

WESTPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION

AGENDA*

(Agenda Subject to Modification in Accordance with Law)

PUBLIC SESSION/PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

7:00 p.m., Staples High School, Cafeteria B (Room 301)

ANNOUNCEMENTS FROM BOARD AND ADMINISTRATION

PUBLIC QUESTIONS/COMMENTS ON NON-AGENDA ITEMS (15 MINUTES)

MINUTES: December 20, 2021, *pages 1-3*

DISCUSSION

1. Appointment of Board of Education Committees

Ms. Lee Goldstein

DISCUSSION

1. Strategic Planning Presentation, *pages 4-12*

Mr. Thomas Scarice

ADJOURNMENT

*A 2/3 vote is required to go to executive session, to add a topic to the agenda of a regular meeting, or to start a new topic after 10:30 p.m.

The meeting can also be viewed on Cablevision on channel 78; Frontier channel 6021 and by video stream @ www.westportps.org

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION WELCOME USING THE FOLLOWING GUIDELINES:

- Comment on non-agenda topics will occur during the first 15 minutes *except* when staff or guest presentations are scheduled.
- Board will not engage in dialogue on non-agenda items.
- Public may speak as agenda topics come up for discussion or information.
- Speakers on non-agenda items are limited to 2 minutes each, except by prior arrangement with chair.
- Speakers on agenda items are limited to 3 minutes each, except by prior arrangement with chair.
- Speakers must give name and address, and use microphone.
- Per Board policy, speakers must be town residents or employees
- Responses to questions may be deferred if answers not immediately available.
- Public comment is normally not invited for topics listed for action after having been publicly discussed at one or more meetings.

Be it resolved, that having been duly appointed to fill a vacancy of the Board in accordance with Connecticut General Statute Section 10-219, and upon taking the Oath of Office in accordance with Connecticut General Statute Section 10-218a, Neil Phillips shall serve as Secretary of the Board.

**MOTION: Lee Goldstein
SECOND: Christina Torres
RESULT: Passed Unanimously
VOTE: 6-0**

Appointment of Board of Education Committees

Be it resolved that the Board of Education establishes membership as follows to its ad hoc committees:

- **Policy Committee membership shall be comprised of Lee Goldstein, Liz Heyer, and Kevin Christie, with Lee Goldstein as Committee Chair;**
- **Teaching and Learning Committee membership shall be comprised of Dorie Hordon, Christina Torres, and Neil Phillips, with Dorie Hordon as Committee Chair; and**
- **Finance and Facilities Committee membership shall be comprised of Liz Heyer, Kevin Christie, and Robert Harrington, with Liz Heyer as Committee Chair.**

Be it further resolved that the Board of Education appoints Lee Goldstein as the CABA Liaison.

**MOTION: Lee Goldstein
SECOND: Dorie Hordon
RESULT: Passed Unanimously
VOTE: 6-0**

DISCUSSION

Health Report

FY 2022 Preliminary Budget Discussions with Board of Finance, RTM Education Chair, and Finance Committee Chair

Strategic Planning Update

DISCUSSION/ACTION

Proposed Course Additions:

- AP Computer Science
- Popular Music and Diversity in American Society (UConn)

Be it resolved, that upon the recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools, beginning the 2022-2023 school year, the Board of Education authorizes the offering of “AP Computer Science A” and “Popular Music and Diversity in American Society” as full-year courses at Staples High School, in accordance with the materials accompanying the agenda of the

meeting of December 20, 2021.

MOTION:Christina Torres
SECOND: Kevin Christie
RESULT: Passed Unanimously
VOTE: 6-0

Proposed Board of Education Meeting Dates 2022-2023

Be it resolved, that upon the recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools, the Board of Education approves the Draft A calendar of scheduled public meetings for the period July 1, 2022, through June 30, 2023.

