



Akron Public Schools®

Transition Report

Prepared by
Burns / Van Fleet, LLC

MAY 2024





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Acknowledgment

ABOUT BURNS/VAN FLEET

Burns/Van Fleet (hereinafter BVF) is a K-12 consulting firm. Its partners are retired urban superintendents who are assisted by associates who are active educators. The Firm prepares transition reports, conducts human resources audits, provides guidance in special education disputes, and consults on various governance issues.

In the last few months, BVF has prepared reports for West Allis - West Milwaukee WI, Rockingham County, VA, Green Bay, WI, and Bessemer City, AL. Numerous other projects have been undertaken for various superintendents.

The goal of all BVF work is to help districts improve outcomes for students. The Consultants are always available at no cost to discuss issues and answer questions that the Superintendent may have.

Letter from Dr. Stuart Berger

Transition Report Lead

INTRODUCTION



Initially, deciding to have outside consultants prepare a transition report for a new superintendent seems rather innocuous. It makes sense to take an in-depth look at the various operations of a system. By its very nature, transition reports dwell on the negative which often upsets people.

Akron Public Schools (hereinafter APS) is a perfect example. A great deal of what exists is excellent and will be reflected in the Findings. However, like every district, especially a large urban one, has significant challenges, APS is no exception.

The final Report needs to be put in context. This Report is not evaluating anyone – which would be ridiculous – nor questioning anyone's motives. Rather, this Report attempts to give an honest portrait of APS with both its strengths and weaknesses. Certainly, the Recommendations are focused on the challenges; the strengths are evident.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology to complete a transition report is based on the belief that the best way to learn about a district is to talk with employees. Basically, interviews are conducted with administrators and principals.

Occasionally, a few teachers and union leadership are involved. For this particular Report the Superintendent requested that the Consultants met with representatives of its community and business partnerships. Leaders of other governmental entities also participated. A few elected officials were interviewed. This community participation was extremely helpful.

Interviews are very informal and are supposed to be confidential. Most interviewees respected the general rules and provided valuable insights. Those insights are the basis of this Report.

Hopefully, everyone who reads the Report, including the media and APS leadership, will acknowledge context. APS is coping with many issues, some beyond the control of anyone in the District. The Report concerns itself only with issues that APS can affect.

The main parts of the Report are the Findings and Recommendations. Definitely, all of the Recommendations will not be implemented, nor even respected. Hopefully, they will at least inspire discussion and introspection. The areas that are reviewed are: (1) instruction, (2) governance, (3) excellence and equity, (4) enrollment, (5) culture, (6) climate, (7) human resources, (8) facilities, (9) logistics, (10) student services, (11) community relations, (12) legal, (13) communication, and, (14) organization/leadership.

The goal of any transition report is to be constructive. The fact that improvements may be necessary does not mean that staff is not dedicated, hard-working and effective. Rather it reflects the District's willingness to be honest with itself and its stakeholders and move forward. Hopefully, this Report assists in achieving the mission – providing the highest quality education possible.

The Consultants synthesized what was heard and found many themes. Follow-up calls were made. Numerous documents were reviewed. Obviously, the Consultants were able, based on their experience, to add context, comparisons, and conclusions.

In all one hundred and seventy (170) individuals were interviewed. Their time and the assistance of the Superintendent's staff, especially his administrative assistant, led to this comprehensive Report. Hopefully, everyone's time will be rewarded by a report that assists APS in improving education for all students.



Executive Summary

Many Superintendents arriving in a new district commission a transition report. Simply put a transition report consists of two components: (1) a quasi-performance audit; and, (2) a set of concrete recommendations. In the case of the Akron Public Schools (hereinafter APS) a separate audit of the Human Resources Department (hereinafter HR) was conducted. It is obvious from just initial contacts both internally and externally that there is an incredible amount of support for APS. The District has done an excellent job of cultivating philanthropic and business support. Staff is also proud of aspects of APS.

On the other hand, the last few years have tarnished the System's image. A contentious relationship between the Board of Education and the previous Superintendent received a great deal of negative media coverage. Other unflattering stories of the District's challenges were unfairly emphasized.

It is obvious from just initial contacts both internally and externally that there is an incredible amount of support for APS.

Governance was a problem with unclear roles of the Superintendent and individual Board members. A threatened teacher strike was unhelpful. Within this environment, the Consultants undertook the two studies – HR and the overall system. The results of the HR audit are contained throughout. Suffice it to say that HR has to move rapidly from a bureaucratic culture to one of customer service.

In terms of the Transition Report itself, the main strategy is to conduct numerous interviews and review documents (see Exhibit B). Actually, the Consultants interviewed one hundred and seventy (170) individuals, mostly central office administrators, and principals, but also members of the Board of Education, union leadership and their professional staff, community, business and philanthropic leaders. The findings are summarized below.



Current Landscape

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

APS has created a curriculum at the high school level that is quite meaningful. There are academies and pathways that are designed to prepare students for work and college. Expansion to the middle schools for next year is exciting.

On the other hand, expectations for students are low; implicit bias is high. Higher level thinking is not stressed; professional development is insufficient, and the gifted and talented program is severely lacking.

GOVERNANCE

This is an area of great concern. Roles between the policy making Board of Education and the administrative duties of the Superintendent have become blurred. The Board needs to understand that individual Board members have no statutory power; their authority is as a group in public. The Board may have empowered the Akron Education Association (hereinafter AEA) beyond what is constructive.

EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY

These two concepts are not, of course, mutually exclusive. APS is dedicated to equity but it is not embedded within the District; therefore, equity is seen as an “add-on” rather than everyone’s concern.

Excellence exists but not as a driving force. For instance, most of the high schools offer very few Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

Excellent specialty schools are available, but they inevitably face equity questions.

ENROLLMENT

Like most urban school districts APS is losing students - seven hundred (700) this year- and thus a loss of state aid. Numerous factors are causing the decline, some beyond the power of APS to counteract, e.g. declining birth rate, outmigration from Northeast Ohio. The State with its voucher plan exacerbates the situation.

APS will have to compete. There are excellent programs which are being marketed. Other options are being explored. APS is trying to repair its image so the parents will want to send their students to the System. (approximately seven thousand (7000) students who live in the district do not attend APS.)

Finally, there must be high-quality instruction. Excellent curriculum without quality teaching is meaningless. A culture of continuous improvement is the goal.

CULTURE

It is an understatement to say the culture is not one of accountability. Many reasons created this problem, but the most significant is the administration's fear of the unions. Consequences are nonexistent. Poor performance is tolerated.

Communication is lacking as is ownership of decisions. Cynicism abounds. Criticism of APS by staff which is certainly their right is unfortunate. Changing culture is extremely difficult. Nonetheless, it is essential.

CLIMATE

APS should be commended for its understanding of the importance of climate and commits resources to it. Unfortunately, the emphasis is trying to create school climate with external experts rather than internally with staff. (Sadly the "experts" lack training.)

Having a positive professional climate is the primary responsibility of the principal. Some do a good job; others do not. Collegiality means a cooperative, respectful relationship between the administration and the employee organization. It is lacking currently.

FACILITIES

APS has a number of buildings that need to be closed or totally retrofitted. Thankfully, the District staff have brought forth an excellent plan – the Long-Term Operational Plan (LTOP). It addresses not only facilities but also boundaries and changing demographics.

A persistent problem is the future of North High School. It is overcrowded but for very unique demographic reasons redistricting is not an option. Building a new school while there is so much empty space is not a great option. A solution should be forthcoming.

LOGISTICS

Transportation is the biggest challenge. Like most other school systems, there is an insufficient number of drivers, especially substitutes. Unless an effective plan is put forth, some students may miss school this winter due to a lack of drivers.

The warehouse, despite the efforts of many, is operated in an antiquated way. Some procedures are still completed with paper and pencil. Change has been slow.

Facilities are old and require a great deal of maintenance. Custodial services are also a challenge. A great deal of overtime is used due to staff shortages.

STUDENT SERVICES

Various services are divided between special education and family engagement. Student Services does not seem to receive a great deal of attention. With the additional social – emotional challenges students face, these services are more essential than ever.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

This Department has a very important mission, but it is rather diffuse. It is responsible for climate, discipline hearings, the central office operation and community partnerships. The scope leads to a massive task that is a bit unorganized and not mission driven.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

APS makes great efforts to engage the community. Its relationship with philanthropic, business and community based organizations is exemplary. They are long-standing and essential and lead to meaningful support.

Relations with the general public are more problematic. Outreach is limited and sadly only when a levy is on the ballot. Lots of concerns about equity by various internet groups are not addressed adequately.

ATHLETICS

Athletics is strong in many ways. Equity once again is lacking. A new central facility is desperately needed.

COMMUNICATION

Like in any urban district communication is difficult. The media criticizes the major urban district while the problems of the suburban districts remain untouched. There are solid efforts to engage the media which help.

Internal communication is ineffective. No one is really in charge.

Both the Communications Department and the Superintendent's office try to keep staff informed. Fighting rumors takes an incredible amount of time and social media worsens the problem.

LEGAL

The District does not have in-house counsel. Rather it has a firm on retainer which provides an on-site attorney usually one day a week.

Other members of the firm are available for consultation. A different external firm is contracted for negotiations and another for capital projects.

APS spent a great deal of money on legal services last year which in fairness was greater due to the separation of the former superintendent. This organization is unusual and may not be the most efficient.

ORGANIZATION

There are many ways to organize a school district that are logical and efficient. APS is organized as a traditional top down bureaucracy which seems to be working.

Unfortunately as enrollment and revenue decline, needed central office positions must be eliminated.

Currently, the schools are organized horizontally with supervision of the schools being: K-5, 6-8 9-12. Some specialty schools do not fit neatly into this particular organization and a couple of high schools are 6-12.

A service mentality is not everywhere. Some central office staff are quite visible, others not so much. Included is suggested organization. It is not necessarily a better one but possibly more compact and school service oriented.



APS Historical Report Card and Testing Data

The Ohio General Assembly amended Ohio’s accountability law in the summer of 2021. Schools and districts now receive an overall rating and star ratings for five components.

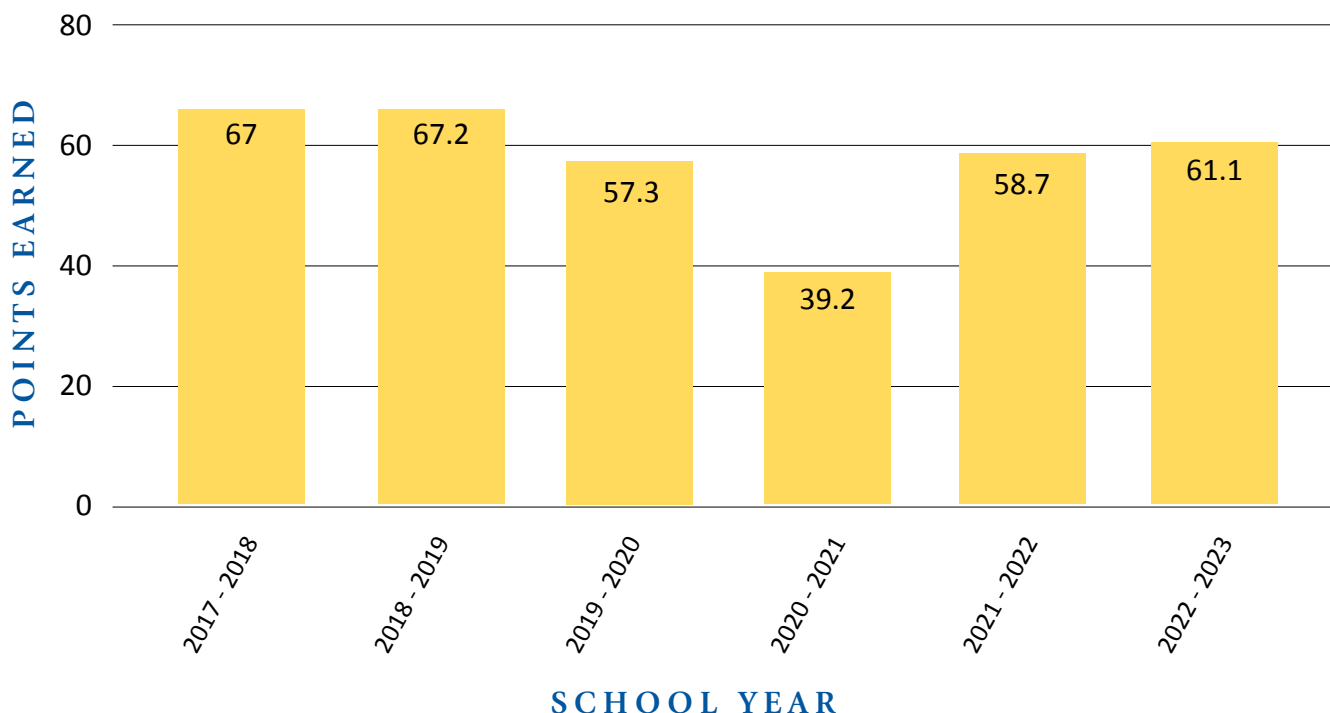
Ohio School Report Cards give your community a clear picture of the progress of your district and schools in raising achievement and preparing students for the future. The information measures district and school performance in areas most critical to success in learning. The report cards also provide information about finances and expenditures and educators and staffing.*

OVERALL REPORT CARD GRADE					
2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
D	D	Not Reported	Not Reported	Not Reported	2.5 Stars

Performance Index Points

The **Performance Index** measures the achievement of every student, not just whether or not they reach “proficient.” Districts and schools receive points for every student’s level of achievement. The higher the student’s level, the more points the school earns toward its index. This rewards districts and schools that improve the performance of highest- and lowest-performing students.

