



DOVER-SHERBORN PUBLIC SCHOOLS SUPERINTENDENT ENTRY REPORT

Elizabeth M. McCoy, Ed.M.

April 2023

INTRODUCTION

As Superintendent, I am honored to be serving the students of Dover, Sherborn and Boston alongside many talented educators, supportive families and dedicated community members. The Dover-Sherborn Public Schools have a tradition of excellence in achieving their mission to “inspire, challenge and support all students as they discover and pursue their full potential.” As the primary instructional leader, I am committed to preserving this distinction and supporting the District in its pursuit of continuous improvement by bringing to fruition a shared vision for 21st century education.



As Assistant Superintendent, I initiated and engaged with educators in professional development focused on innovative, student-centered pedagogy and annually conducted numerous classroom observations. I also played a prominent role in the development of the District’s former strategic plan, Portrait of a Graduate and equity audit process. I chaired multiple teams and committees, including the Academic Innovation Committee, COVID Teaching & Learning Subcommittee and DS AIDE (Dover-Sherborn for Anti-racism, Inclusion, Diversity and Equity). Collectively, these experiences provided me with a solid understanding of current practices and foundation on which to build.

Through the superintendent entry process, I have sought to deepen my knowledge of the District through conversations with stakeholders, observations of systems and routines, the collection and analysis of data, and a review of documents and policies. Assistant Superintendent Denny Conklin has engaged in a similar study focused primarily on teaching and learning; his notes are integrated into this document. Consistency between findings lends validity to the themes and recommendations that follow.

This report includes a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data relative to the strengths, challenges, hopes and aspirations of the District and its constituents. Patterns are organized into emerging priorities or levers that will advance the system in achieving its mission. With further analysis, emerging priorities will evolve into strategic objectives and initiatives that will drive our collective work for the next three to five years. The complete Strategy for District Improvement will be presented in August/September followed by a detailed action plan later this fall.

DISTRICT STRENGTHS

Commitment to Community • Equity & Excellence • Respect & Dignity • Climate of Care

The Dover-Sherborn Public Schools are rooted in academic excellence and committed to sustained success and continuous improvement. By way of an academically rich and rigorous curriculum, extensive enrichment events and activities, highly competitive athletic teams and clubs, and a strong fine and performing arts program, students have an array of opportunities to develop their intellectual, physical and artistic abilities. Evidenced by multiple measures, including standardized test scores, graduation rates, college enrollment and alumni accounts, students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in postsecondary life. As reported by multiple interviewees and survey submissions, the schools are the community's greatest asset and are the reason most families choose to live and raise their children in Dover and Sherborn.

"We moved here and most value the rigor of education that Dover Sherborn schools provides in preparing students for life beyond 12th grade." -Chickering & High School Parent

Parents, educators and students named the community itself as a significant strength. With its small size, educational focus and rural landscape, there is high regard for and deep appreciation of the people and places that embody Dover-Sherborn. Over the past ten years, the towns have become more diverse, a positive noted by several respondents. Many also referenced the METCO program as an asset, allowing students to learn cooperatively alongside peers whose perspectives and backgrounds are different from their own, promoting skills such as empathy, critical thinking and problem-solving that prepare students for a diverse, multicultural world.

"Our greatest assets are our students. We are also lucky to have parents who value education and support the schools." - Chickering Educator

Of significant value noted by students, parents and caregivers are the faculty and staff, described as helpful, caring, supportive, flexible, understanding, fun, enthusiastic, dedicated and hard-working. Many revere the strong relationships that educators build with their students, seeking to get to know each as an individual and "uncover their unique gifts and talents." Staff also expressed deep respect for their colleagues and the positive climate and culture that contribute to a collaborative work environment.

"The colleagues with whom I work are our greatest asset." - Middle School Educator

The schools' focus on the whole child is a strength acknowledged by a significant portion of the staff and community. The District's decade-long work with Challenge Success has led to greater balance for students with research-based adjustments made to schedules, homework and assessments. A "silver lining" of pandemic learning is a marked shift in recognizing the importance of social-emotional wellness

as a precursor to learning; many noted the efforts made to expand programming and personnel to meet the growing need for mental and behavioral support. The recent equity audit reinforced the value of students' sense of belonging and its correlation to academic achievement, student motivation, classroom engagement and improved health. Together these measures have fostered a student-centered environment grounded in opportunities for learning and growth across multiple developmental realms.