MOTION: Christina Torres
SECOND:Dorie Hordon
RESULT: Passed Unanimously
VOTE: 6-0

ADJOURNMENT: Liz Heyer moved to adjourn at 9:15 p.m.; seconded by Christina Torres and passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Lee Goldstein Acting Secretary, Board of Education
(minutes written by Lisa Marriott and Jennifer Caputo)



WESTPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

THOMAS SCARICE
Superintendent of Schools

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To: Westport Board of Education Members
From: Thomas Scarice, Superintendent of Schools
Re: January 4, 2022 Board of Education Meeting: Strategic Planning Update
Date: December 30, 2021

For decades public schools have been called to respond to societal need. From the Horace Mann purpose of developing literate, moral, and productive citizens, to the compulsory education movement in the early 20th century, followed by the desegregation efforts of the Civil Rights Era and the science/math movement precipitated by the 1957 Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite, public schools are littered with examples of admirably answering the call.

More recently, most modern classrooms continue to reflect the consequences of the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, "A Nation at Risk". Framed by the foreboding declaration on the first page of the text, "*If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.*", "A Nation at Risk" cleared the path for the standards-based education movement of the 1990s and 2000s in yet another response to the calls of society.

Two of the authors of this seminal document now publicly recant their alarmism, including the writer responsible for that infamous line. Yet, 40 years later, it is clear that explicit academic content standards, measured on high stakes accountability tests administered at the state level, continue to serve as the centerpiece to public education policy and practices across the nation.

Objective academic content standards serve a critical role in formal education. Assessing student performance is another necessity in an effective educational process. Yet, while necessary, academic content standards and the standards-based education movement fall short in preparing students for the challenges of the modern, and future, world.

Essential Questions for Consideration:

- To what extent are we preparing our students for the true challenges of work and citizenship that they will confront as young adults?
- What are the consequences for students, and our society, if our students are unable to meet these challenges as a result of not transforming our current practice?
- How can our schools justify much of what we do?

Where Our Process Began

In the 2010s, the work of the Westport Public Schools was driven by the vision of former Superintendent, Dr. Elliott Landon, and the inspirational “Westport 2025” plan. Launched in 2010, “Westport 2025” was a districtwide, K-12, curriculum initiative, designed to develop students' critical and creative thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills.

In conjunction with university partners from Teachers College, Columbia University, “Westport 2025” initiated a number of major curriculum changes in the school district that remain relevant and alive in our classrooms today. This work provides strong shoulders on which to stand as we fasten our attention to the future.

In 2017, the most recent iteration of a Board of Education adopted strategic plan emerged. This adaptation introduced explicit belief statements, guiding principles, and a district commitment to diversity and inclusion. In addition, a significant number of goals and objectives were identified in five broad “realms”: Teaching and Learning, Healthy Learning Environment, Organizational Synergy and Efficacy, Facilities and Finance, and Stakeholders. The executive summary can be viewed here:

https://www.westportps.org/uploaded/site_files/www/District/Strategic_Plan_Summary_16-page_FINAL_10-30-18_EDIT.pdf

For a variety of reasons, including a facilities crisis at Coleytown Middle School and turnover in key leadership positions, the plans and intentions of the 2017 adaptation were not realized. This deleterious churn was only compounded by a generational pandemic.

At the outset of my tenure as Superintendent, I drafted and presented an initial entry plan, which endeavored to include a modest number of strategic actions along with customary steps that enable a new leader to learn about, and begin building relationships with, the school community. One of these steps included the task of actively gathering stakeholder feedback. This work would ultimately culminate in serving as a part of the foundation of information that would be used to inform long-term strategic planning.

A report of this process was provided to the Board of Education on July 22, 2021. A summary of my interpretations of these focus group meetings was captured in a five page memo to the Board in advance of the meeting. That summary can be viewed here:

<https://resources.finalseite.net/images/v1627385122/westport/zscoiwsx4ytdwoab6nv/7-27-21SpecialMeeting-Packet2.pdf>

Role of Strategic Planning

Strategic planning, by definition, helps organizations set priorities, while focusing energy and harnessing resources towards a common vision and agreed upon goals. This process enables the assessment and adjustment of an organization’s direction in response to performance and an ever-changing external environment. When done well, strategic planning clearly articulates not only where an organization is going and the actions needed to make progress, but also where it will anchor its focus, and how it will know if it is successful.

As much as it is critical to establish consensus on what a strategic plan is, it is equally important to clarify what a strategic plan is not. If an effective strategic plan is characterized by directing focus to a couple of high leverage areas, then a strategic plan is not a process by which an organization captures each and every effort and plan within the system.

