



# Harrisburg City School District

*2021-22 - 4<sup>TH</sup> QUARTER PROGRESS REPORT*

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## **Introduction**

This quarter (April 1 - June 30, 2022) marked the last weeks of the initial receivership which began on June 17, 2019, through June 17, 2022. Over the course of the last three years much work has been done to stabilize the Harrisburg City School District; however, the District continues to experience several challenges in the areas of finance, academics, and student stability, and requires continued close monitoring to achieve the goals of the Amended Recovery Plan.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, on May 23, 2022, the Pennsylvania Department of Education filed a petition to extend receivership for another term of three years, with the new term set to expire on June 17, 2025.

In the spring of 2019, prior to the onset of the first period of receivership, the Pennsylvania Department of Education contracted with Mass Insight to conduct a diagnostic study of the Harrisburg City School District.<sup>2</sup> Since the third quarter progress report provided a status update on the 62 initiatives of the Amended Recovery Plan, the focus of the fourth quarter progress report will be a comprehensive overview of the ten elements framed as recommendations for Harrisburg City School District in the Mass Insight Diagnostic Report of 2019:

- **Vision, strategy, and culture:** Clear vision, strategy and manageable set of priorities for the district that recognize the local environment (e.g., regulations, statutes, contracts, funding, politics, governance) and district's capacity for change while promoting a culture of excellence and high expectations for all.
- **Organizational clarity and collaboration:** Clear central office structures, processes, and policies that work together to support school and student success.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:fccf091e-43f7-3995-9e07-9fe30dd3dcd2>

<sup>2</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:a4e9b8ea-8915-35f7-9a7c-ae1c8c4dbc1a>

- **Focus on instruction:** Curriculum, materials, tools and supports that help school leaders, teachers and other school staff constantly improve and refine standards-based instructional practice.
- **School management:** Policies, structures, and systems that create the conditions needed for school success, maintain accountability for results, and enable effective school leaders.
- **Central services and operations:** Effective delivery of services to schools, allowing school-based educators to focus on teaching and learning.
- **Finance:** Alignment of financial resources with district needs and priorities.
- **Talent management:** Systems and processes to recruit, place, develop, and retain talented staff.
- **Stakeholder engagement and communications:** Intentional systems and processes to maintain open lines of communication with staff, family and community stakeholders.
- **Data:** Data is available and informs decision-making at all levels of the district and in schools.
- **Focus on equity:** Policies, structures, systems, and resources ensure equitable, high-quality education for all students, including students with exceptional needs.

These ten areas were recommended points of focus for the Harrisburg City School District during the initial three-year receivership and were used to frame the 62 initiatives of the Amended Recovery Plan. Progress in these ten areas is described below up to and including the final quarter of the 2021-22 school year, along with observations and recommendations for improvement as the 2022-23 school year begins.

## 1. Vision Strategy and Culture

The Superintendent engaged the services of Performance Fact, LLC, to assist him in establishing the vision for the Harrisburg School District. A series of listening sessions were held in the fall of 2021 with various stakeholder groups. These data were synthesized to create five strategic themes that would inform the District's work moving forward.<sup>3</sup> Those themes are: 1) Student - Teacher Relationship, 2) Family and Community Outreach, 3) Staff Support and Retention, 4) Equitable Access to Quality Programs, and 5) Proactive Communication.

The Superintendent also engaged the services of the National Center for College & Career Transition (NC3T) to begin to develop a Pathways framework for Harrisburg School District. During the fourth quarter of 2021-22 and over the summer months, the Superintendent and his team are working to develop a Course of Studies book for the high schools with the eventual goal of aligning courses to various college and career pathways.

The Superintendent possesses a high-level vision for improving the quality of education for students in Harrisburg School District; however, the gap between vision and strategic action is wide. From the Receiver's perspective, it will be necessary for the Superintendent to refine the vision and translate it into a manageable, actionable plan that the principals and District leadership will be expected to implement with fidelity. Creating a culture of excellence and high expectations must continue to be a focus in order to improve the academic performance of the Harrisburg School District. A deeper sense of urgency must be created among all stakeholders. Low expectations and academic performance cannot be an accepted standard in the Harrisburg School District. The Receiver believes that the District has demonstrated strong capability to embrace change over the past three years, but this capacity must now translate into stronger results in the classrooms.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:bfc9d802-a671-34a5-b1e0-762d3f370799>

## **2. Organizational Clarity and Collaboration**

The Superintendent worked to finalize the organizational chart during the fourth quarter of the 2021-22 school year after having completed his first year in the role. The organizational chart is a critical factor in increasing clarity among employees as to the “chain of command” and reporting structure within the organization. Earlier in 2022 the Superintendent requested an Assistant Superintendent be hired to assist him in the leadership of the organization. Although the job description was developed and an administrator appointed in the role, there continues to be a lack of clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of this position. It will be essential for the Superintendent to clarify the role of the Assistant Superintendent going into the 2022-23 school year to maximize the effectiveness of the position and provide needed supports to building level leadership.