"I think that DS should continue to promote well rounded students. Success should be measured not just by academic success, but also passion for a subject or career and intellectual curiosity."
- High School Student

PROCESS

PHASE I: LISTENING & LEARNING (September - February)

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the District's core values, culture and vision, its strengths and areas for growth, I conducted interviews and focus groups, administered surveys and questionnaires, visited schools and classrooms, and reviewed key documents and policies. Throughout the process, I focused on the depth of intellectual rigor and student engagement in learning and sought to identify any gaps in opportunities, achievement and systems of support. I also examined the ways in which financial governance, staff oversight and operational management serve to advance our mission.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH	
INTERVIEWS (41) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> School & District Leaders (15) School Committee Members (15) Town Officials (3) Local Safety Officials (6) Union Leaders (2) 	QUESTIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do you value most about the Dover-Sherborn Public Schools? What are the District's greatest strengths and assets? What challenges do we face as a school system and might we address them? The District's mission is "to inspire, challenge and support all students." In what ways do we inspire, challenge and support students? In what ways might we improve? To what extent does our district ensure equity and inclusivity? How could we do better? What should education in the 21st century look like? What shifts and changes should we consider? How should we measure the success of our district? Is there anything else you would like to share?
FOCUS GROUPS (22) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students (9) Educators (6) Parents/Community (7) 	
SURVEYS (355) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students (161) Educators (34) Parents/Community (160) 	

KEY DOCUMENTS	
CURRICULUM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DS Portrait of a Graduate • District and School Improvement Plans • NEASC Report • NYU Equity Audit Report • Curriculum documents • Academic Handbooks • Student performance and outcome data • Social-emotional survey data • District Curriculum Accommodation Plan • Student support plans • Technology Plan • Extracurricular offerings and involvement 	MANAGEMENT & OPERATIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Organizational Chart • Central Office Organizational Study • Staffing assignments • Financial documents • Capital Improvement Plans • Class size reports • Enrollment projections • Student and staff handbooks • Coordinated Program Review • Collective Bargaining Agreements • Policy Manual • Emergency Management Plans • DESE reports
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District website • District and school publications • Communication Survey results 	PROFESSIONAL CULTURE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educator evaluations • Culture and climate survey data • Professional Development Plan • Mentoring and Induction Handbook

PHASE II: DATA ANALYSIS & REFLECTION (March - April)

Through the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data collected in Phase I (“see,” “hear,” and count” data), patterns and trends that reflect District strengths and areas for growth were identified. With input from the Leadership Team, these emerging priorities have been outlined below. With further analysis, emerging priorities will evolve into strategic objectives and initiatives during Phase III of the entry process.

EMERGING PRIORITIES

EXCELLENCE & INNOVATION IN LEARNING - Maintain academic excellence and rigor while adapting practices to prepare graduates for success in a rapidly changing world.

STRENGTHS

- The District’s Portrait of a Graduate highlights the skills and competencies necessary for success as we empower students to become lifelong learners capable of navigating and adapting to a rapidly changing world.

- Through the generous support of the towns and parent/community organizations, students are exposed to an array of enrichment activities that supplement classroom learning; educators have access to resources that allow them to experiment with new practices and explore cutting-edge products.
- Elementary coaches have contributed to classroom-based professional development for educators in support of improved student outcomes in literacy, numeracy and social-emotional skills.
- Courses including AP Computer Science, Financial Literacy and Forensic Science have been added to the high school catalog and provide students an opportunity to explore topics and apply learning in relevant, real-world contexts.
- Through site-based visits and professional development sessions, educators have had opportunities to explore alternative instructional methods, including project-based and interdisciplinary learning; staff report feeling empowered to try new strategies.
- Educators have transformed spaces with flexible seating options that allow students to become aware of themselves as learners and make choices conducive to individual style and preference.



AREAS FOR GROWTH

- While educators are currently employing multiple research-based instructional practices, a shared district-wide vision for 21st century teaching and learning would focus efforts and maximize outcomes.
- Educators are eager to further actualize the Portrait of a Graduate by identifying strategies for classroom application and measures of student growth and mastery.
- Current grading practices reinforce task completion over deep learning and provide limited feedback to students and parents relative to growth and understanding.
- The District's Technology Plan is in need of revision and should be updated to reflect post-pandemic practices, current trends and future possibilities.
- Although school schedules include designated class time and breaks, they are not structured to cultivate deep learning, support social-emotional wellness and allow for community building.
- Efforts have been made to expand course options yet there exist few alternate pathways for students to explore individual topics of interest or non-traditional learning models.
- While buildings are well-maintained, learning spaces are not designed to promote student inquiry, creative design and collaborative problem-solving in line with 21st century learning.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How do we design learning experiences to prepare students for a rapidly changing world?
- How can we build upon students' innate curiosity and foster a lifelong love of learning?
- How do we balance technology usage with opportunities for student interaction and discourse?
- What types of spaces and schedules support 21st century learning?
- How can we partner with local agencies to expand opportunities for students?