Our system will continue to advance plans that address facilities, technology, and equity and inclusion, among numerous others. At times, these individual plans may intersect with our strategic focus areas (i.e. perhaps in curriculum initiatives, professional learning, etc.), and at other times work will be undertaken to singularly advance the goals of these individual plans. Facilities, through a refresh of the Board adopted capital maintenance plan (i.e. Antinozzi report), equity and diversity (final report to be presented to the Board within the next month), and technology (in need of a refresh following Board adoption of a strategic plan), will all receive Board attention as each plays a critical role in advancing the system.

Ordinary Continuous Improvement

In the day to day work of professional educators, there is an element of continuous improvement that compounds over time to collectively produce organizational growth. Reflective practice, the ability of an individual to reflect on one's actions with a critical stance towards one's own practice, engages the professional in a process of continuous adaptation and learning.

Over time schools can improve performance through the normal course of reflective practice of individuals. Yet, these actions, taken largely in isolation, result in pockets of excellence and modest organizational growth, void of singular coherence across the thirteen years of formal K-12 schooling.

On the other hand, the execution of a focused, coherent strategy is about driving systemic change, namely, building the organizational capabilities to increase performance towards a compelling vision, by design, and much more intentionally, than “business as usual”.

The Power of Focus to Accelerate Growth

A system, like a peak performing individual, is more likely to achieve its best work with deep focus. As the volume of distractions continues to increase, external forces relentlessly put pressure on the system (i.e. a pandemic, the economy, technology disruptions, etc.).

In order for a school system to have its greatest impact for the most students, and for the greater good, a compelling vision with deep focus is necessary. This manifestation is perhaps best captured by psychologist, author, and contributor to the emotional intelligence movement of the 1990s, Daniel Goleman, with his observation that “*Focus is the hidden driver of excellence.*”

A scan of the horizon can provide a window into areas of highest leverage, namely, how strategy execution of a few concentrated, focused areas can accelerate growth beyond “business as usual” to achieve a clearly defined bold vision. If the question is, “*To what extent are we preparing our students for the true challenges of work and citizenship that they will*

confront as young adults?”, then the answer must first contemplate the requisite capacities students will need to thrive, and these capacities must drive the work of the system.

A comprehensive and inclusive process of information gathering was conducted over a six month period, and a thorough analysis by 28 Westport Public Schools educators, shared below, provides the Board with the rationale for the recommendation of two concentrated areas of focus intended to accelerate growth for the next strategic plan.

Inclusive Information Gathering Process

After months of remote instruction, hybrid learning, and transition planning for the 2021-22 school year, the spring of 2021 finally offered an opportunity to dedicate focused time and energy to strategic long term plans.

As mentioned earlier, part of my initial entry plan included a robust series of focus groups throughout our schools. Over a period of nine full days in May and June, 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.

As I shared with the Board over the summer, 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 provided a set of core questions/prompts for each group:

- What do we do well?
- Describe the culture.
- What are two priority areas/bodies of work we should 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 the school district in one statement.

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 visibly 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. as we proceeded to the next question. These conversations, and my analysis of the information gathered based on over 4,000 comments and suggestions (i.e. sticky notes), formed the first building block in our work toward the development of our strategic goals.

Simultaneously in the spring of 2021, we began to think more broadly about a deeply inclusive process for determining our course of action and about what other data and inputs would be important.

Given my singular interpretation of the focus group feedback, a testing and verification process of these findings was initiated. Education consultant and retired superintendent, Judith Ives Wilson, was secured. Judith served in an objective capacity to ensure that the information gathered, and subsequent interpretations, represented the views and insights of the district stakeholders. Judith facilitated the testing and verification process through broad dissemination of surveys to faculty, parents, students, administrators, and the community at-large. In addition, Judith assisted in the ensuing facilitation of the core team of 28 WPS educators in a two day analysis/planning retreat on November 16 and 17, 2021.

Surveys were administered to confirm the findings of the focus groups, but also to gather opinions and suggestions from multiple groups of stakeholders through thoughtful open-ended questions. In all, there were 2,594 responses to the surveys, including 260 community members without children in our schools. In addition Judith conducted 37 “1:1” interviews with individual district leaders and members of the Board of Education.

Finally, the district hosted two thought provoking “futurists”, Mitchell Weiss and Chris Bishop, in the fall for a keynote address and open community question and answer forum. Mitch and Chris were asked to share their thinking with all stakeholders across our community and to help us begin to think forward.