The **Indicators Met** measure represents student performance on state tests. It is based on a series of up to 23 state tests that measure the percent of students proficient or higher in a grade and subject. Districts and schools also are evaluated on the Chronic Absenteeism Improvement Indicator, End-of-Course Improvement Indicator and Gifted Indicator, giving districts and schools up to 26 possible indicators.*



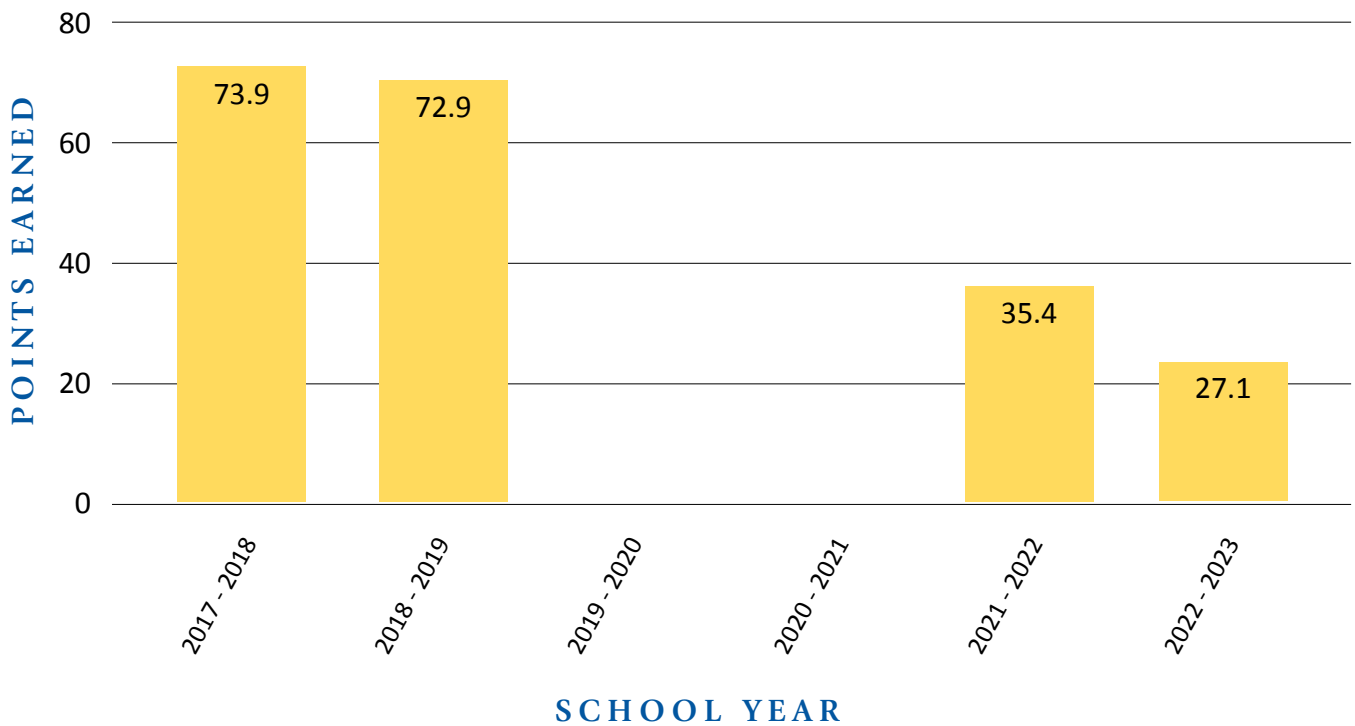
*Ohio Department of Education & Workforce - <https://education.ohio.gov/>

Gap Closing

The Gap Closing component shows how well schools are meeting the performance expectations for students in English language arts, math, and graduation. It also measures how schools are doing in supporting English learners to increase language proficiency, reducing chronic absenteeism for all students, and identifying gifted students and providing gifted services.

The annual performance goals are established in six areas, and the performance of specific student subgroups are measured against the annual or long-term goals for each area. Goals are established for English language arts academic achievement and growth, math academic achievement and growth, graduation, English learner language proficiency, chronic absenteeism, and gifted performance. The state expectation for all areas and all student subgroups is to continue closing educational gaps year over year.

The Gap Closing Component uses a series of points based on enrollment of the federal student subgroups and the indicators listed above. A maximum of 75 points is possible for schools and districts.*

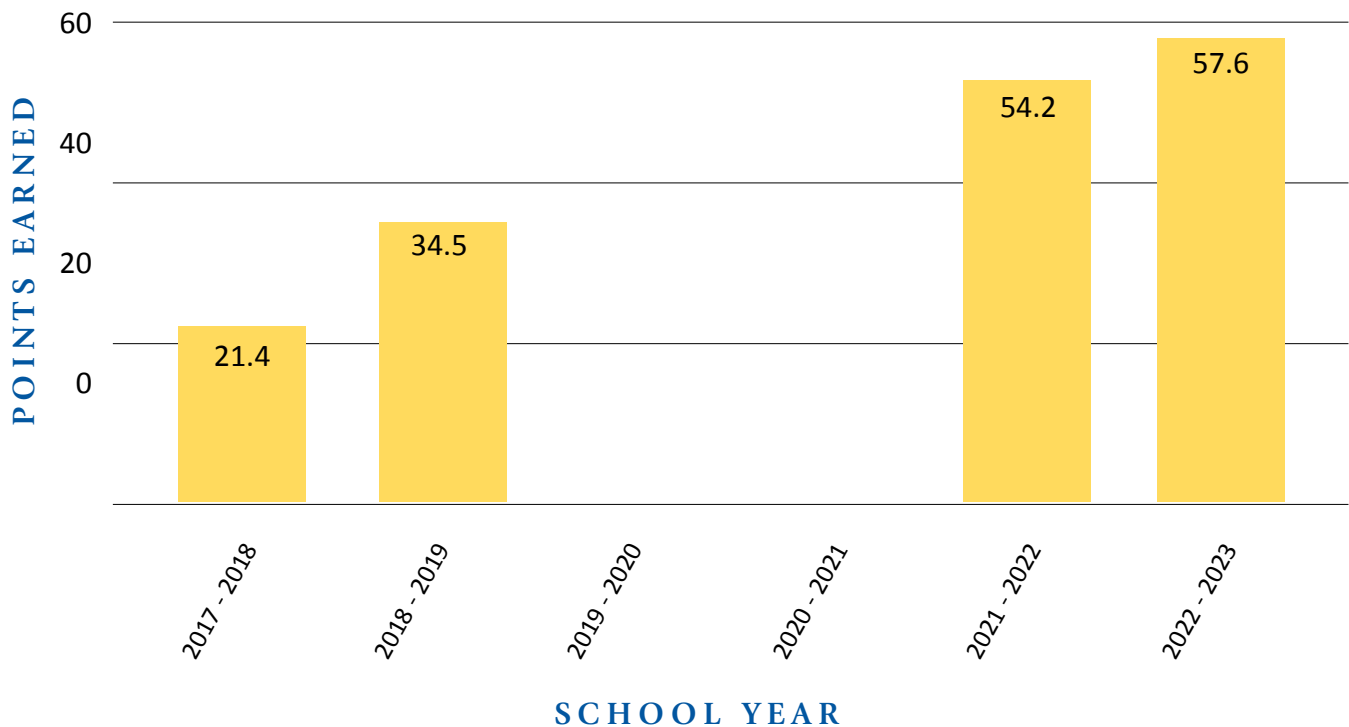


*Ohio Department of Education & Workforce - <https://education.ohio.gov/>

K-3 / Early Literacy

This measure uses two consecutive years of data to evaluate how well schools and districts are doing at providing the supports needed to help struggling readers become on track with their reading. The calculation starts by identifying the number of students who were not on-track (i.e., were not reading at grade level) based on reading diagnostic assessments given at the beginning of the prior school year, or the current school year for 3rd graders.

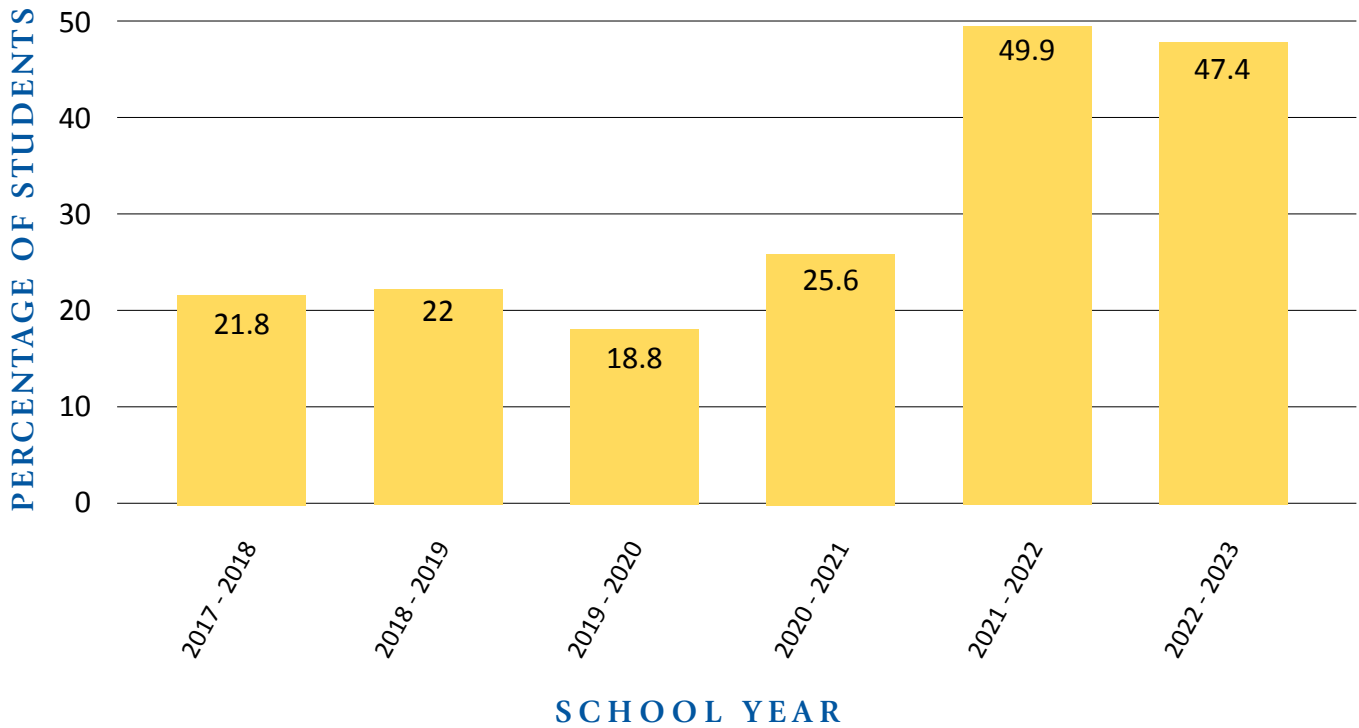
Students scoring not-on-track are required to be placed on a Reading Improvement and Monitoring Plan for that school year. The students come back to school the following year, and take another diagnostic. Third graders who remain in the school take the Ohio State Test in the spring. The calculation measures how many students are identified as being on track (i.e., reading at grade level) on that second reading diagnostic assessment or Ohio State Test in 3rd grade.*



*Ohio Department of Education & Workforce - <https://education.ohio.gov/>

Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism at the school level refers to students missing a significant number of school days over an academic year, typically defined as 10% or more of school days. It's a persistent pattern that can hinder academic progress and requires targeted interventions involving school staff, families, and community partners to address underlying issues and promote regular attendance.*



*Ohio Department of Education & Workforce - <https://education.ohio.gov/>

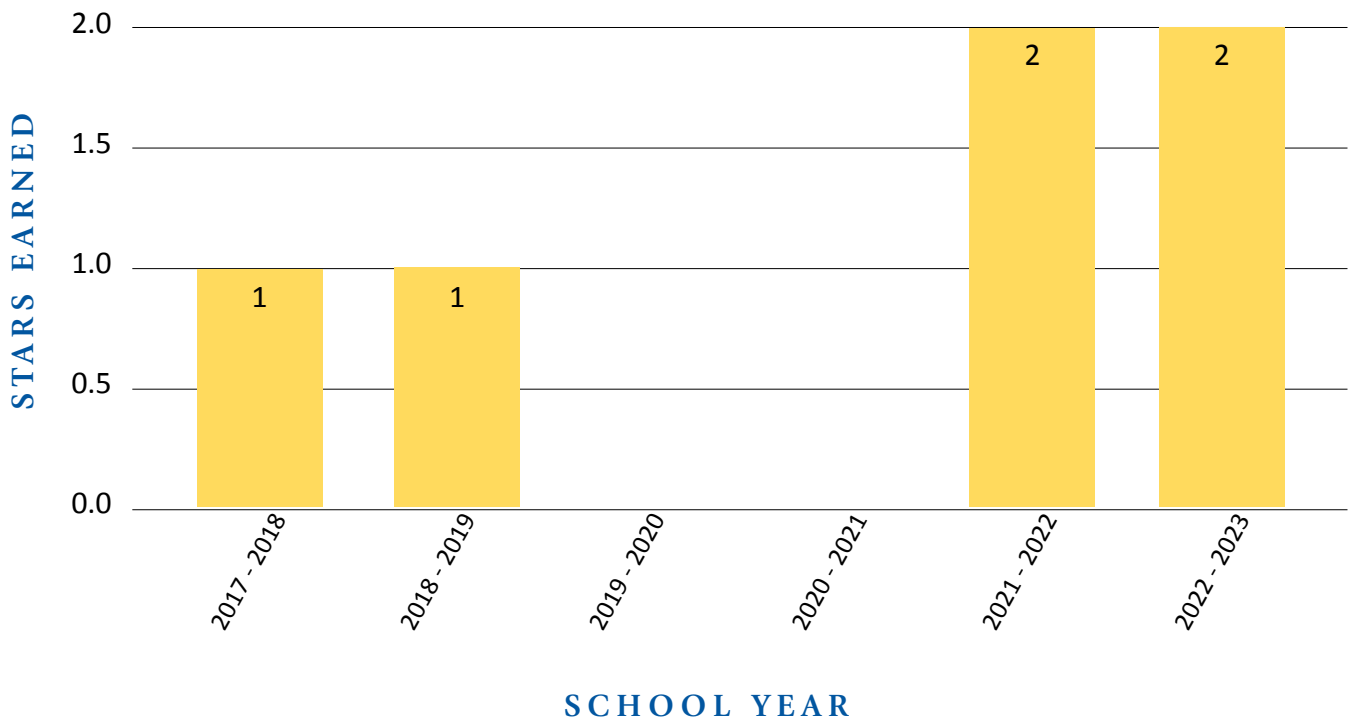
Progress

Progress looks closely at the growth all students are making based on their past state test performances. The Progress Component measures the academic performance of students compared to expected growth on Ohio’s State Tests. This calculation uses a “value-added” model of measuring academic growth that compares the change in achievement of a group of students to an expected amount of change in achievement that is based on the students’ prior achievement history.

The Progress Component has one measure, the overall value-added progress measure, that contributes fully to the star rating. Students’ state tests results are examined through a series of calculations by the department’s vendor, SAS, to produce an overall value-added score. The overall value-added score is used to assign a star rating to schools and districts. There are additional data reported with the Progress Component which do not factor into the star rating and are noted below.

Previous component ratings were assigned based solely on a “growth index.” The growth index provides a level of evidence that the growth observed is statistically different than the growth expected. Another way to interpret this is that the growth index tells us how sure we are that the growth happened in comparison to what we expected.

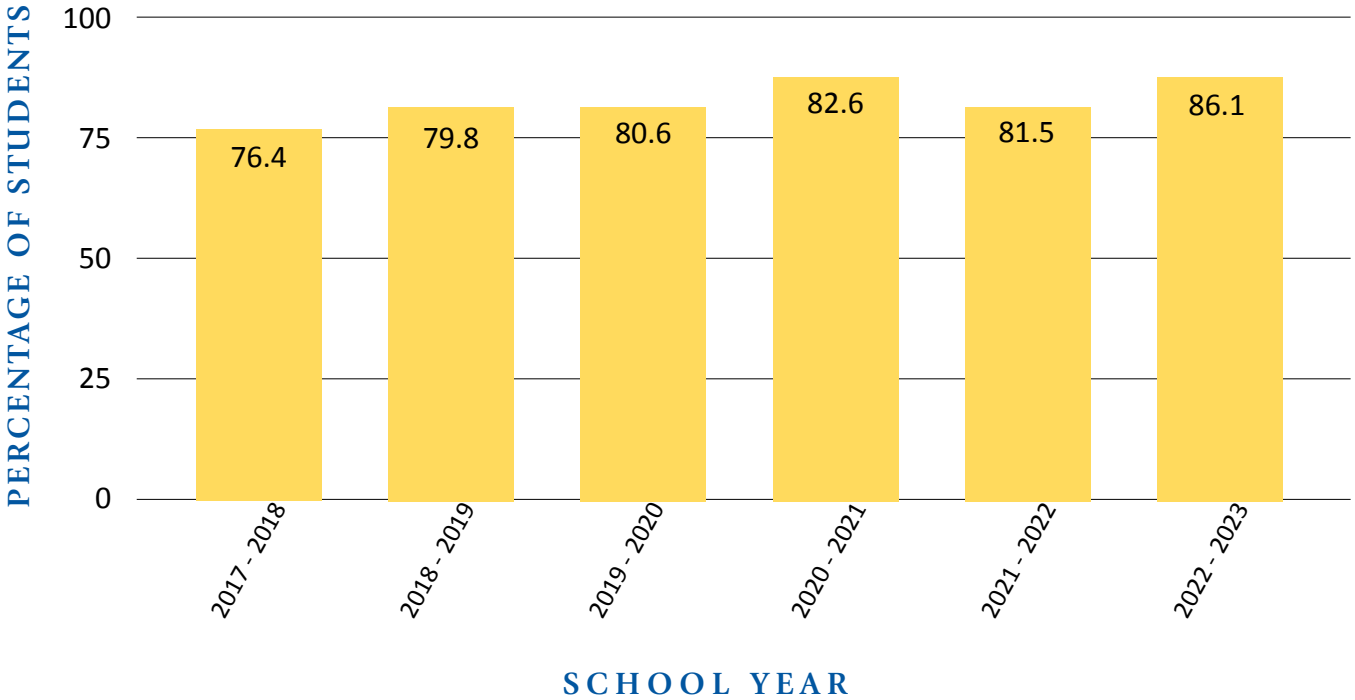
As set forth in legislation, and through consultation with stakeholders, the updated Progress Component includes a second step to assign ratings. The second step uses an “effect size” to measure the magnitude and it helps standardize and interpret the value-added growth measurement. Another way to say this is that the effect size helps measure the amount of the growth that took place between the two years’ tests.*



*Ohio Department of Education & Workforce - <https://education.ohio.gov/>

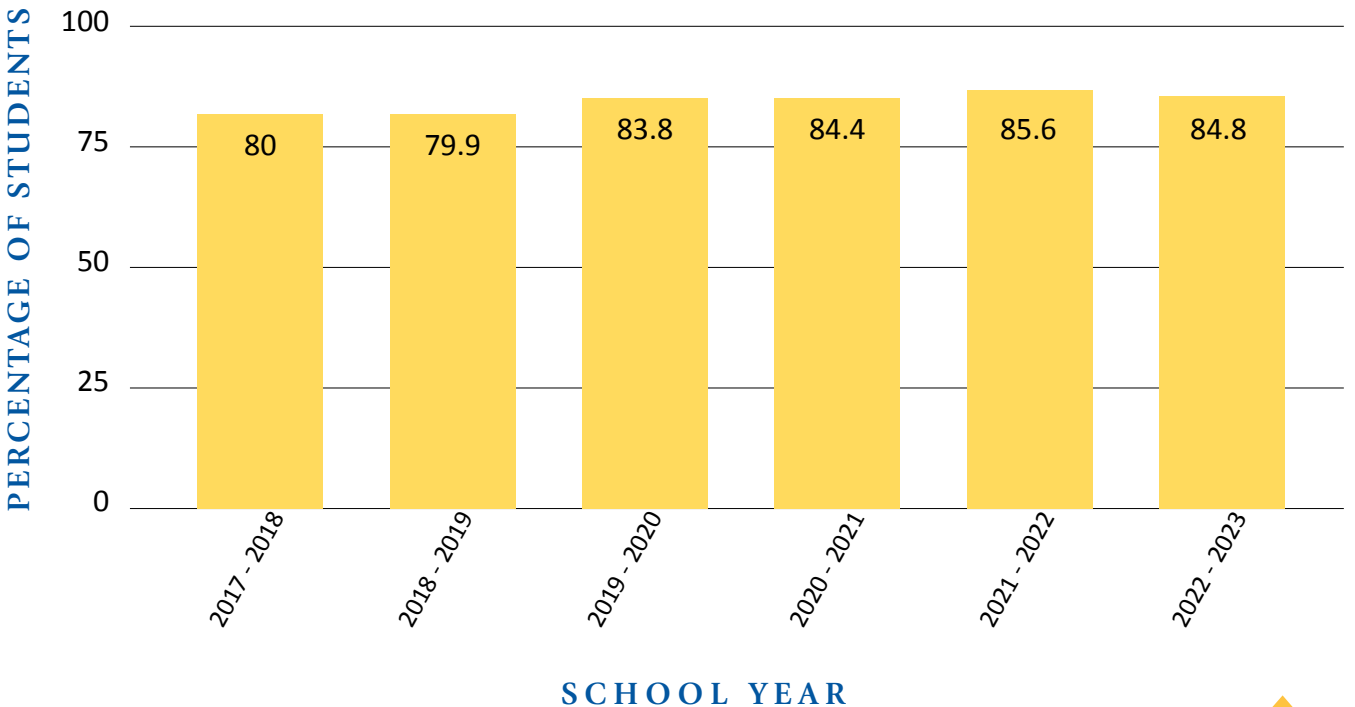
Four-Year Graduation Rate

The Four-Year Graduation Rate includes only those students who earn diplomas within four years of entering ninth grade for the first time.*



Five-Year Graduation Rate

The Five-Year Graduation Rate includes those students who graduate within five years of entering ninth grade for the first time.*



*Ohio Department of Education & Workforce - <https://education.ohio.gov/>

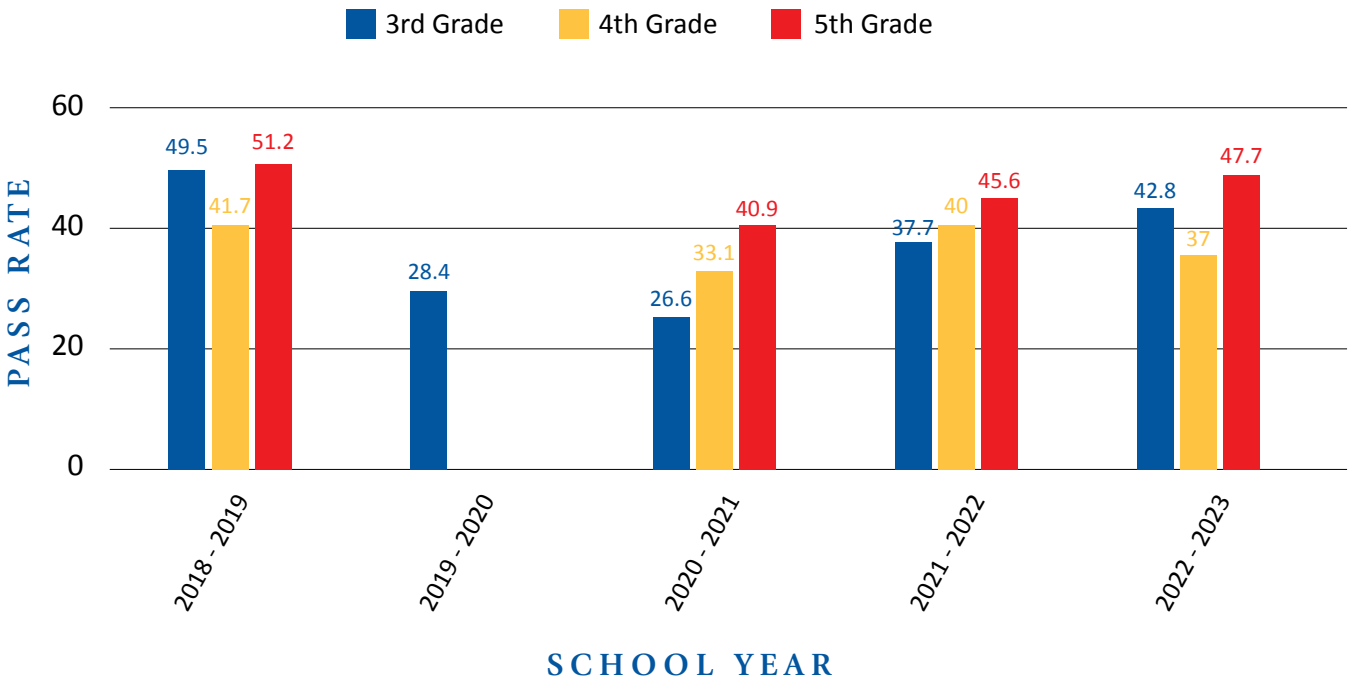
State Achievement Tests

State achievement tests tell us how well our students are growing in the knowledge and skills outlined in Ohio’s Learning Standards. These tests help guide and strengthen future teaching so we can be sure that we are preparing our students for long-term success in school, college, careers, and life. Test results also allow citizens to know how their local schools are performing compared to others around the state.*

	ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS	MATHEMATICS	SCIENCE
Grade 3	✓	✓	
Grade 4	✓	✓	
Grade 5	✓	✓	✓
Grade 6	✓	✓	
Grade 7	✓	✓	
Grade 8	✓	✓	✓

Elementary English Language Arts

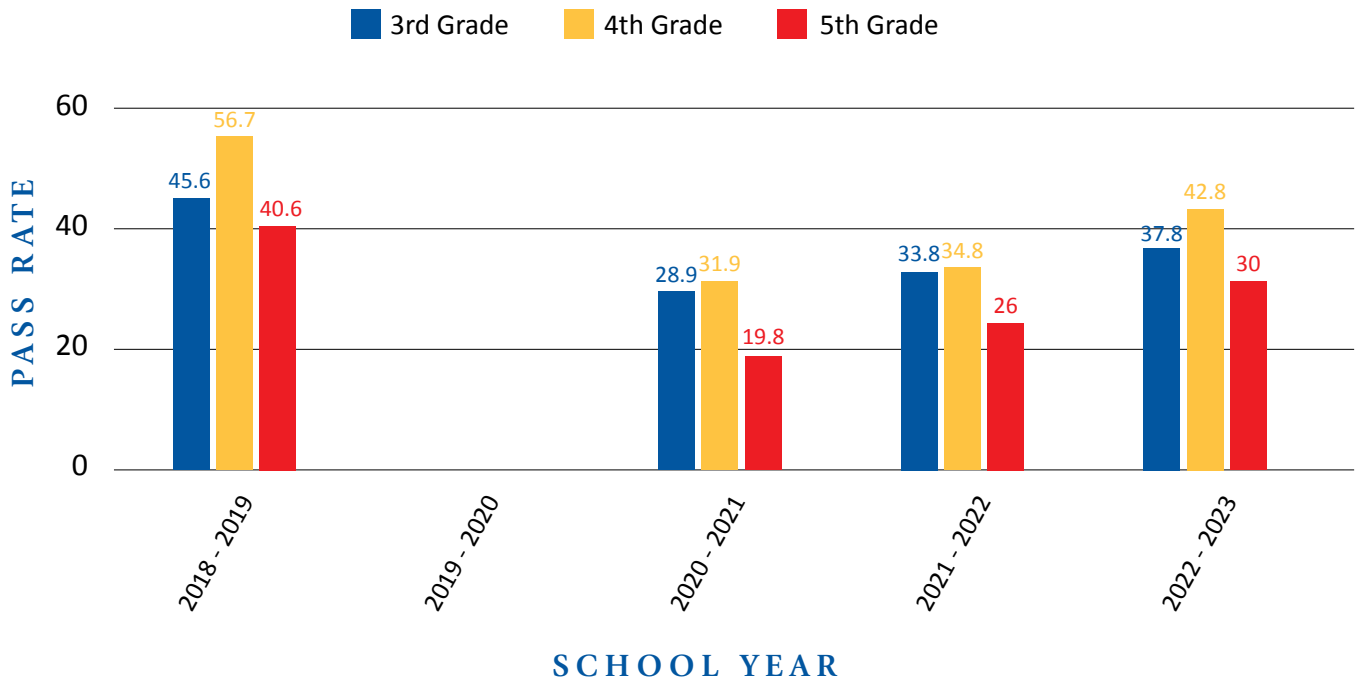
Proficient and Above



*Ohio Department of Education & Workforce - <https://education.ohio.gov>

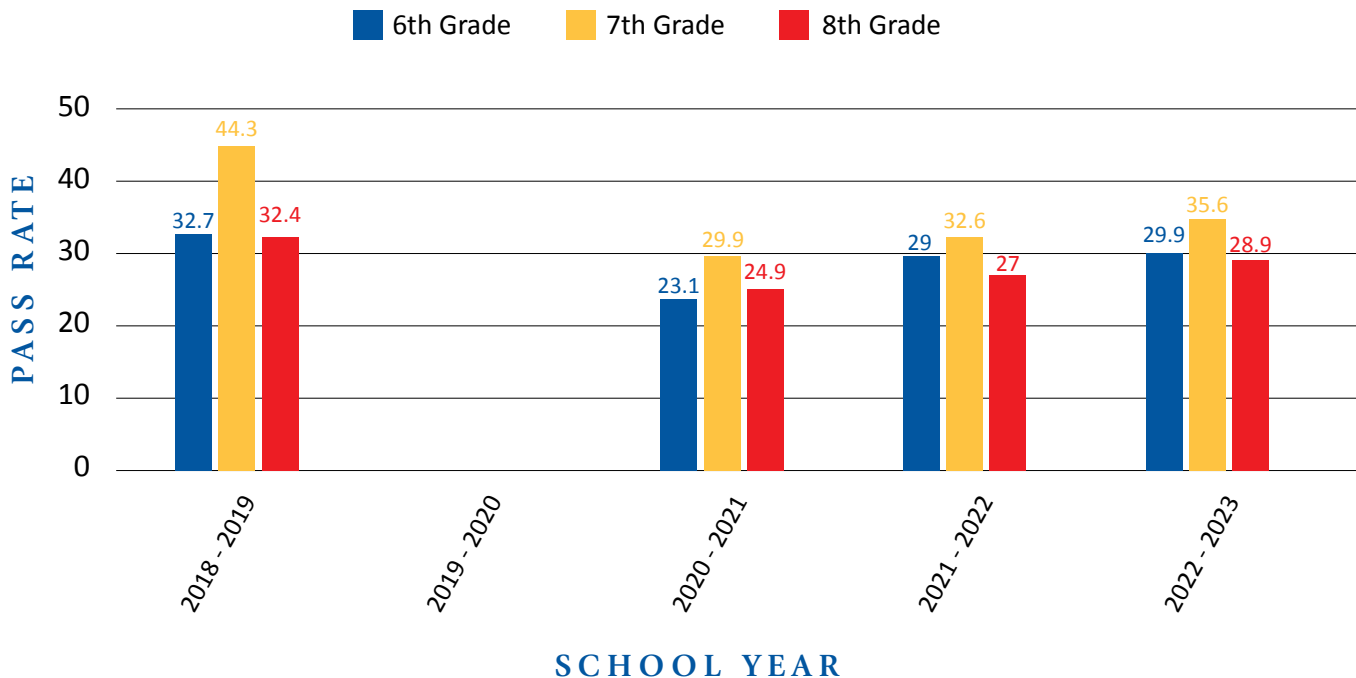
Elementary Mathematics

Proficient and Above



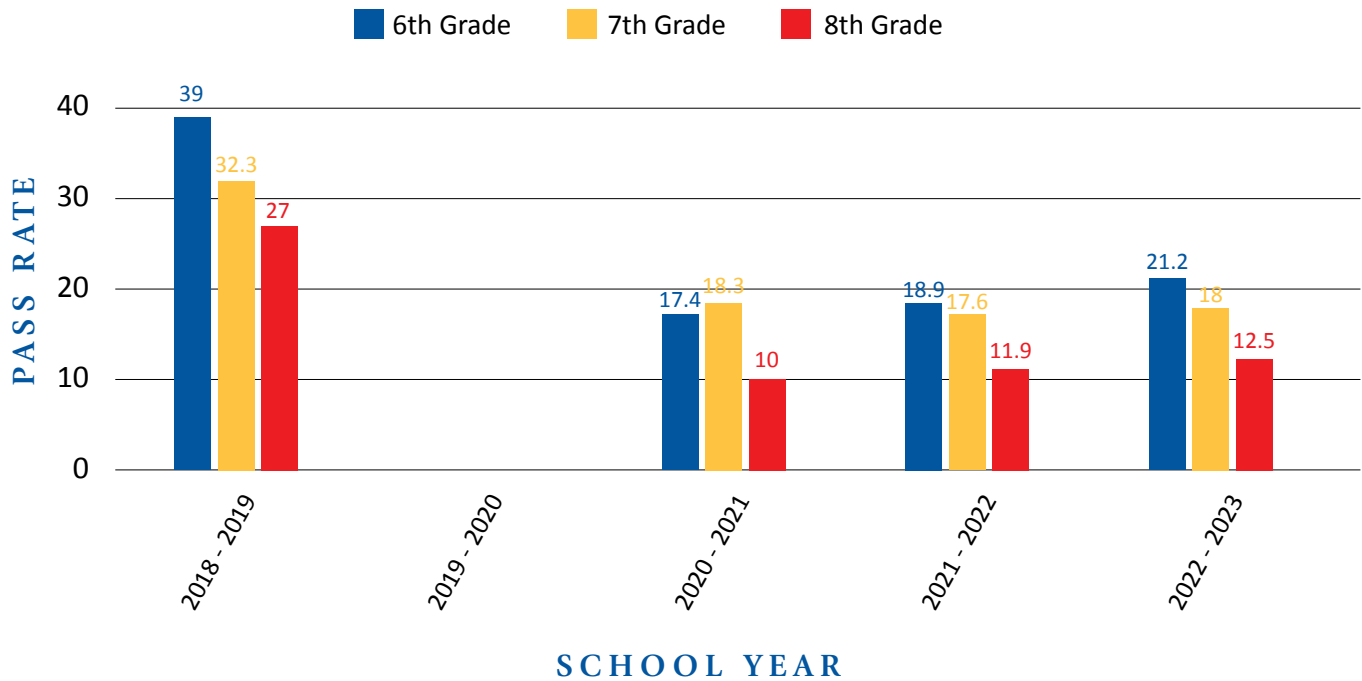
Middle School English Language Arts

Proficient and Above



Middle School Mathematics

Proficient and Above



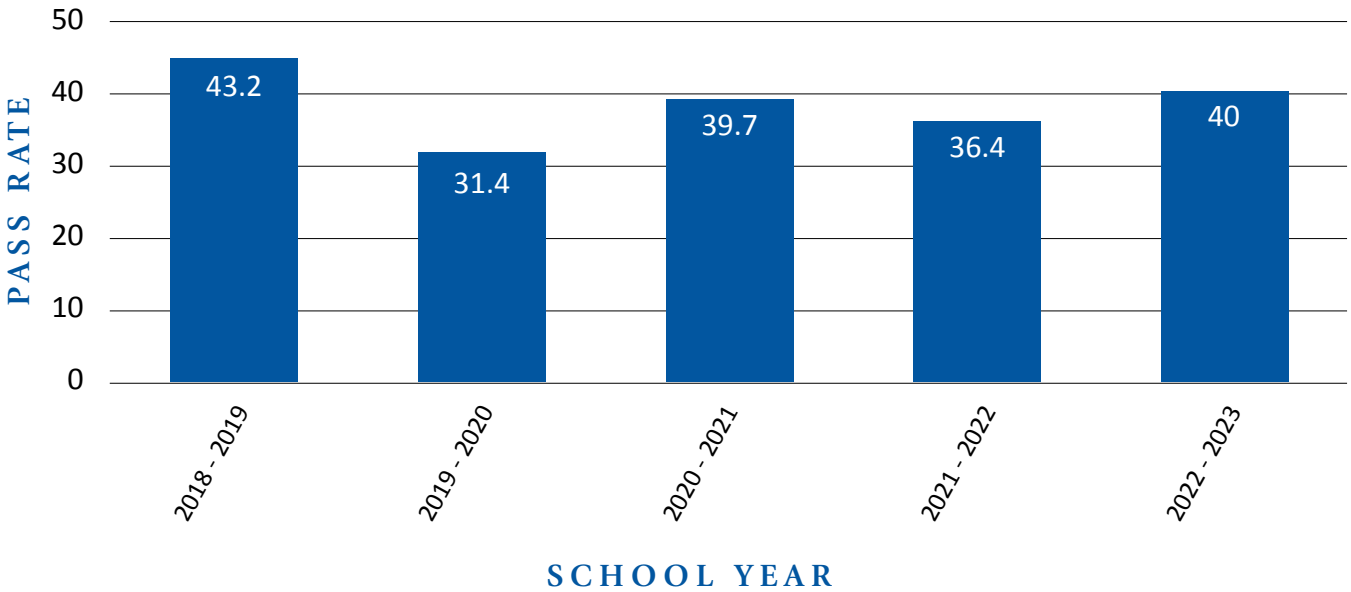
High School Courses

Classes of 2023 and beyond - End-of-course tests in English language arts II, algebra I, geometry (or integrated mathematics I and II), biology, American history, and American government.

Classes of 2018 - 2022 – End-of-course tests in English language arts I and II, algebra I, geometry (or integrated mathematics I and II), biology or physical science (class of 2018 only), American history and American government.

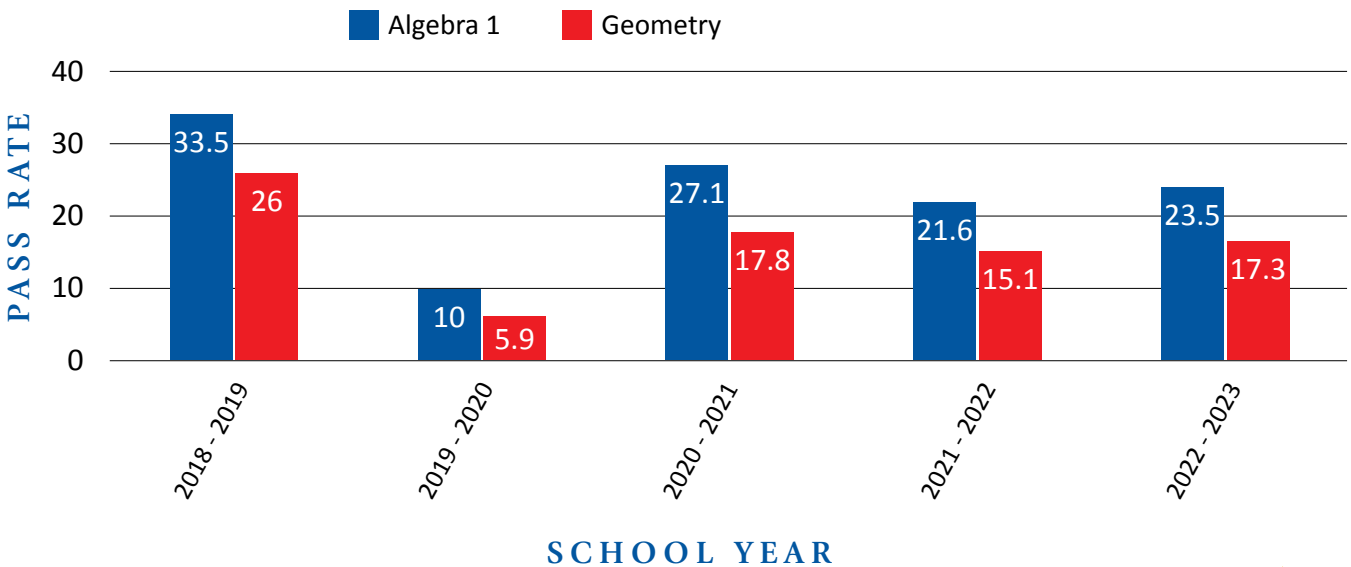
High School English Language Arts II

Proficient and Above



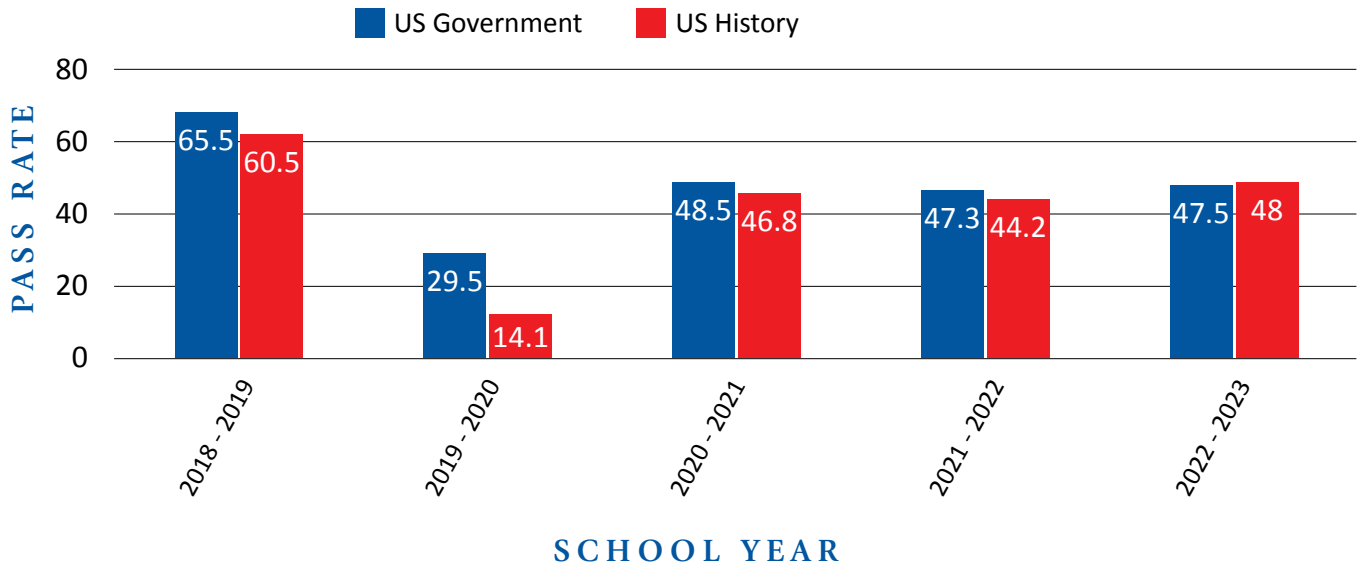
High School Mathematics

Proficient and Above



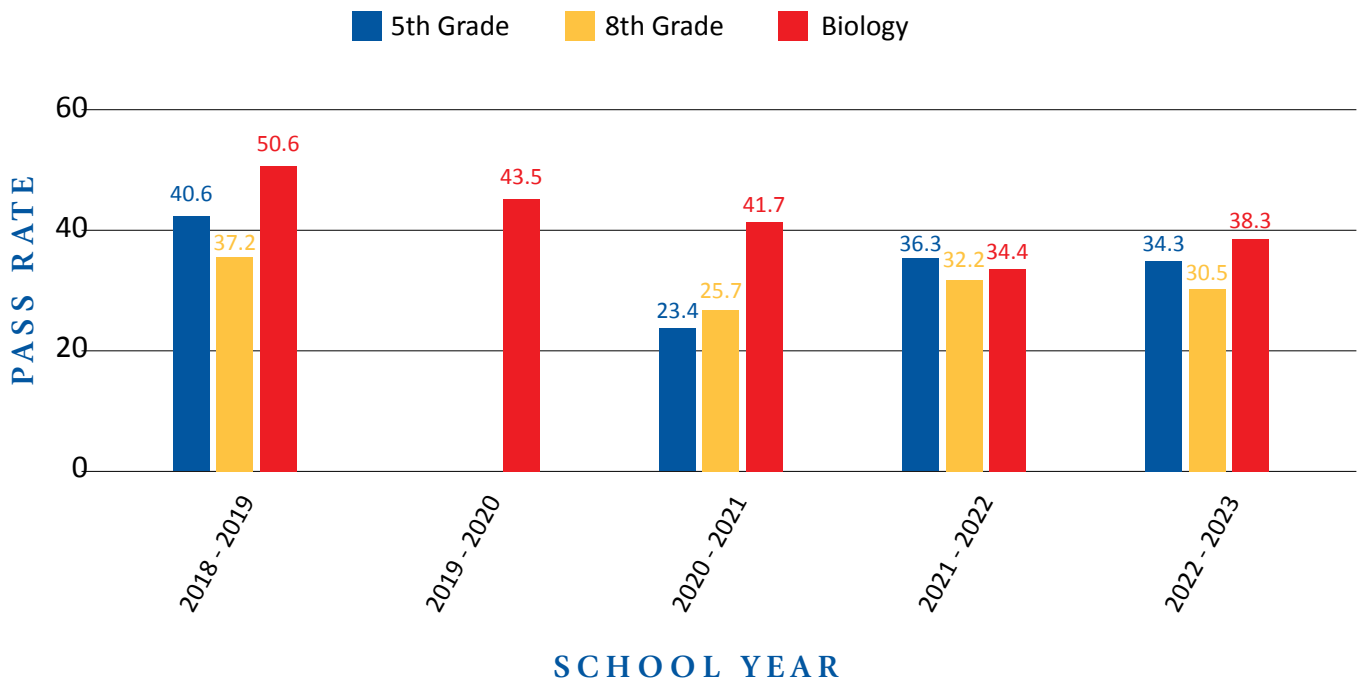
High School Social Studies

Proficient and Above



Science

Proficient and Above





Acronyms

AP - Advanced Placement

APS - Akron Public Schools

AEA - Akron Education Association

ASPA - Akron School for the Performing Arts

CAO - Chief Academic Officer

DEI - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

ESOL - English Speakers of Other Languages

ESL - English as a Second Language

LTOP - Long Term Operational Plan

MA - Master Agreement

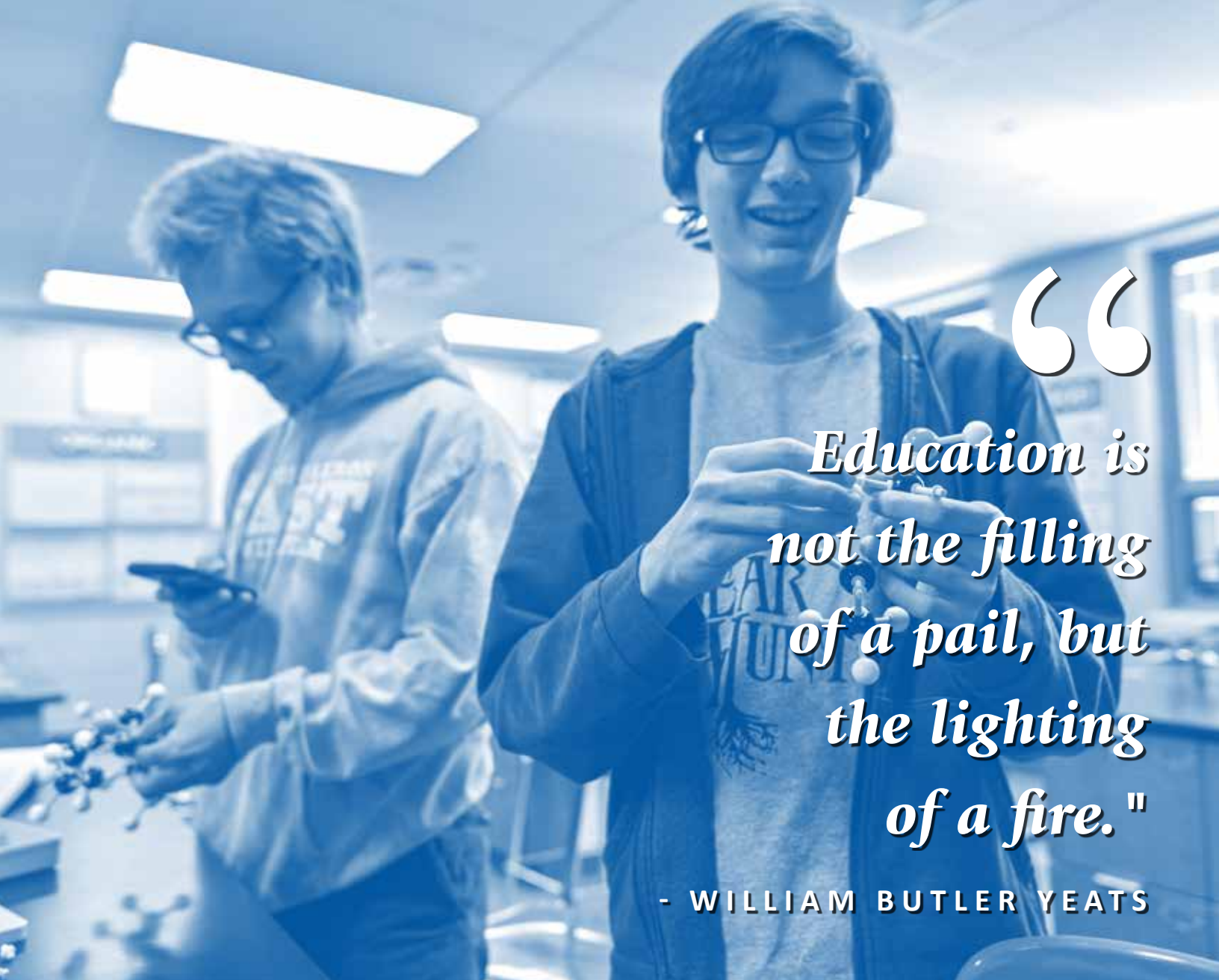
STEM - Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

HR - Human Resources

MA - Master Agreement

AP - Advanced Placement

CFO - Chief Financial Officer



“

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”

- WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

FINDINGS

▶ Teaching and Learning

CHARGE STATEMENT

SUMMARY

STRENGTHS

CHALLENGES

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CHARGE STATEMENT

Teaching and Learning is the heartbeat of the district. The victory is in the classroom, one of the most important components of the district.

The consultant's work will provide potential opportunities for all student to be academically successful through the many equitable pathways the district offers.

SUMMARY

TEACHING AND LEARNING:

While this area is not the greatest current challenge; rather it is the most important and must be given the greatest emphasis. This aspect of APS includes the actual curriculum, the instructional delivery system and professional development which presently is diffuse at best.

The curriculum itself is impressive. The entire college/career program is of great quality. Students in high school actually are provided a real “pathway” to college or career. The partnerships with The United Way and other philanthropic entities is commendable.

The remainder of the curriculum is traditional which makes sense.

The dual credit program is available as are specialty schools. Early College, and STEM High School are providing excellence and choice.

One part of the curriculum that is troubling is the inequitable availability of Advanced Placement (AP) courses. One high school offers almost all the AP courses, while most of the others offer very few. Dual enrollment is valuable, but not a replacement for rigorous AP courses. These inequities are glaring.

The middle school program does a good job of providing the paradigm for true middle schools. Options exist and the needs of the whole child are met. Plans are in place to bring the “platforms” to middle school students which is logical.

The elementary curriculum is quite traditional which is not inherently a problem. Proper emphasis on literacy and numeracy is commendable. Exploring the Science of Reading is a good approach. Allowing time for specials - music, art, and physical education - is a testament to APS preventing tested subjects to overwhelm the importance of a comprehensive curriculum.

The early childhood program is expected to undergo some significant changes which will be helpful. There appears to be room for increased enrollment.

The responsibility for curriculum development, textbook adoptions and pacing (scope and sequence) is a part of the overall assigned responsibility of the Chief Academic Officer (CAO). Previously it was a clear department, but the position of Executive Director was eliminated for the current school year.

Currently, there are curriculum specialists for Social Studies/ Health, Language Arts/English, Science/Health and ESL/World Languages; these combinations are not necessarily sensible and probably devised over time to save money. These positions are generally regulatory, distant from the schools, and not always helpful.

This summary has not even discussed the many other excellent programs, initiatives and partnerships. The curriculum is a major strength of APS. However, no matter how comprehensive the curriculum, it is meaningless without corresponding solid instruction. Sadly, that is not the case in APS.

In fact, APS has devoted an entire department to assisting with improving outcomes, aptly named the Department of School Improvement. It is led by an Executive Director and assisted by a Coordinator of Testing and Research, a Manager of Testing and Assessment, Coordinators of School Improvement, and a Manager of Auxiliary Services.

These functions are certainly essential. Whether a separate department is necessary is an open question. Some of the coordinators are administrators, others are teachers which is a problem. Once again, despite everyone's best efforts the quantitative results are disappointing.

Elementary instruction is uneven at best. Reliance on work sheets, and rote learning with little enrichment permeate. Good instruction also takes place but not in every classroom. Culturally relevant practices are also limited. The situation is best described by a comment made by an administrator/former APS parent – “I chose a Catholic school for flexibility.” While in no way disparaging Catholic education and acknowledging its strengths, generally those schools are seen as more structured than public schools.

The outcomes speak for themselves. Even recognizing the challenge of an urban district, the test scores, while improving a bit, are still disappointing. Once again a lack of accountability is evident.

APS has been willing to invest in instruction. There are instructional coaches in every school. Some are effective, some are being used inappropriately and others are ineffective. Often they are used as quasi-administrators. Also, some teachers are beyond coaching to competence.

One of the biggest problems is the role, interest, and instructional competence of the principals. Despite the research for decades that the principal must be an instructional leader, in reality, many are not.

This disparity exists in APS. The Master Agreement (hereinafter MA) so limits the authority of the principal that some just surrender.

They also receive insufficient support from their supervisors when they make tough decisions.

A few are just not interested. Being a principal at any level is quite complex, especially at the secondary level. Just operating the building, interacting with students, staff, and parents, addressing crises, and complying with central office directives is a full-time job. Devoting time to instruction is lost.

Finally, some principals do not have the skills to be instructional leaders. Interviews led to a couple candid responses from principals that they really did not know much about instruction. Interviews with central office leadership and support personnel reflected a belief that about half the principals were instructionally competent. (Part of the problem is the promotion process.)

As expected, much of the secondary teaching staff has been in the profession for a long time and have developed certain instructional practices. Some of these are sound, others are not. A willingness to evaluate and change is not the norm and there is insufficient leadership to assist with improvement. Equitable practices are often lacking. High expectations for students are also not the norm.

These instructional deficiencies are clearly exasperated by HR practices. Hiring occurs far too late when the candidate pool is small. There is little incentive to address poor instruction with the excuse being the need to

protect everyone. Senior leadership fails to emphasize employee accountability and potentially overemphasizes due process rights.

The problem is intensified by the number of long-term substitutes. The goal is to find someone with a degree who may be able to manage a class. Student spending a year in French class with a "teacher" who does not speak French is hardly fair.

A major solution to poor teaching is effective professional development. Basically, that is not the case now. There is a recognition of the need and there are uncoordinated efforts, but a comprehensive plan does not exist. There are numerous obstacles: (1) no comprehensive plan, (2) no one in charge, (3) contract limitations, and (4) too many initiatives. Each obstacle is discussed in depth below.

There is certainly professional development occurring - much of it quite helpful. The issue is that there is no overall plan. The approach is tactical rather than strategic.

Comprehensive professional development is challenging when there are so many initiatives. Many of these initiatives are worthwhile but lead to confusion and a lack of clarity. It is difficult to provide quality professional development

if the mission is unclear.

The MA is a major impediment. The calendar has been negotiated. (At convocation, principals were worried about transporting the teachers back to the buildings in order to comply with the MA.) Sections of the MA regarding workday, staff meetings, and the calendar (3.04–3.06) can be roadblocks to the requisite time needed to be devoted to necessary professional development.

Finally, no one is in charge. It appears to be a major oversight that in a district as large as APS, no position has the explicit responsibility for professional development. When everyone is in charge, no one is in charge.

The framework for effective instruction exists. The curriculum is solid, coaches are plentiful, and school performance is organized to be supportive. Leadership needs to put these pieces into an effective whole.

The framework for effective instruction exists. The curriculum is solid, coaches are plentiful, and school performance is organized to be supportive. Leadership needs to put these pieces into an effective whole.

STRENGTHS

TEACHING AND LEARNING:

- ▶ Impressive college/career program providing real pathways for high school students, with a commendable partnership with The United Way.
- ▶ Availability of dual credit programs and specialty schools like Early College and STEM High School.
- ▶ Middle school program offers options and meets the needs of the whole child, with plans for logical extensions.
- ▶ Emphasis on traditional elementary curriculum with commendable focus on literacy, numeracy, and comprehensive education including music, art, and physical education.
- ▶ Anticipated improvements in the early childhood program to accommodate increased enrollment.
- ▶ Comprehensive responsibility for curriculum development and pacing under the Chief Academic Officer (CAO), with specialized curriculum specialists.
- ▶ Recognition of the need for improvement in instructional outcomes and dedicated support through the Department of School Improvement.
- ▶ Investment in instructional coaches in every school to support teacher development.
- ▶ Commitment to addressing disparities in Advanced Placement (AP) course availability and improving instructional practices.
- ▶ Efforts to address challenges in professional development, although lacking a comprehensive plan and centralized coordination.

CHALLENGES

TEACHING AND LEARNING:

- ▶ Diffuse professional development lacking clear emphasis.
- ▶ Uneven elementary instruction with reliance on worksheets and rote learning.
- ▶ Lack of instructional leadership among principals.
- ▶ Hiring practices leading to late recruitment and reliance on long-term substitutes.
- ▶ Lack of a comprehensive professional development plan and centralized responsibility.
- ▶ Entrance requirements in specialty schools are criticized as elitist.



FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

TEACHING AND LEARNING:

1. While the emphasis on literacy and numeracy is not only commendable but necessary, more instructional time in the elementary schools should be spent on activities stressing higher level and divergent thinking. This emphasis should be supported by AEA.

In order to provide more meaningful instruction, APS will need to invest in greater professional development and increased coaching. Moreover, a culture of high expectations for both students and teachers is non negotiable.

2. A comprehensive program for students identified as gifted must be offered.
3. It is difficult to determine if a program exists at all. There are uneven course offerings at the secondary level. Some type of "pull out" program may be available at the elementary level. No one appears to be in charge.
4. The District should continue its efforts to provide "pathways" for the middle school students.

The college and career initiative overall has been a major success. Making the program available for middle school students makes sense.

5. There are dual responsibilities in the curriculum department that are not compatible nor achievable.

Certainly, APS wants to control central office positions and curriculum seems like a good place to do so, but there are illogical combinations. In reducing subject matter responsibilities, the curriculum specialists must assume more involvement with meaningful instruction and professional development.

6. The District should aggressively recruit Pre-K students and place the programs in comprehensive elementary schools.

APS already has plans to close its early childhood centers and place the programs in some neighborhood elementary schools. An increased emphasis on Pre-K opportunities will not only

allow more children to be ready for kindergarten, but facilities will be effectively used and enrollment will increase.

7. There needs to be consensus that the principals are the instructional leaders in their schools

There is general agreement that outcomes are abysmal. No one really assumes ownership of the outcomes. Principals and their supervisors must. Who is chosen as principals, what is the accountability and what is expected must be reviewed. Candidly, some of the principals especially at the secondary level may not have the skills to provide true instructional leadership.

8. The role - duties, responsibilities, etc. - of the coaches must be clearly defined.

APS invests a great deal of both human and financial resources to its coaching program. These positions are not meant as quasi-administrative. Again, selection is essential.

9. Negotiations with the AEA must center around regaining the principal's authority.

Slowly, over many years, the authority of the principals has eroded. The District has given up many of the principals' prerogatives. With responsibility must come authority.

Evaluation must be honest, constructive and actually helpful. It does not help anyone, especially students to evaluate the vast majority of teachers as outstanding and is unfair to the truly outstanding teachers. An honest appraisal system is integral to a well functioning organization.

10. The admission criteria for participation in Akron After School should be expanded.

Akron After School is an outstanding program provided through the support of the City of Akron. Historically, its entrance criteria has been limited primarily due to funding.

Having this program available to APS students only makes sense. With support from the System, entrance criteria can be expanded. Within the context of the mission, a family pay option should be available. Greater enrichment opportunities should be available.

11. Instructional accountability must be the norm

High expectations for all students must infuse the entire instructional program.

No longer can the principals be allowed to blame all the shortcomings on the union contract – that is an unworthy excuse.

12. The instructional program should incorporate all the excitement that an urban environment offers.

APS already does an excellent job of working with other entities. Partnerships abound, but more "field trips" will make instruction more meaningful.

13. Special Education Coordinators should report to the Chief of Schools Officer – one in each cluster.

The following positions should be eliminated or refigured.

A. Learning Specialist Language Arts

This position has three major responsibilities: (1) reading/ literacy, (2) secondary English and (3)ESOL.

A new position for ESOL should be created.

B. Library Media and Digital Learning Specialist positions should be combined.

Both these positions are valuable but as enrollment declines and revenue decreases sadly central office positions must be cut.

C. The Director of Special Education should be converted to Executive Director of Student Services and be responsible for Special Education and all student support services e.g. psychologists, speech therapists, etc.

This leadership position will be comprehensive.

D. A position under College and Career Academics should be eliminated.

While this program is vitally important, it cannot be exempt from "right sizing." It is best to allow the Director to re-organize and eliminate one position.

E. The positions of Executive Director of Elementary Schools and Principal Supervisor of elementary, middle, and high schools should be eliminated.

The position of Chief of Schools for two clusters of three high schools CLCs each should be created.

This change would reduce two positions and would allow for vertical alignment discussed above.

F. The responsibilities currently undertaken by the Director of Student and Family Services will be provided by the Chief of Community Relations.

The positions in this department will report directly to the Chief of Community Relations.

G. A position of Director of Professional Development will be created.

The delivery of the professional development could be coordinated much better. This position under the Chief Academic Officer will be responsible for this coordination.

14. Each secondary school will assign one of its assistant principals to be its Athletic Director.

The Athletic Director is an administrative position carried out by an administrator. The secondary schools have a healthy number of assistant principals. Having someone with flexible time during the day devoted to athletics will improve the entire process. There will no longer be supplemental contracts for Athletic Directors.



“

Human resources are like natural resources; they're often buried deep.

You have to go looking for them; they're not just lying around on the surface. You have to create the circumstances where they show themselves."

- KEN ROBINSON

FINDINGS

Human Capital and Labor Relations

CHARGE STATEMENT

SUMMARY

STRENGTHS

CHALLENGES

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CHARGE STATEMENT

The effectiveness and efficiency of Human Resources which the district refers to as Human Capital and a new department of Labor Relations will ensure that the needs of employees are addressed in a timely manner and opportunities for growth and development are evident.

The consultant will assess the current state of Human Capital and determine the current statute of organization and logistical operations to the affected day to day functions and success of the system.

SUMMARY

HUMAN CAPITAL AND LABOR RELATIONS

As complex school systems prioritize their challenges, human resources is often at the top. There are many reasons, but most are created by the organization itself.

This is certainly true in APS. The simple is needlessly made complex. The concept of customer service is nonexistent. The Department itself, despite individual effort, is not a cohesive group. The tragic outcome is that for numerous reasons, APS loses some of the best and brightest – this should not happen!

Basically, there are five divisions. They are: benefits, substitutes, recruitment, labor relations and paraprofessionals. Why there are four system wide divisions and one dealing with specific employees is an obvious question. Other functions are randomly assigned or not assigned at all.

Benefits are organized in a traditional format. A sick bank is available. Personal days are granted and some employees have vacation. Most benefits have been negotiated.

The District is self insured as it should be. There is a third-party administrator and a stop loss policy. Evaluation of potential providers is undertaken.

Service is generally good. Written information is provided. Staff members are quite knowledgeable. Calls and emails usually receive prompt responses but not always. The benefits team works well together.

Substitutes is an important aspect of not only HR, but the entire System. There are the usual daily substitutes, permanent substitutes and long-term substitutes. The daily substitutes are provided through an automated system which works well. Each building has minimally

one permanent substitute which allows each school to have at least one person as necessary which is generally always. Having a substitute who is familiar with the students has lots of positives.

The real issue is the long-term substitutes. There are usually numerous vacancies which require long-term substitutes. The success here is mixed. Rarely is the long-term substitute certified especially in the assigned area. Often individuals have no background in the subject. Some long-term substitutes have significant classroom management problems. It should be noted that long-term substitutes receive benefits.

The support areas provide their own substitutes. With the exception of transportation, there are sufficient substitutes. The lack of substitute bus drivers has a potential to create major disruption.

Teacher recruitment is the most important area if the real goal is excellent instruction. New leadership under a former principal has been a real positive, but there is a long way to go.

The leader of Recruitment is supported by a couple of recruiters who are not educators. There is a reliance on retired principals. Urgency is not the norm. Onboarding is a real problem but not under the authority of recruitment.

The transfer process causes the hiring period to begin basically in late spring. Transfer process rights have been negotiated, but there are obvious changes that can be made (see recommendations). The whole student teaching experience in APS, especially potential employment, is not smooth.

It is unclear why paraprofessionals are a separate division. The only explanation is that identifying, retaining and reviewing them is an obvious weakness. Requirements are stated, but not always adhered to.

Service is generally good. Written information is provided. Staff members are quite knowledgeable. Calls and emails usually receive prompt responses but not always. The benefits team works well together.

Prior to discussing labor relations, some general observations are in order. First, some HR employees are unionized which is a bit of an oxymoron. There are also numerous confidential employees, but the criteria appears arbitrary. Finally, fairly recently the Board will approve only new employees whose pre-employment packets are complete. While quite logical, it can result in losing quality employees.

Labor relations was left last not because of its unimportance but rather its impact on the whole District which sadly is negative in many key ways. The first concern is that this essential process is a part of a basically non-functional department. Labor relations is in a difficult situation because the previous Boards and Administrations have abdicated some of their authority. Senior staff want no part of unpleasant decisions.

There are seven unions to work with. The AEA is an especially complex relationship. The contracts are over-interpreted. Grievances are allowed beyond the contract. Labor relations actually seem to advise that the contract supersedes the law.

Discipline and dismissal which are inherently difficult are made even more so. Senior staff defers to middle management which is predictably risk averse. Too many staff believe there will never be consequences.

As long as this area operates as it does currently APS will be partially paralyzed. The words "grievance," "harassment," and "attorney" cannot petrify everyone. Change is essential.

STRENGTHS

- ▶ Well-organized benefits division with negotiated benefits and a self-insured district model.
- ▶ Effective management of substitutes, including daily and long-term substitutes, with a focus on familiarity and student needs.
- ▶ Recruitment efforts led by new leadership show potential for improvement despite current challenges.
- ▶ Sufficient support staff substitutes, except for bus drivers, minimizing disruption.
- ▶ Legal services department, although complex in structure, ensures necessary legal support with an on-site lawyer and external counsel as needed.
- ▶ Labor relations, despite challenges, manages relationships with seven unions and advises on contract interpretation and grievance procedures, ensuring compliance with legal requirements.
- ▶ Strong commitment to addressing challenges and improving HR processes, despite existing complexities and organizational issues.

LEGAL SERVICES

It is difficult determining the exact organization of the Legal Services Department. The Organizational Chart indicates that there is a "General Counsel." It is unclear if that position is internal or external. If it is internal, it is not a full-time position.

Actually, there appears to be a law firm on retainer which charges hourly for services. This firm provides an on-site lawyer once a week and often more. The position is part of senior staff, but not always available.

Understandably, other legal services are needed. Bond counsel is necessary and the District chooses to have an outside firm lead negotiations. Some other contract and employment disputes are contracted out.

Interestingly, APS spent over one million dollars (\$1,000,000) (This is the figure provided to me by the Finance Department) on legal services. Although these costs reflect a protected severance agreement negotiation, they are stunningly high for a district of twenty thousand (20,000) students.

While not the most important function, legal services affect individuals' lives, ability to govern the District, the culture and, of course, finances. Like all other departments, efficient, effective and thoughtful operation is essential.

CHALLENGES

- ▶ Lack of cohesion and customer service culture within the HR department.
- ▶ Divisional organization lacks clarity and efficiency
- ▶ Issues with long-term substitutes' qualifications and classroom management.
- ▶ Recruitment process lacks urgency and effective onboarding.
- ▶ Unclear divisional organization for paraprofessionals.
- ▶ Labor relations department operates within a non-functional HR department.
- ▶ Complex relationships with seven unions, leading to over-interpretation of contracts and grievances.
- ▶ Difficulty in discipline and dismissal processes, leading to risk aversion and lack of consequences.
- ▶ Legal services organizations lack clarity and may rely too heavily on external firms.
- ▶ High costs of legal services raise concerns about financial efficiency and oversight.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The HR Department must evolve from bureaucratic to customer service.

Being able to accomplish this goal will take time, patience, unyielding expectations and personnel changes, if necessary.

2. As part of moving towards a customer service culture, shared decision making should be a new norm.

Currently, the HR Department is a top-down bureaucracy with closed decision-making and poor communication.

Shared decision making will fix many aspects of the operation.

3. No employee of the HR Department should be eligible to join a union.

All these positions are confidential by their very nature.

4. The hiring process should begin in late winter

Currently, by the time the transfer process is complete, the recruitment process begins in late spring. This timeline is far too late to attract the best candidates.

5. There should be a practice of offering contracts to quality applicants even if no specific vacancy has yet occurred.

The number of APS annual vacancies is already known by the District. For most areas, there is little chance that too many excellent teachers will be identified and accept.

6. The position devoted to DEI must be reinstated

As recommended above each major department must have a position at least partially devoted to DEI. Nowhere is this more important than HR, especially recruitment.

7. Senior staff must be involved in discipline and dismissal.

Conflict cannot any longer be avoided. With significant authority comes difficult challenges. Being everyone's friend is nice but unacceptable

8. Labor Relations in APS is a major function and often problematic; it should be a separate department reporting to the Chief Legal Counsel.

As the department is being created the opportunity for new procedures is obvious. For example, the contract usually should be interpreted literally. All grievances must be related to a specific contract clause.

9. Vacancies should be filled rather than using excessive overtime.

Simply put, a better job of controlling overtime is necessary.

- 10.** Generally, the use of retired principals should be severely reduced.

Although this recommendation will produce significant pushback, it will save money and improve operations.

Recruiters should be full-time employees who actually report to work. Substitute principals are unnecessary for absence less than a full week.

- 11.** A specific manager position should be added to coordinate all on-boarding activities.

Presently, there is diffuse, inefficient, poorly communicated on-boarding. Having a position devoted to the process should improve the new employees' first experience.

- 12.** A strategy needs to be developed between HR and the Transportation Department to employ sufficient substitute drivers.

Having insufficient substitute drivers has the potential for some students to miss school. That possibility is, of course, unacceptable and cannot be allowed to occur.

- 13.** Streamline the interview process.

- 14.** Revise, add and simplify systems.

Current systems have not been updated and are often ineffective.

e.g. the interview process, or non-productive, e.g. use of retired principals, or very cumbersome, e.g. discipline and dismissal policies.

- 15.** Allow staff to communicate concerns without fear of retribution.

It is apparent that some staff are very fearful of their supervisors. Whether that fear is justified or not, it is palpable and must be addressed.

- 16.** Expect everyone to "pitch in"

Silos are unacceptable. There is a job to be done and everyone must help regardless of specific job descriptions.

- 17.** Emphasize communication both internally and externally.

The silos must be broken and a team created. Clear and honest communication will foster cooperation and teamwork. This change in culture must be communicated by the Department.

- 18.** Accept principals recommendations regarding student teachers.

If a principal identifies an excellent candidate, then an offer should be made contingent on a background check. No interview process is necessary which to some is lunacy, but the ultimate goal of employing high quality staff is what is at stake.

- 19.** Streamline the interview process.

HR should be involved only to be of assistance. Candidates who are actually certified and have completed references should be sent to the principal who chooses- period!

- 20.** Reorganize the transfer process so it ends 2/28

Obviously, much of this procedure is governed by the Master Agreement (hereinafter MA). Nonetheless, the administration can improve the process within the confines of the MA.

- 21.** Create the position of Diversity Recruiter.

This position existed in the past to attempt to diversify the staff, especially teachers, and is absolutely essential.

- 22.** Use administrative leave for no longer than six months.

Except in extraordinary cases administrative leave should not be used for longer than six months. A fair process should resolve disputes within a six month time period.

- 23.** Ensure discipline is appropriate to the offense.

Warnings for serious infractions is not acceptable. The District cannot produce quality outcomes if there is a pervasive belief that major infractions have few consequences. It is demoralizing to hard working staff.

- 24.** Use Plans of Assistance for no more than three years.

If after three years, there is not meaningful improvement, a more significant intervention is required.

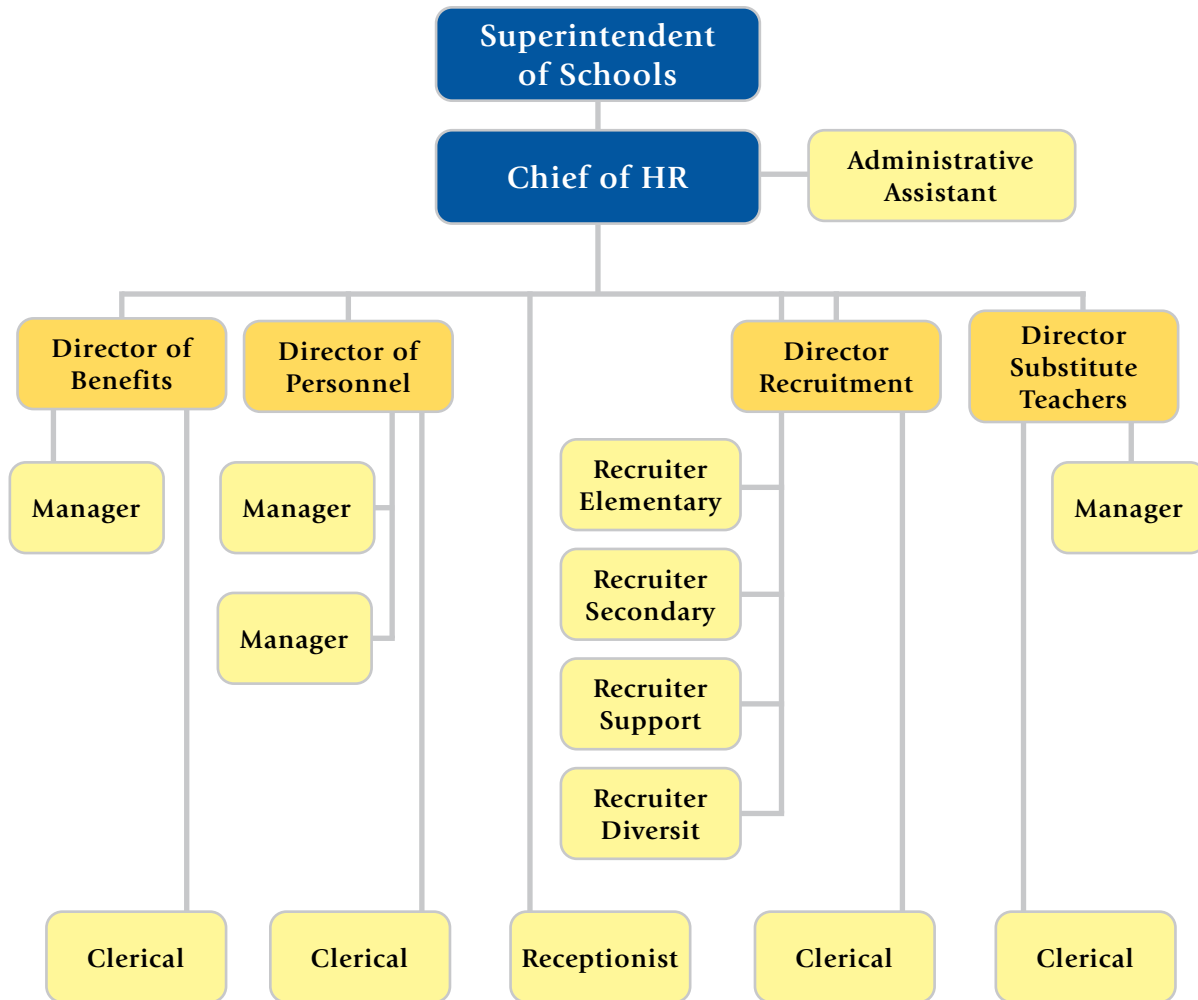
HUMAN CAPITAL AND LABOR RELATIONS

25. Interpret the contract literally in most cases.

The Agreements are the understanding between the parties. While there is always a need for flexibility, generally the contracts should be construed strictly.

26. Organize the Department into four distinct areas: (1) personnel, (2) substitutes, (3) benefits, and, (4) recruitment.

Each of the areas will have a Director reporting to the Chief of HR.



27. Assign the Chief of HR direct reporting responsibilities to the Superintendent.

This position must have direct access to the Superintendent.

28. Assign a secretary and a receptionist to provide administrative support to the Chief of HR.

Sufficient support staff is necessary to allow the Chief of HR to function effectively.

29. Place responsibility for most of the activities necessary for current employees under personnel.

The responsibilities will include records retention, supplemental contracts, employment verification, performance reviews and evaluations for all departments within APS.

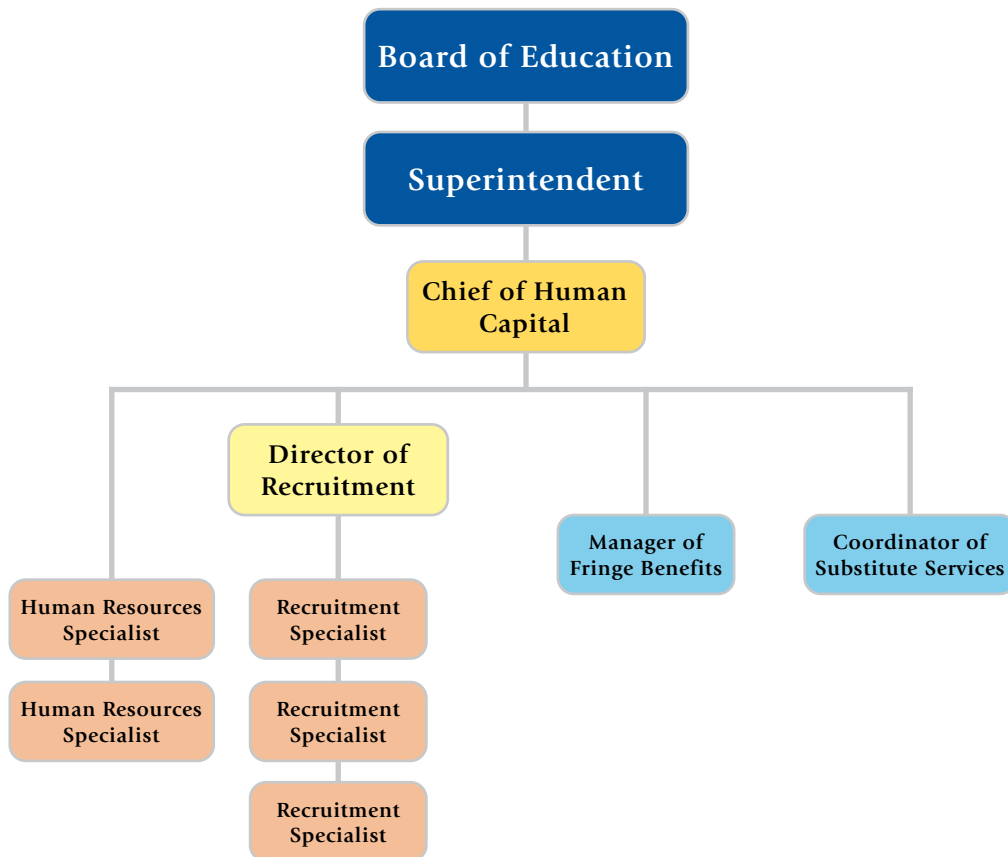
HUMAN CAPITAL AND LABOR RELATIONS

- 30. Staff personnel with a Director, two managers, and a clerical position.

The Director must be degreed. This staffing is tentative as it is a new area but the proposed staffing should allow for an efficient operation.

- 31. Operate the Substitute area as it has been previously.

There will be three changes: (1) the leader will be a Director, (2) the Director will have no recruitment responsibilities, and, (3) an additional clerical position will be added as there will be responsibility for all substitutes throughout APS.



- 32. Keep Benefits staffing as is.

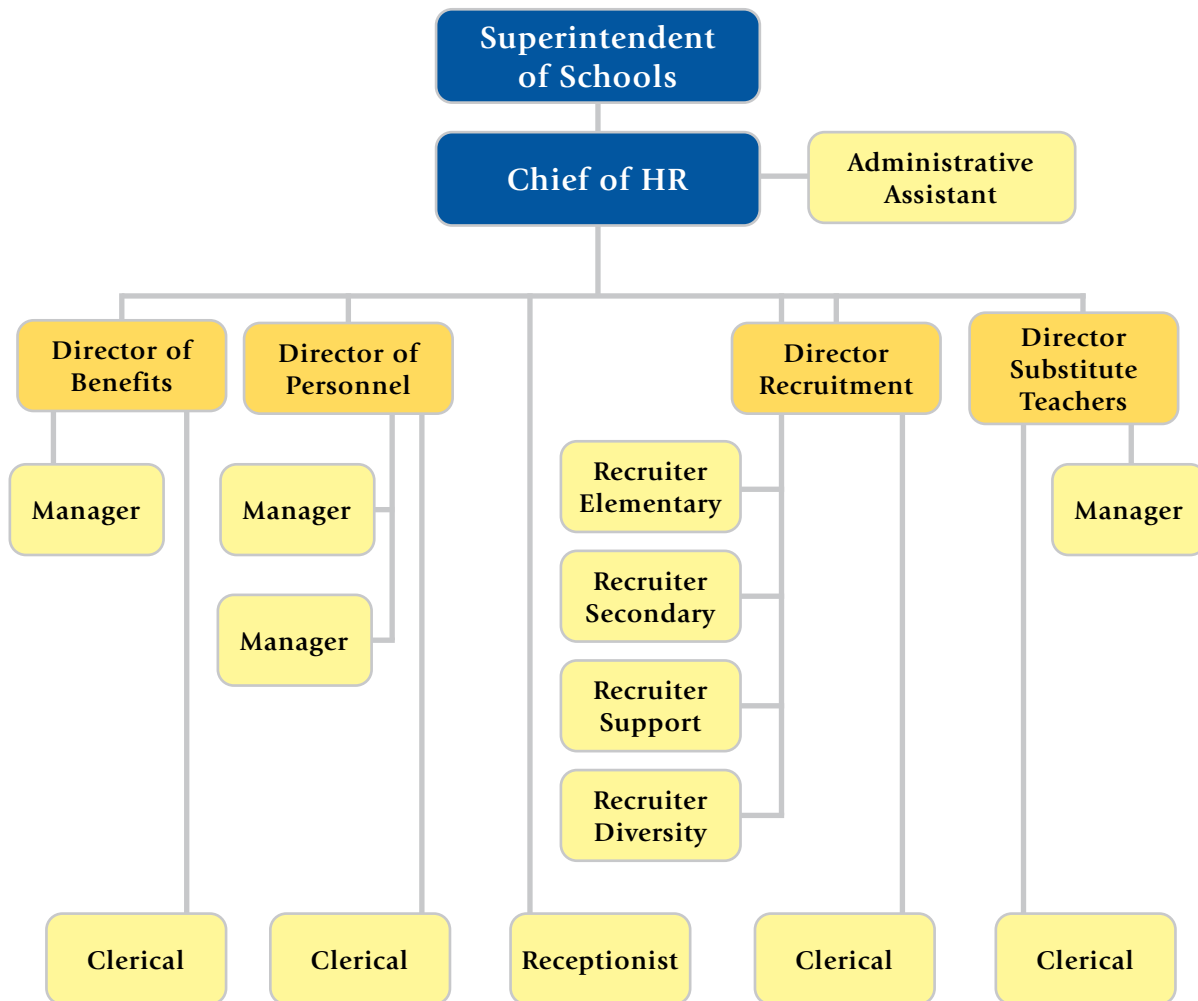
Services must improve in certain aspects. There is enough staff for prompt responses to employee requests.

- 33. Emphasize quality Recruitment.

Everyone must be aware of the importance of recruitment. As noted above, the whole process must be revamped.

34. Revamp Recruitment with four full time recruiters.

There will be a Director, two coordinators who are educators and administratively certified for secondary and elementary education recruitment, a recruiter for support positions, and one for diversity. Clerical support will remain the same. All retired principals will be eliminated.



35. Have Recruitment oversee the entire student teacher experience.

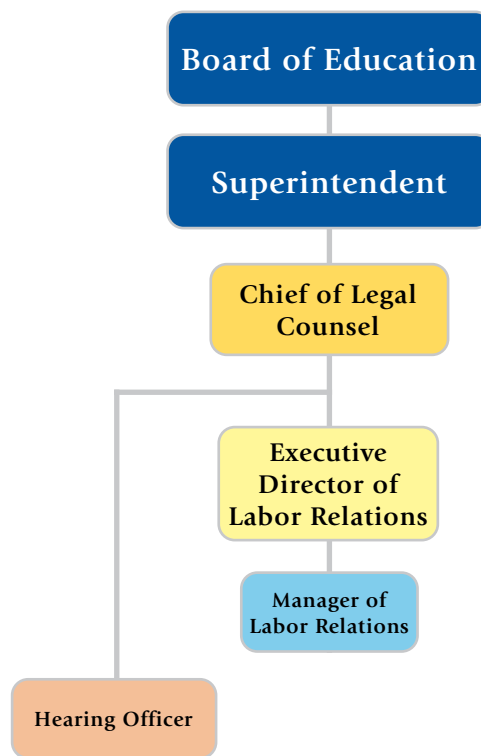
As noted above, student teachers should be a major source of new teachers.

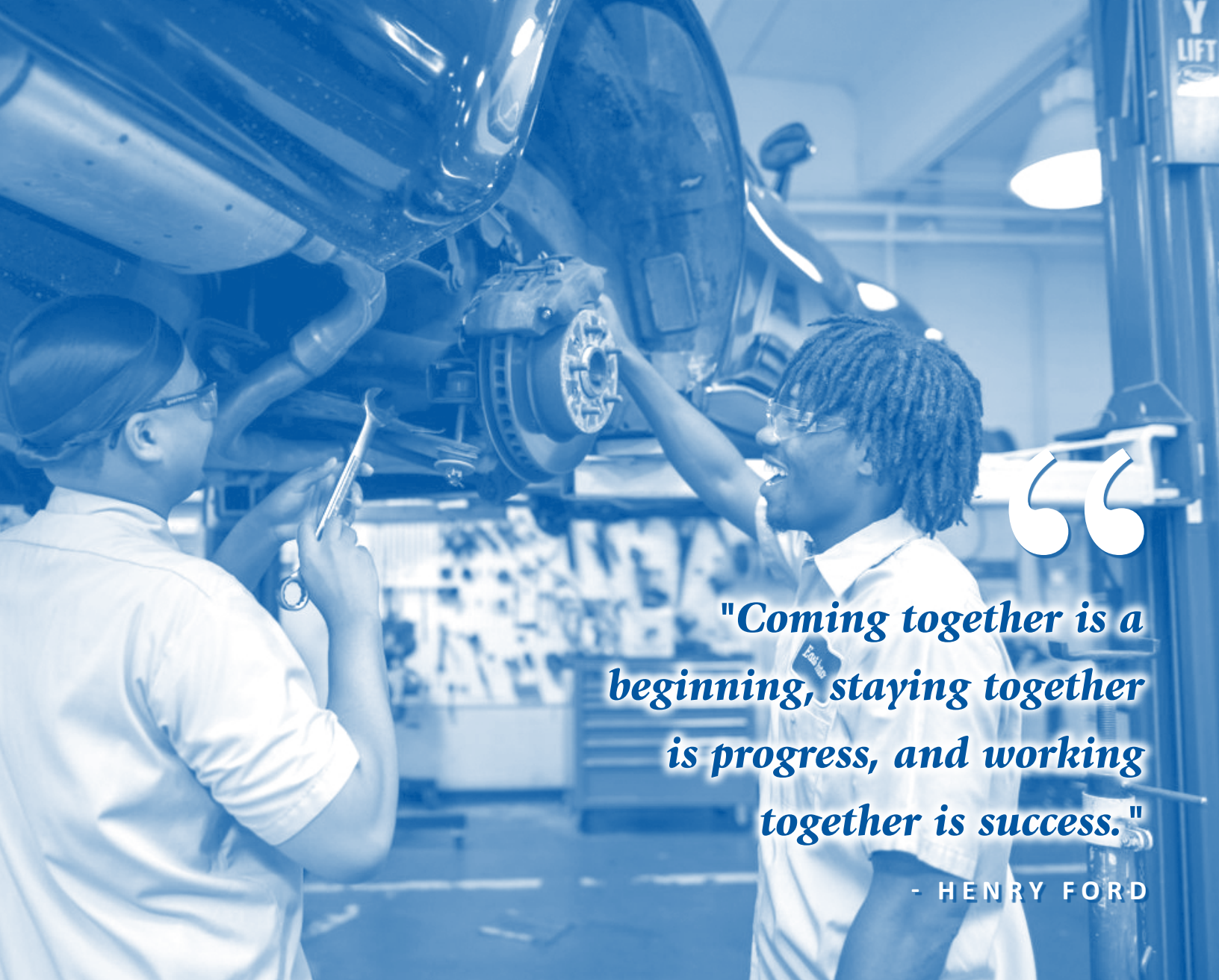
36. APS should return to its traditional organization of having an internal Chief Legal Counsel.

The current system is unusual and not clear. One internal attorney with an assistant can resolve most of APS' legal problems outside of capital projects.

37. The new position of Executive Director of Labor Relations should be an attorney whose other duties would be the chief negotiator.

Outside counsel would be unnecessary. Legal fees last year were approximately one million dollars (\$1,000,000). That is quite a bit even with the cost of the severance agreement with the former Superintendent.





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"Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success."

- HENRY FORD

FINDINGS

Organizational Systems and Structures

CHARGE STATEMENT

SUMMARY

STRENGTHS

CHALLENGES

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CHARGE STATEMENT

Akron Public Schools embraces the importance of systems and structures that will create a culture of harmony and cohesion. The consultant will provide findings and strategies to support the work of continuous improvement in Akron Public Schools.

SUMMARY

FACILITIES

APS has existed for a long time and so have some of its schools.

Simultaneously, the System has lost almost half its enrollment. There is a consensus that despite closing numerous schools there are too many facilities, many in disrepair.

In response, the administration has prepared the Long-Term Operational Plan (LTOP) which has been approved by the Board. It lays out a plan to close, renovate and build schools. It is clear and direct and has begun to be implemented.

It recommends closing or moving the following:

- ▶ Close the Ott building and move the alternative programs to underutilized buildings.
- ▶ Close Miller South and occupy a new facility being built. This recommendation is a part of LTOP.
- ▶ Close Firestone Park, Stewart, and Essex Elementary Schools at the end of the school year and reassign the students.
- ▶ Close Pfeiffer Elementary and move its students to a building which will be constructed.
- ▶ Construct a new Kenmore School which will replace Miller South and Pfeiffer.
- ▶ Relocate STEM high school to another building at the University of Akron- (in process)
- ▶ Construct a new athletic complex at the former Kent Middle School.
- ▶ Close preschool buildings and assign the programs to various elementary schools.

(The sixth grade students have already been assigned to East CLC.) The LTOP goes into various options for the former Kenmore CLC and North HS. The solution to Kenmore appears in place, but North is an enigma. While there is ample room for its students in other high schools, it is a unique community. Shuttering and reassignment will cause significant loss of enrollment.

Nevertheless, North High School needs major repairs and lacks sufficient capacity. Therefore despite the school systems already having excess capacity a new North High School should be built.

It is difficult to explain to the community, i.e. tax payers, the need to construct new facilities while enrollment declines. Nevertheless that is the dilemma APS faces.

Reducing the number of schools should save some crucial funds. Not only would it save some operational dollars but staff can also be reassigned to vacant positions. The savings could be enormous.

The plan does not address administrative facilities. The central office is in an appropriate building, while facilities, transportation and food services are located in a couple of older buildings not far from the main office. Some space may be available.

In trying to “right size” the Board and administration face using its facilities effectively while being cautious about the effect decisions make on enrollment and attendance. While the LTOP is an excellent document it does not replace the need for a comprehensive facilities study. Economics obviously is also a key variable.

LOGISTICS

School nutrition, technology, transportation, and maintenance are all part of logistics. Currently, all these operations are the responsibility of the Executive Director of Business Affairs. Both the Executive Director of Business Affairs and the Coordinator of School Nutrition are certified dietitians with years of experience. The program provides breakfast, lunch, and snacks. Because of the number of Title I eligible students, all students eat free. This opportunity bolsters revenue.

The Technology Department has had stable leadership for a number of years. A new Executive Director assumed the position this summer.

Prior to his arrival change was difficult and too often resulted in interpersonal conflict.

The Technology Department provides comprehensive service which is fairly traditional.

ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

There are numerous long-term employees which is commendable given the disparity between APS salaries versus nearby districts.

Transportation is likely the most challenging area in the Business Department. It too has a new Coordinator. There are significant issues that must be addressed.

The greatest one involved personnel. Finding qualified drivers, substitutes and mechanics is a real issue. Transportation is responsible for hiring its employees.

Currently, high school students are transported by public transportation through a contract between APS and Summit County Metro. K-8 students who attend comprehensive schools are on yellow buses operated by the District. Out of district transportation, special education students, etc. receive service from private contractors.

The real shortage is substitute drivers. Being that there are not enough, there is a danger that some routes may not be able to operate as absences increase during the winter.

Communication with the principals is not as it should be. Student behavior must be consistently addressed. Transportation staff try to be in constant communication with the building administration.

Like other areas, maintenance/custodial has challenges. This area is organized and has long-term leadership. Finding sufficient custodians remains a problem. A great deal of overtime is used as there are often numerous vacancies.

The task will become easier as buildings are closed and the footprint is reduced. Grounds will also be better maintained. Preventative maintenance definitely is a major goal.

Culture is an issue. With all the pluses of stable leadership, there are also problems of lack of change and exploring new ways of providing services. Complacency has a way of setting in.

Probably, the most traditional is the warehouse and inventory operations. While the service is good, procedures are antiquated. Inventory is completed by pencil and paper. Introspection is missing.

Internal mail delivery responsibility lives in the central office. The head custodian is in charge. Mail is sorted and then delivered. Some of the drivers also serve as central office custodians.

Finally, the business office provides security for the schools, their activities, and the central office. There are significant numbers at the middle and high schools as safety is a major concern. Security guards at the elementary schools are limited to a couple where the facility configuration requires it. There is also a position at the metro hub.

As is evident, the business services department is quite comprehensive. Often their operations are taken for granted but these supports are essential. Delivering quality, cost-effective services remains the goal.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Closely related to family engagement is community relations.

Community relations has been a part of school systems for many years. The goal is to help the wider community be a part of the school system resulting in greater understanding and hopefully support.

While it was not part of the core mission when the current Superintendent arrived, positive interaction with its constituents is essential for APS. Not only everyone in Akron, especially those with little connection to the System would feel a part of APS. This is certainly the key



to passage of levies and/or redistricting issues which the District may face soon.

Recognizing that placing athletics/extra curricular activities in this section may seem unusual, but it can be justified. Like it or not, success in athletics is important. Being successful gives public pride in its teams. Also, having quality dramatic performances, science fairs, art shows etc builds support for APS.

Of course, the goal of all extra-curricular activities is to help students grow. It does by encouraging participation in fun pursuits. Once again, equity issues mar parts of the programs. Some schools have far more extra-curricular activities/athletics than others.

Facilities are also lacking throughout. Extracurricular opportunities affect enrollment.

An incredible strength of APS is its partnerships. The most obvious are all the business and philanthropic partnerships that make up the comprehensive career/college programs. For many reasons, this program is a success.

There are many other strong relationships. The City of Akron is a great resource, e.g. Akron After School as are the University of Akron and Stark Community College. Excellent use is made of City facilities and the incredible intellectual resources. Other City resources such as the museums and Metro are also accessed.

APS has earned the support of various foundations not only in Akron, but the greater metropolitan area. These charitable entities support financially but also share their employees as volunteers.

All this outreach, plus inclusive and stable governance has allowed APS to basically avoid the negative image of many if not most urban school districts. Recently a bit of that luster has been lost.

COMMUNICATION

Virtually any large, complex organization - which APS is - faces numerous difficulties in communication both internally and externally. APS leadership reorganized the essentiality of communication and has devoted resources to it. Its effectiveness remains a question.

The Department tasked with coordinating communication is aptly labeled the Communication Department. The Department addresses media relations, operates the radio station, coordinates social media, and develops marketing strategies. On the surface, such a department should provide meaningful clear communication. Sadly, this is not always the case.

Generally, the relationship between the news media, especially print, is contentious. That is true here, despite very experienced leadership. The reasons are actually numerous.

First, the Akron media focuses on the main urban district and basically ignores the suburban systems. Urban areas often produce more unfortunate situations. Viewers and readers prefer the negative so that is what is reported.

Not all the cases are beyond the District's control. Communication is not proactive, nor transparent. Senior staff is understandably wary of the media. Crises are not always

An incredible strength of APS is its partnerships. The most obvious are all the business and philanthropic partnerships that make up the comprehensive career/college programs. For many reasons, this program is a success.



addressed properly and openly. The result is a culture of blame with little acknowledgment of the job of the media. A few more positive stories would help a bit.

The operation of the radio station and the use of social media appears well received if not always utilized. Marketing may be a misnomer as it appears confined to college/career enrollment and services.

Internal communication is ad hoc and in many ways nonexistent.

Email announcements are sent to all staff by the Superintendent. Attempts are made to be certain the principals have adequate information to explain the District's plans. Many meetings are held and every effort made to keep all administration personnel abreast of the latest news. A lack of communication is often blamed when problems arise.

Sometimes that is true, but other times the problems are a result of poor decision making. Even effective

communication cannot resolve the consequences of poor planning, thought, or effort.

ORGANIZATION

There is no science to an organization of a central office of a school system. Generally, they follow a traditional bureaucracy with an individual responsible for; (1) supervision of the principals, (2) Curriculum and Instruction, (3) Student Services, (4) Operations/Facilities, (5) Business/Financial, (6) Legal, (7) Communication/ Community Relations and (8) Human Resources (talent). Depending on the size of the district, there are numerous functions within each area.

Where responsibilities fall varies by system.

APS is traditional and comprehensive with the exception of Student Services – which appears to be part of special education – each responsibility reports directly to the Superintendent. Additionally, there are school improvement and Student

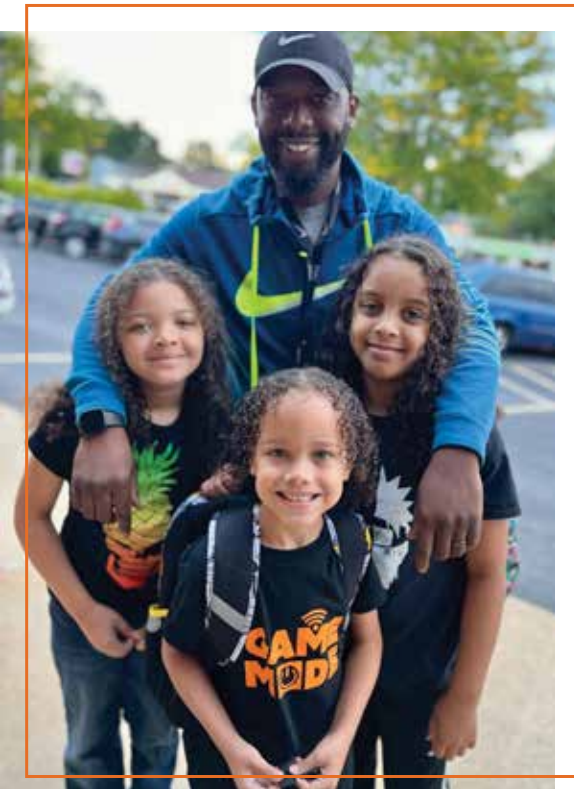
Services/Family Services Departments (although there are traditional student services, e.g. psychological, speech/hearing guidance etc. They are not clearly organized).

It is easy to quibble with any organization. What is more difficult is to devise a rational evaluation of the number of positions necessary. Complaints always abound about the numbers in the central office usually from individuals who have little to no data.

Nonetheless, cuts usually emanate from a report like this one. This necessity is compounded by declining enrollment. A number of positions were eliminated last summer in a process that many believe was neither fair nor positive.

What has remained is that every position in the central office has one goal – assist in better outcomes for students. Keeping that goal in mind will allow a painful process of eliminating positions to be honest and transparent.

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STRENGTHS

FACILITIES:

- ▶ Development and approval of the Long-Term Operational Plan (LTOP) for school closures, renovations, and construction.
- ▶ Clear plan for consolidating and renovating facilities to optimize resources.
- ▶ Acknowledgment of the need for comprehensive facilities study and consideration of economic factors.
- ▶ Focus on saving operational costs and utilizing staff effectively through facility reductions.
- ▶ Coordination of business services to support school operations effectively.

LOGISTICS:

- ▶ Stable leadership in the Technology Department.
- ▶ Provision of comprehensive school nutrition services with experienced dietitians.
- ▶ Recognition of challenges in transportation personnel recruitment and communication with principals.
- ▶ Organized maintenance/custodial operations with a focus on preventative maintenance.
- ▶ Community partnerships for student transportation and utilization of City resources.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS:

- ▶ Engagement with constituents to build understanding and support for APS.
- ▶ Recognition of the importance of athletics and extracurricular activities in building public pride and support.
- ▶ Strong partnerships with businesses, philanthropic organizations, and educational institutions.
- ▶ Historical success in avoiding negative perceptions of urban school districts.
- ▶ Focus on inclusive governance and positive interaction with the wider community.

CHALLENGES

FACILITIES:

- ▶ Overabundance of facilities despite declining enrollment.
- ▶ Plan for closing, renovating, and building schools.
- ▶ Challenges in explaining facility construction amidst declining enrollment.
- ▶ Importance of comprehensive facilities study.

LOGISTICS:

- ▶ Challenges in school nutrition, technology, transportation, and maintenance.
- ▶ Issues with finding qualified personnel in transportation.
- ▶ Need for improved communication and modernization of procedures.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS:

- ▶ Importance of positive interaction with constituents for support.
- ▶ Equity issues in extracurricular activities and athletics.
- ▶ Strength of partnerships with businesses, philanthropies, and community organizations.

COMMUNICATION:

- ▶ Contentious relationship with media, lack of proactive communication.
- ▶ Challenges in internal communication and decision-making.
- ▶ Importance of clear and transparent communication strategies.

ORGANIZATION:

- ▶ Traditional bureaucracy with varied responsibilities.
- ▶ Need for rational evaluation of positions amidst declining enrollment.
- ▶ Focus on assisting better student outcomes in central office positions.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FACILITIES:

1. Many facilities in APS are old and barely usable, and should be closed.

The District has developed a long-term operational plan (LTOP). This plan should be adhered to and amended as necessary.

LOGISTICS:

2. A comprehensive audit of the numbers of positions in the Technology Department should be undertaken.

With a new Executive Director after a long period of stability, the perfect opportunity exists to take a fresh look. There seems to be a great many employees, but the consultants do not have the expertise to draw the proper conclusions.

3. Students in grade 7–12 should ride Metro.

While the question of safety and legality will be raised, a few 7th and 8th grade students already ride Metro. More security can be added if necessary. Not only will this plan likely save money, but it will help resolve the driver shortage. Metro has the capacity. Middle school students already ride the metro for their personal travel.

4. The warehouse operation must be modernized.

Not all of the processes and procedures are computerized which is quite surprising. