - What do you wish we offered (curricular or co-curricular) that we do not yet?
 - What changes would you recommend?
 - What do you see as the primary sources of stress for kids?
 - Summarize your expectations for the school district in one statement.
- Students
 - What is the best part of your day? What do we do best?
 - What is something you would recommend we change about school?
 - What suggestions do you have for your teachers to improve our school?
 - What are the sources of stress that kids feel?

In short, the questions were an attempt to surface:

- assets and strengths to build from,
- features of the professional culture that hinder or accelerate performance,
- priorities for long-term improvement as seen by individual stakeholders, and
- areas of stress for students.

The question asking parents “*Summarize your expectations for the school district in one statement.*” can serve a critical role as the Board considers outcome measures for a strategic plan. The district wide leadership team will dissect the responses at an upcoming meeting and capture the most salient expectations for the system through the eyes of our parents. I’m confident that this information will prove invaluable in developing outcomes measures over time.

Findings/Themes

I have captured the most frequent responses and grouped these replies into themes or categories. Each idea remains archived and can be referred to for clarification, in addition to the testing and verification process we will employ. I have grouped and listed the themes and categories below in statements for the identified questions and will elaborate on each at the meeting on July 27.

Faculty/Support Staff

- What do we do well?
 - The responses most frequently cited:
 - the ample resources provided by the district to our faculty and staff
 - the academic program provided to our students Pre-K-12
 - “teacher to teacher” support and collegiality
 - the emphasis on social/emotional development.
 - Other themes raised as strengths of the district:
 - professional development over the years
 - highly engaged families and strong parent partnerships
 - the hiring and retaining of highly skilled and exemplary faculty
 - sense of community in our schools
 - the broad arts program
 - special education and intervention programs
 - extracurricular programming
 - crisis response (i.e. the pandemic)
 - communication
 - “forward thinking” historically
 - administrative support
 - inclusive instruction
 - the “middle school” model

- Describe the culture.
 - The responses most frequently cited:
 - positive/supportive/welcoming
 - High “horizontal trust”, low “vertical” trust
 - stressful/competitive
 - unhealthy pace/initiative overload
 - Other themes raised as descriptors of the culture:
 - student centered
 - committed to professional growth
 - sense of feeling undervalued
 - high performance expectations
- What two top -priority areas/bodies of work should we address together in the next 3-5 years?
 - The responses most frequently cited:
 - Social/Emotional, Whole Child Development
 - Curriculum renewal/refresh
 - professional development focus
 - “teacher to teacher” professional collaboration structures
 - special education resources/staffing
 - Other themes raised as priorities:
 - standardized testing/assessment
 - diversity/equity/inclusion
 - faculty morale/culture
 - human resources (coverage, hiring)
 - pace
 - instructional approaches
 - technology
 - facilities
 - staffing structures
 - start times
 - class size
 - progress reports
 - Open Choice program
 - schedules
 - BOE/Central Office/Staff Relations
 - reduce pressure/competition

Parents

- What do we do best for your child?
 - The responses most frequently cited:
 - academic development
 - sense of classroom/school community
 - social/emotional development
 - know students as individuals
 - curriculum breadth
 - listen to/communicate with parents
 - Other themes raised:
 - outstanding faculty
 - extracurricular program
 - abundant resources
 - special education programming
 - fun/engaging environment
- What do you wish we offered (curricular or co-curricular) that we do not yet?
 - The responses most frequently cited:
 - executive functioning
 - practical life skills
 - social skills
 - more opportunities for instruction with less screen time
 - Other themes raised:
 - public speaking
 - increased science instruction
 - transition skills from level to level
- What changes would you recommend?

- The responses most frequently cited:
 - homework
 - class size
 - recess/unstructured time
 - home/school communication
 - world language program
 - start times
 - standardized testing
 - guidance program
- What do you see as the primary sources of stress for kids?
 - The responses most frequently cited:
 - grades
 - social media
 - college acceptance process
 - narrow definition of “success”
 - standardized testing
 - pressure to conform to peer groups

Students

- What is the best part of your day? What do we do best?
 - The responses most frequently cited:
 - welcoming and kind adults
 - adults who know and care for students
 - elementary: recess, WIN block
 - high school: breadth of electives, courses, teachers know their students
 - middle school: teachers are flexible, numerous electives, safe learning environment
- What is something you would recommend we change about school?
 - The responses most frequently cited:
 - cafeteria offerings
 - more project based learning
 - more field trips
 - connection to real world when learning academics
 - more life skills: social media strategies, current/modern day issues facing students
 - teach self-advocacy
 - less focus on standardized tests preparation
- What suggestions do you have for your teachers to improve our school?
 - The responses most frequently cited:
 - more hands-on learning
 - less reliance on technology
 - flexible furniture
 - movement breaks
- What are the sources of stress that kids feel?
 - The responses most frequently cited:
 - grades/GPA
 - social media
 - “pressure cooker” environment
 - homework

Data Sources

The following is a list of data sources that will be utilized to inform the strategic plan. This information will serve as part of baseline data. Some of these sources are easily accessible and some need to be either created or surfaced. These data sources have been grouped into the following categories: overall, social/emotional, academic, both academic and social/emotional, and professional climate.

Overall

- 2017 Strategic Plan
- Tri State Visit Reports
- Parent Satisfaction Surveys
- Alumni Studies

Social/Emotional

- School Climate Surveys
- Crisis Response Data/Unidentified referral data
- # of risk assessments conducted
- # of referred to community agencies
- Student attendance
- Discipline referral rates
- Youth Risk Behavior Surveys
- Student Well Being Surveys
- Participation in Extracurriculars

Academic

- College acceptance rates (highest, most, etc. competitive schools)
- College completion rate
- Universal screen data (NWEA)
- SBAC, SAT, ACT
- Curriculum Based Measures/Common Assessments
- Grade reports (D/F list)
- # students with a tutor

Both Social/Emotional and Academic

- # referred to PPT, 504
- # qualified for RTI
- Exit data for sped and RTI

Professional Climate

- Teacher attendance
- Positive messages to teachers/admin
- Teacher turnover
- School Climate Surveys
- Professional exit interviews

Next Steps

Although the timelines have been adjusted since my first presentation to the Board, it is important that this work is done correctly and sometimes the need to slow down can accelerate growth in the long-term. Following Board input Tuesday night, the next step would be to identify the best time to administer surveys to stakeholders for the purposes of testing and verifying the information gathered in the focus groups, perhaps as members of our school community return from summer activities in late August. Priorities for long-term planning will emerge from this work and Board input will be essential in providing direction.. Concurrently, a core team of 18-20 educators across all schools, levels and functions will be identified to convene at the start of the school year. This group will serve in this capacity to begin the development of the elements of a “strategy map” (i.e. strategic objectives, initiatives, measures) once the overall direction of the primary areas of focus, or “pillars”, are confirmed by the Board. Perhaps further Board deliberation and input can be considered for the August 30 meeting.