If the district’s strategic focus is to prepare our students for the true challenges of work and citizenship that they will confront as young adults, then a forecasting of that future is warranted. By drawing on their work in the Harvard Business School and IBM, as well as deep research into the dynamic futuristic needs in the worlds of work and citizenship, Mitch and Chris offered insights for the school community to consider that project the capacities our students will need to thrive 10, 20, and 30 years from now.

Along with the focus group analysis, the survey results, the 1:1 interview summaries, the open-ended responses in the surveys, and the insights from two “futurists”, a team of 28 of our exceptionally talented educators representing PK-12 poured over this collection of data and engaged in two full days of facilitated learning, discussion, and direction setting with our consultant, Judith Wilson. The collective charge was established:

Think systemically about areas of focus that would offer the greatest impact for the most students, and for the greater good. Consider compelling focus areas so that the district could harness its resources, talents, and energy in order to serve all children well and prepare them for the challenges of 2022 and beyond.

The core team endeavored to create a roadmap, not a manual, to yield the greatest return on investment for our students.

Recommended Areas of Focus for Strategic Planning

The throughlines of analysis were clear. After a thorough examination of the vast input provided by stakeholders, and by scanning the horizon, the core planning team determined that Westport's students and educators would be best served with a focus on two primary areas to develop over the next 3-5 years:

- Social and Emotional Wellness and
- Collaborative Problem-Solving/Design Thinking

Some of the most insightful information on the focus of social/emotional wellness was found in the open-ended responses to survey questions of faculty and parents to the following questions:

- Parents:
 - In order for students to thrive in the 21st century, I think that students should learn more about _____
 - The three top skills that students will need to be successful in the changing workforce and our changing society are _____
 - If I were setting the district's strategic goals for the next three to five years, I would set goals which focus on _____
- Faculty:
 - The three top skills that students will need to be successful in the changing workforce and our changing society are _____
 - If I were setting the district's strategic goals for the next three to five years, I would focus on these three areas _____

After a thorough review of this consequential feedback, a strong theme emerged for the core team in response to recent mental health trends, and the projected social and emotional capacities that students will need to thrive as young adults and beyond.

The vibrant intersection between open-ended stakeholder survey responses, focus group feedback, and the projected capacities highlighted by our guest "futurists", spoke clearly about the need for well adjusted dispositions, while fostering the abilities of our students to regulate emotions, empathize with others, endure ambiguity, take on alternate perspectives, and embrace a healthy measure of humility. The development of executive functioning skills was also widely cited by numerous parents in focus groups and surveys as a critical missing element to our educational program.

Not only do reports of a current mental health crisis call for immediate action, the future ability of our students to actively and successfully participate in the global marketplace, and as 21st century citizens, necessitate such a focus on social and emotional wellness.

Yet, as the team deliberated over the course of two days, it was evident that the strength of the district academic program, along with the exemplary faculty and support staff, would benefit from a strategic focus that would augment the current instructional approach. A powerful academic program is only made stronger with a coherent focus that binds purposeful learning

longitudinally over the years, perhaps even answering the vexing age-old student question of, “When will I ever use this?”.

Again, the essential question of the extent to which we are preparing our students for the true challenges of work and citizenship that they will confront as young adults loomed in our collective minds. At this point in the retreat, a cross disciplinary thought emerged from a faculty member in the arts. The concept of “design thinking” was put forth for consideration.

Throughout the past six month journey, broad consensus would confirm that our students will continually face extraordinarily complex challenges throughout their lives, most that do not even exist today. Their ability to collaboratively problem solve will be essential to contribute on an individual level, but also collectively on a societal level. How could a thread pull through an already strong academic program to prepare students for these challenges?

By definition, design thinking has a human-centered core. It encourages an iterative solution focus process. The steps in a design thinking process, such as the protocol established in the Stanford Graduate School of Business, offers an opportunity for a school system to unpack the skills and the overall process to identify foundational competencies needed for effective collaborative problem solving. In short, professional educators can point to the “micro-skills” beneath the surface of each step, and work to build these competencies into an already strong academic program at all levels, PK-12.