Over the past three years, the Office of Human Resources was instrumental in correcting several deficient areas that existed in the Harrisburg School District, including, but not limited to, ensuring that appropriate background checks were completed and clearances on file, ensuring that correct certifications were on file for every professional employee, and maintaining an accurate position control. While there have been improvements noted in some areas, there is still significant room for improvement in this office. Employees continue to report delayed response time in having questions answered, errors in bi-weekly paychecks, and challenges in filling vacant positions.

During the fourth quarter of the 2021-22 school year, a new Director of Human Resources was hired in Harrisburg School District to replace the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit (MCIU) contracted Director of Human Resources who retired at the end of June 2022. The new director has a strong background in human resource management and experience working in a public school district. It will be essential for the new director to assess the continued areas for

improvement and develop a plan to ensure the efficient operation of the Office of Human Resources.

In addition to a new Director of Human Resources, the District also hired a new Director of Special Education during the fourth quarter of the 2021-22 school year to replace the current director who retired at the end of June 2022. The new director also has significant years of experience in a director role in a public school district setting. Under the leadership of the retiring director, the District was able to get out of corrective action after a period of nearly seven years. This change in leadership provides an opportunity for the new director to assess Special Education processes, procedures and policies to ensure that practices are compliant with federal and state law. The Harrisburg School District has a significant number of students receiving special education services with 201 of those students placed outside the District. The annual cost for these outside placements is approximately \$17 million. A review of the structure for student placement may be beneficial to ensure that the needs of students are being met in the least restrictive environment and that special education service delivery costs are maximized.

Weekly cabinet meetings provide opportunities for key central office leaders to collaborate on a variety of topics to ensure smooth operations across the District. Currently, the Superintendent's cabinet is comprised of six key roles: 1) Assistant Superintendent; 2) Chief Academic Officer; 3) Director of Human Resources; 4) Business Administrator; 5) Director of Technology; and 6) Director of Operations. The Superintendent may want to consider adding the Director of Special Education to the cabinet due to the importance of special education needs in the overall consideration of District decisions and because of the significant cost associated with these services. Cabinet level leaders have expressed occasional confusion regarding direction

provided in cabinet meetings. Clear communication is essential to ensure that key leaders are aligned and can move strategically toward common goals.

### **3. Focus on Instruction**

The District was pleased to graduate 320 seniors on June 11, 2022, at the New Holland Arena of the Pennsylvania State Farm Show Complex.<sup>4</sup> Six (6) additional seniors received their diplomas at a summer graduation ceremony held at John Harris High School on June 29, 2022, after completion of credit recovery classes.

Academic performance, as measured by standardized tests, continues to be the weakest area of District progress. This quarter the District received its preliminary 2022 PSSA/Keystone Exam test results which reflect that most students scored basic or below basic on the state standardized assessments administered in the spring. Teaching and learning must improve for students to make academic progress. Regular attendance must also be a priority focus for 2022-23. The 2021-22 school year ended with an attendance rate of only 80.76% District-wide. This falls well short of the desired 90% or above attendance threshold outlined in the Amended Recovery Plan.

In addition to regular attendance, students must be actively engaged in meaningful activities in the classroom and online. The quality of instructional practice must be improved. The students in Harrisburg School District deserve to receive instruction that is aligned to a viable curriculum and delivered by highly qualified educational professionals in creative, engaging ways. The high number of teaching vacancies experienced in the 2021-22 school year contributed greatly to low academic performance as students were often taught in larger groups or in classrooms

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<sup>4</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:83e3e9ba-3e9a-390a-8453-961c8eea3fd4>



covered by someone other than the assigned educator. Teacher and staff attendance continues to be a large area of concern in the Harrisburg School District. It is imperative that the District get to the root cause of poor staff attendance and institute a plan to improve in the 2022-23 school year. The Amended Recovery Plan calls for a Staff Absenteeism Taskforce to be convened for the purpose of studying this area; however, the Office of Human Resources was so overwhelmed this past year with the inordinate number of vacancies that needed to be filled which took precedence over this taskforce meeting. The Receiver has assigned this task to the MCIU contracted Director of the Harrisburg Partnership to work collaboratively with the new Director of Human Resources to prioritize the work of this taskforce for the fall of 2022.

As part of the work the Superintendent engaged in with Performance Fact, LLC, an instructional framework was developed during the third quarter of the 2021-22 school year with the collaboration of teachers, support staff and administrators from each District school. This document identified as “Professional Practices for Effective Instruction” is a framework containing four pillars and three lenses of practice.<sup>5</sup> The document was synthesized and created by Performance Fact, LLC, to align with the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s 18 Essential Practices document. The Superintendent must now determine the expectations for implementation of this framework in all District schools and principals must hold teachers accountable for its consistent use.

During the fourth quarter of the 2021-22 school year, the schools having federal designations of CSI or TSI were required to convene their school improvement planning teams to develop and submit their new plans for the upcoming school year. The instructional focus of those plans included the following elements: 1) Reading, 2) Writing, 3) Mathematics, 4) Positive

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<sup>5</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:f1675fcf-eb00-3f46-ab1e-86de105dc6f7>

Behavior and Intervention Support (PBIS), and 5) Attendance. All plans were presented to the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent and Receiver prior to submission to the Pennsylvania Department of Education by the June 30 deadline. However, the plans were returned for budget resubmission to align with the budget of the District's consolidated grant application.

#### **4. School Management**

The schools in the Harrisburg School District are managed by building principals and assistant principals. Many of the schools are led by novice principals (5 years or less of experience) with Harrisburg High School - John Harris Campus, Rowland Academy, Camp Curtin Academy, Scott Elementary, Melrose Elementary, and Downey Elementary Schools all experiencing a change of building leadership for 2021-22. Building level leader churn, coupled with new, inexperienced District level leadership resulted in a lack of clarity, occasional confusion, and unclear chain of command when dealing with day-to-day operations.

Although the District had the benefit of regular consultation with the research firm, Mass Insight, there was little administrative follow-through on recommendations provided to improve building and District level leadership skills. One of the key recommendations given was the hiring of a principal coach to provide continuous coaching feedback to building level leaders. The Superintendent was not ready to move forward with this recommendation during the 2021-22 school year. It is imperative that the Superintendent develop a plan to ensure that building level leaders feel that they are receiving adequate support to be effective in their roles.

The District will continue to experience changes in leadership with the recent retirement of the principal of Ben Franklin Elementary School and the resignation of the principal of Melrose Elementary School. There are currently administrative vacancies at Melrose and Scott Elementary

Schools. Each change in leadership is like starting over for District teachers and students who must adjust to new leadership styles, expectations, and procedures. It will be necessary for the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, and cabinet-level leaders to provide high levels of support for these new administrators to ensure their success during the 2022-23 school year.

A key decision the Superintendent finalized this quarter was the movement of Grade 5 from the middle schools back to the elementary buildings effective August 2022. This decision was made to help alleviate some of the behavior management issues associated with fifth grade this past school year and to attract teachers to the many 5th grade teaching vacancies by having this grade level housed more appropriately at the elementary level in lieu of the middle school level. This decision was met with mixed reviews. While most parents were supportive of the change due to the behavioral concerns at the middle schools, some teachers of lower grades preferred to not have 5th graders return to their buildings. The management of clear expectations for all students will be essential to opening the new school year with fewer concerns than last year. Likewise, natural, logical consequences for violations of the student code of conduct must be enforced to improve the overall culture and climate of all District schools.

## **5. Central Services and Operations**

In late May the Superintendent made the executive decision to relocate the student registration office for the 2022-23 school year from the Lincoln Administration Building to the empty space at Camp Curtin Academy on North 6th Street where the Karen Snider wing of the Hamilton Health Center was once located. This move was precipitated by the need to relocate two special education classrooms from Melrose Elementary School to the Lincoln building because of moving 5th grade back to the elementary schools for 2022-23 and the need for additional classroom

space. In addition to the enrollment center, this wing of Camp Curtin will now house both the offices of Special Education and English Language Development. These moves from the Lincoln Administration Building will also free up additional classroom space for Cougar Academy, the District's blended learning school, which continues to receive new enrollments.

For schools to focus their attention on teaching and learning, there are several central services that, in the professional opinion of the Receiver, should be removed from the plates of building leaders. The first is time and attendance verification. Principals are spending too much time manually reconciling weekly time logs for employees which could be better spent on instructional leadership tasks. The District must review its attendance tracking procedures for all staff. Although the District moved to Frontline back in 2019-20, this management software application does not appear to be used as efficiently as it could be. There is still too much manual validation of teacher and support staff work time being performed by building principals. The Auditor General's report dated January 2021 recommended that all time and attendance data be tracked electronically through the purchased system.<sup>6</sup> In conversations with the new Business Administrator, the Frontline Time and Attendance Verification system has been a continual source of frustration as it does not properly interface with eFinance. This has resulted in numerous payroll errors which are only caught if someone is manually reviewing and correcting them. This is inefficient and opens the District to potential risk of theft of service time. The Receiver has recommended that this issue be addressed immediately. The Business Administrator has engaged the services of Boyer & Ritter to rebuild the payroll system from the ground level to ensure accurate time and attendance reporting that correctly interfaces with the eFinance system for

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<sup>6</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:7d7423d4-869d-3aa0-a86a-c889491846e3>

payroll. This is no small task and will require time and expense, but it is critical to ensuring that work time data is accurately reported and paid.

Another area that takes time away from instructional leadership is the requisition of supplies. As it is currently set up, the employee making the request must go into the system to create a requisition request to order supplies and materials. While this can be an effective procedure in a high-functioning school district, the current level of dysfunction in the Harrisburg School District does not allow for this process to work effectively without a lot of support. It would be better to reassign the creation of requisitions in the system to business office personnel so that principals are not spending valuable instructional leadership time in this area. Considering that the business office continues to be short-staffed, this is an area that will need to be evaluated moving forward to promote better efficiency and internal controls in procurement processes.

## **6. Finance**

The Business Administrator presented a solid, proposed 2022-23 budget for the Board and Receiver's review at the June 6, 2022, meeting. This budget was then placed on public display for the required 20 days prior to adoption at the June 27, 2022, public meeting.<sup>7</sup> The balanced budget contains revenues and expenditures of \$223,890,848. The School Board voted 6 - 1 on June 27th to raise property taxes 3.36% or 1 mill for 2022-23. This increase was below the Act 1 index of 5.1% but represented the first tax increase in Harrisburg School District in the past three years. However, fortunately, due to the Homestead Exemption, most property owners will see a decrease in their overall tax bill for 2022-23.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:a39208eb-e240-3e8e-a3fa-4d70823a4eb6>

Considerable administrative work went into the development of the 2022-23 budget to ensure alignment with District priorities. First among them was a new agreement for the Harrisburg Education Association (HEA) this quarter.<sup>8</sup> On June 6, 2022, the Receiver approved a new one-year agreement with HEA that increased the starting salary for teachers to \$49,510 and allowed for step movement and column advancement across the membership. After several years of being frozen on step, this adjustment was met with great support from the teachers' union who ratified the contract by a vote of 250 - 13 on May 26, 2022.

The District continues to meet with representatives of AFSCME to negotiate the support staff union's collective bargaining agreement which expired on June 30, 2022. The administration is hopeful that a new agreement will be in place before the start of the school year in August.

An updated Act 93 Agreement was approved by the Receiver on June 27, 2022. This one-year agreement added language to control the cost of retiree health care.<sup>9</sup> A compensation study for Act 93 is planned for the fall of 2022 to ensure that administrative salaries and benefits remain competitive with other school districts in the region.

This quarter the District finalized its ESSER III spending plan which aligns with the District's priorities to "prepare, prevent and respond" to Covid-19. Included in this plan is the planned renovation of Steele Elementary School and HVAC upgrades in several school facilities.

The Superintendent recommended several new positions be included in the 2022-23 school year budget to address growing needs across the District, including moving Family Engagement Specialists from part-time to full-time positions and the hiring of Home & School Visitors for each

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<sup>8</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:8c52f75b-3e58-3491-9371-1e120edee3e5>

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[https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/harr/Board.nsf/files/CFQKRL5322E0/\\$file/Act%2093%20Agreement%202022-2023%20-%20FINAL.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/harr/Board.nsf/files/CFQKRL5322E0/$file/Act%2093%20Agreement%202022-2023%20-%20FINAL.pdf)

level. These positions were recommended to address ongoing student attendance concerns, truancy, and to improve liaison services between the school and home.

This quarter the Receiver approved the recommended agreements with Effective School Solutions and Living Well Institute to provide mental health supports for staff and students across the District. A Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) for mental health is being developed in conjunction with Effective School Solutions. Living Well staff will work collaboratively with District personnel to integrate mental health and social-emotional learning supports for students and their families. Removing the barriers of mental health and behavioral issues that impede learning is a critical step toward improving teaching and learning.

Fund balance transfer commitments for 2021-22 have been finalized. The District's financial position heading into the 2022-23 school year is strong due to the significant ESSER funding.

## **7. Talent Management**

The pool of qualified candidates for teaching vacancies is very shallow. The District had hoped that increasing salaries in the new collective bargaining agreement would entice a larger group of potential teachers, but thus far, that has not been the case. The Superintendent and his cabinet are spending most of their time developing a plan for how to reopen school with a total of 79 instructional vacancies District-wide.

The District participated in job fairs at colleges and universities during the fourth quarter of the school year and continues to actively recruit teachers via social media platforms. It is essential that the District begin to develop a "grow your own" program to encourage high school

students to pursue the teaching profession, especially to increase the number of minority teachers across the District.

## **8. Stakeholder Engagement and Communications**

The Superintendent has engaged a small stakeholder group comprised of business and post-secondary partners, community members and District staff to float his vision for the District. These meetings were facilitated by Performance Fact, LLC. There is a need to increase communication both internally and externally to reach District employees and parents/community members about key issues facing the District. This is a critical concern expressed to the Receiver by various stakeholders. It is essential that a plan for communications be developed to address day-to-day communications within the organization as well as crisis communications to external groups. The District had engaged pre-pandemic with Beth Trapani Communications, LLC, to assist the District in the development of a communications plan. This project will reconvene in the fall of 2022.

## **9. Data**

The District's Data Specialist does an outstanding job of keeping the leadership team regularly updated with current data on student performance, attendance, and discipline. During the fourth quarter the Superintendent worked with Performance Fact, LLC, to establish a professional development workshop for the leadership team to be conducted at its annual summer retreat. This professional development focused on capacity building for the Superintendent and key leaders regarding analysis and interpretation of student data from multiple sources based on the 4-Lens Protocol. The four lenses include 1) growth, 2) consistency, 3) equity, and 4) standards.



Building level leaders and their Data Wise teams presented their data portfolios in the spring. A tremendous amount of work went into the development of these data artifacts.

#### **10. Focus on Equity**

The District strives to make decisions through an equity lens. This spring the Superintendent focused on course offerings at the high school level. Although the SciTech campus is an application high school, students at the John Harris campus should also have equal opportunity to take advanced placement courses and participate in dual enrollment offerings. The Superintendent's vision is to create an educational system that serves the needs of all students, regardless of grade point average or pathway.

With the projected staffing shortages heading into the 2022-23 school year, it will be critical to ensure that all students have equitable access to a high-quality education. This will involve artful use of infrastructure and creative thinking to resolve problems that may continue to plague urban school districts for years to come.

#### **Conclusion**

In closing, the Harrisburg City School District has made progress in stabilizing the District over the past three years of receivership, but there is still significant room for improvement in the areas of financial reporting, student academic achievement, and the retention of students in the District over the course of time to avoid the exodus to cyber charter schools. Organizational clarity and collaboration must be a priority for the District as the 2022-23 school year commences to avoid some of the ongoing issues that resulted in employee frustration, confusion, and overall job dissatisfaction.

The 2021-22 school year was particularly challenging for District employees and students after returning to in-person learning after nearly 17 months at home. The key to a more successful 2022-23 school year is consistent communication, collaboration, and high expectations for all. There is so much potential in Harrisburg School District, but the infrastructure still suffers from years of mismanagement and poor decision-making, which has led to understaffing in many key areas. There is significant work to be done to continue to correct deficiencies in daily operations.

Consideration should be given to conducting a follow-up diagnostic study in the fall of 2022 to collect perceptual data to compare the improvement of the District from 2019 to 2022 through the lens of all stakeholders. This data will be important as the District begins writing its new Comprehensive Plan in 2022-23.

The ability to accomplish many of the initiatives of the Amended Recovery Plan is contingent upon having adequate staffing to perform those tasks in addition to getting the day-to-day work done to keep the operations of the District flowing smoothly. The students in the Harrisburg School District deserve to receive access to a high-quality education delivered by highly qualified professionals. They also deserve to receive supports necessary to improve mental health and well-being which is a contributing factor to academic success. The Receiver is committed to continued oversight of the District's Amended Recovery Plan and working with the central office administrative team and elected School Board members to improve the future of the Harrisburg School District. The District was fortunate to receive increases in both the Basic Education and Special Education funding, as well as Level Up funding, in the recently adopted Commonwealth budget. Although these additional monies are beneficial, without sufficient human capital, the District will continue to struggle to accomplish its goals. Improving the culture and climate of the District's schools remains a priority focus for the 2022-23 school year so that future

teachers and support staff employees will desire to join the team to work in an urban educational environment that is conducive to learning, supportive of students and teachers, appropriately resourced, and effectively managed.