CHALLENGING & SUPPORTING ALL STUDENTS - Enhance programming to ensure all students are able to achieve their full potential within a supportive learning environment.

STRENGTHS

- Educators are experts in their disciplines and provide a solid foundation for students across all subject areas.
- Staff develop strong relationships with students and recognize them as individuals with unique talents and needs; these connections serve as the basis for learning and provide avenues for students to seek support during and after their school experience.
- The District's decade-long work with Challenge Success has reinforced the importance of meeting the needs of the whole child and led to greater balance for students with research-based adjustments to schedules, homework and assessments.
- The development of a tiered system of support at the elementary level has provided for a more personalized learning experience as students are supported to meet and challenged to exceed grade-level benchmarks; this has also led to a decrease in special education referrals and findings of eligibility as services are provided in the general education setting.
- The expansion of programming and addition of personnel to meet academic, social-emotional and behavioral needs have provided greater support for all students, decreased dependence on out-of-district placements and allowed for the transition of some students back in-district.
- Additional personnel in the English Learner program have allowed the District to meet the needs of a growing population of multilingual students through direct service and collaboration with content-area experts.
- The equity audit served as an opportunity for the District to better understand the range of student experiences and outcomes, identify strengths and challenges relative to employing inclusive and equitable practices, and engage stakeholders in developing a common understanding of research and practice.
- The curriculum audit is a means to ensure the academic program engages all students as active learners in standards-aligned content by providing opportunities to explore topics and apply learning in relevant, authentic and real-world contexts; builds on students' strengths, interests, backgrounds and prior knowledge; and develops students' abilities to think critically, ask questions and analyze sources.
- The "silver linings" of pandemic learning and availability of one-to-one devices have provided additional means for student engagement via multiple apps and platforms as well as more consistency of expectations and materials via the Google suite and structured learning plans.



AREAS FOR GROWTH

- Although course-specific curriculum maps exist, there is a need for greater horizontal and vertical alignment of content and expectations to ensure a K-12 progression of learning and development.

- While the high school offers many advanced courses, enrollment data indicates that not all students access them; further analysis would identify any barriers and offer possible solutions.
- Parents expressed concern around the ability of the District to support students below grade level; others around challenging students above grade level; others around advancing students “in the middle.” Consideration should be given to the implementation of more differentiated practices.
- As the middle and high schools continue to address academic, social-emotional and behavioral needs, use of a framework to analyze data and provide interventions would maximize use of resources and advance progress toward student-specific goals.
- Many students report a strong sense of belonging; however, focus group and survey data indicates this is not true for all students. Further efforts should be made to build connections for students with diverse identities and those who do not have strong extracurricular affiliations.
- In response to bullying and bias-based incidents, students, educators and parents have requested additional tools and strategies to prevent, address and report these types of events.
- While the district is moving to adopt more restorative disciplinary practices, students, faculty and families have asked for more education around its principles and practices and associated behavioral expectations and consequences.
- In response to varied opinions around the change in start times, analysis of relative data points would identify intended and unintended outcomes and suggest necessary adjustments.
- Some parents referenced an assumption of financial wealth and stability among all Dover and Sherborn families, cautioning that child care, tutoring and other resources are not a given for all.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How do we ensure all students have access to rigorous coursework and learning opportunities?
- How do we simultaneously support and challenge students below, at and above grade level?
- How do we measure success and hold ourselves accountable to the growth of all students?
- How do we promote a safe, supportive and inclusive learning environment?

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING & GROWTH - Expand opportunities for professional growth and collaboration among educators in support of the District’s vision for teaching and learning.

STRENGTHS

- Educators and staff are highly skilled and committed to individual and collective growth in the application of evidence-based practices that lead to strong outcomes for all students.
- Educators are provided access to rich professional development opportunities within and outside the District and are granted time and financial support to pursue them in support of individual, school and district goals.



- A strong collaborative culture exists within schools that allow educators to engage in professional dialogue around curriculum, instruction and student support; there is a strong desire among faculty to expand these opportunities.

AREAS FOR GROWTH

- While educators appreciate the guidance of principals and teacher leaders, many express a need for additional content-specific instructional support in order to achieve the shifts outlined above.
- As many professional development options are provided, there is a desire among educators to identify gaps in training as well as opportunities to address multiple goals and initiatives at once.
- In line with the student version, educators are interested in developing a Portrait of an Educator to highlight professional skills and attributes aligned with the District's vision for 21st century learning and indicators inherent in the supervision and evaluation process.
- Educators are eager to identify ways to increase time/capacity for collaboration and professional learning within and across buildings.
- Both educators and administrators seek ways to make the supervision and evaluation process more meaningful in support of sustained professional growth and development.
- In response to the equity audit and evolving diversity within the community, educators and parents seek to increase efforts to recruit, support and retain highly qualified and diverse staff.
- The Central Office Organizational Study reinforced the need for additional administrative support in the area of human resources, focused primarily on educator recruitment and onboarding, employee management and evaluation, and legal compliance.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What resources are needed to support 21st century practice across PK-12 classrooms?
- How can we increase collaboration and planning time for educators?
- How do we expand opportunities for reflection, dialogue and feedback in the evaluation process?
- How can we further diversify our faculty and staff?
- How do we sustain continuous improvement while maintaining a healthy work-life balance?

FAMILY & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT - Engage families and community members in the strategic pursuit of a shared vision and mission.

STRENGTHS

- Schools provide multiple means of communication with parents via bi/weekly newsletters, emails and social media posts.
- The District has facilitated multiple community forums for parents and community members to share their hopes and apprehensions related to diversity, equity and inclusion work in the schools.
- The District is developing a new website that will be launched this summer; the goal is to provide a current,



user-friendly method for constituents to find information and stay apprised of school and district news.

AREAS FOR GROWTH

- Parents emphasized the importance of core disciplines as the foundation for learning. While recent communications have focused on various District initiatives as a means to improve transparency, efforts should be made to highlight the rich academic learning our students experience on a daily basis.
- In order to ensure all students have access to available opportunities and resources, parents/caregivers require additional curricular and programmatic information with clear contacts and avenues for communication.
- Students and parents have expressed interest in examining the school calendar to be more inclusive of the various holidays and traditions observed and celebrated by the community.
- While information is provided to families in multiple languages, consideration should be given to identify and eliminate barriers to full participation in school and community events.
- Recommendations from the equity audit were met with both support and apprehension; as the District moves forward with strategic objectives and action steps it will be important to communicate goals, share progress and solicit feedback.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How can we better highlight the rich learning and academic experiences of our students?
- How can we improve communication to increase access to information for all families?
- How can we further promote civil and constructive discourse within the community?

SAFE & SUSTAINABLE SPACES - Evaluate and update facilities to ensure safe, sufficient and sustainable spaces amidst a changing educational and environmental landscape.

STRENGTHS

- School buildings and grounds are well-maintained due to the hard work of custodial staff and commitment to capital improvements by the towns; the On-Site Insight Report is key to short-term and long-range planning of facility upkeep.
- Safety-related updates resulting from the 2018 security audit have provided for additional security measures and safeguards as part of the emergency preparedness and response plan.
- Sustainability continues to be a focus as systems are updated for energy efficiency, consumables are sorted for composting and recycling, and the student-led Sustainability Task Force educates constituents about the impact of individual and community choices.



AREAS FOR GROWTH

- Safety is a top priority of the District and there is strong support for continued updates to facilities, systems and protocols as they relate to emergency preparedness and response.
- Expansions of programming and fluctuations in enrollment have led to a shortage of available and appropriate space within buildings.
- While Pine Hill has been well maintained, consideration should be given to its aging infrastructure as the town faces costly improvements in the near future. Educators and parents have expressed concern about its lack of air conditioning and a need to address temperature and humidity.
- As the athletic facilities on the regional campus require updates, repairs and replacements, the District should consider additional funding sources and partnerships to support cost.
- Students, educators and parents have expressed tremendous support for green initiatives and encourage the District to expedite and expand its sustainability efforts.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How do we provide for the safety of our students and staff within buildings and across campuses?
- How can we increase space to meet the growing needs of our students and programs?
- How do we maintain, update and expand facilities within the financial means of the towns?
- What additional steps can be taken to support green infrastructure and sustainability?

NEXT STEPS

Following the presentation of findings to the Dover, Sherborn and Dover-Sherborn Regional School Committees, this report will be shared with the larger community for review. Feedback will be solicited and considered during the next phase of the entry process.

Over the course of this spring and summer, the Leadership Team will conduct an analysis of emerging priorities in order to identify strategic objectives and initiatives that will drive our work over the next three to five years. The final District Strategy will be presented in August/September followed by a detailed action outlining intended outcomes, required resources and an estimated timeline. Inherent in the plan will be ongoing communication with stakeholders including reports of progress and opportunities for feedback.

I am inspired by the District's understanding that maintaining an exceptional school district requires continuous reflection and a sustained drive for improvement. I look forward to the work ahead and invite you to partner with me as we aim to “inspire, challenge and support all students as they discover and pursue their full potential.”