For example, the Stanford Graduate School of Business 5 stages of design thinking include:

1. Empathize—sense the human needs behind the problem
2. Define—identify the core of the problem
3. Ideate—create many ideas and build on each other
4. Prototype—figure out what might work and what won't
5. Test—learn from real users

There is great value in using rigorous academic content to integrate the process of empathizing, substantive brainstorming, and prototyping across disciplines. These capacities can serve our students in not only their future professional lives, but also their personal lives.

If the school community endeavors to do our level best to make our kids “future proof”, as futurist Chris Bishop coined, then a deep and sustained focus on social and emotional wellness, and collaborative problem solving via design thinking, can provide a sturdy backbone to the core academic and whole child educational program of the Westport Public Schools.

Next Steps

For the purposes of the January 4 meeting, Board endorsement of these two areas of focus (i.e. social/emotional wellness and collaborative problem solving/design thinking) is sought. As a governing body, the act of setting a strategic direction is a critical role of a board of education. On behalf of the core strategic planning team, endorsement is sought to advance specific action plans to begin this exciting work.

The investment of “think tank” time will be a necessity if the Board endorses these concepts as primary drivers in a long-term strategic plan. Time and thought will be needed to clearly define social/emotional wellness and the capacities that will become the focus of not only programming, but of a complete and rigorous evaluation of current school-based, and district-wide, policies and practices that either encourage, or prohibit, healthy social/emotional development.

Behavior never lies. We cannot aspire to foster these social and emotional capacities in our students while promoting contradictory and inconsistent policies and practices. For example, if we truly support the concept of developing a “growth mindset” in our students based on social and emotional values, then we must confront practices that prematurely “stamp” belief systems into the minds of our students. Perhaps the confrontation of our current practices is where the need to muster the “courage to question” is the greatest.

Additionally, faculty will need to unpack the steps of design thinking, to pinpoint the “micro-skills”, to integrate with current successful practices, and to redesign curricular units and learning experiences that naturally embed this learning into the day to day work of our students. It is critical that this does not become an “event”, a singular project, or a high school course. In order to experience the exponential effect of the focus of collaborative problem solving via design thinking, the process has to find its way, naturally, into the daily academic content of our schools, at all levels, and effortlessly in all disciplines.

Measurement

Again, when done well, strategic planning clearly articulates not only where an organization is going and the actions needed to make progress, but also where it will anchor its focus, and how it will know if it is successful. Measurement is a key component of this process. However, measurement in public education, and perhaps in most mission-based organizations, can be problematic.

Public schools are notorious for having measures imposed on them by bureaucracies and higher levels of government, and then developing goals around those measures. Rarely do schools ask, “What do our students need?”, and then develop goals, and subsequent measures, around those aspirations. Conflating goals and measures is endemic in public schools.

However, there are models and pathways to prevent the “tail from wagging the dog”. Process measures and outcome measures can be divided and appropriately designed within a larger framework. Last spring I presented a framework I became enamored with a while back from the Harvard Business School called the “Balanced Scorecard”. I maintain that this framework encourages responsible planning, goal setting, and measuring, particularly with “mission-based” systems such as public schools.

Within the process of next steps, the district would be well-served to partner with experts in the nonprofit world, such as GuideStar by Candid, which provide exemplary models and supports in

developing a robust and credible measurement system. Such an effort could be coupled with the development of a holistic approach to program evaluation, a practice currently absent in our system.

With focused and honest intentions, appropriate measurement and program evaluation could provide the district with a straightforward analysis of current performance in the pursuit of continuous improvement.

Closing

“When there is genuine vision (as opposed to the all-too-familiar vision statement), people excel and learn, not because they are told to, but because they want to.”(Peter Senge)

This moment is an opportunity. The opportunity is a refresh, something countless stakeholders expressed an appetite for in focus groups discussions and surveys. The opportunity is also the chance to stand on strong shoulders and continue advancing the great work of our system to a new level.

With the aspiration to prepare our students for the true challenges of work and citizenship that they will confront as young adults, our system will achieve its best work with deep focus. As the Board deliberates and considers the overall strategic direction of our schools, a direction that will further distinguish our district, it is my recommendation, and that of a team of exemplary Westport educators, that a deep and sustained focus on social and emotional wellness, and collaborative problem solving via design thinking, can provide an inspiring backbone to the core academic and whole child educational program of the Westport Public Schools.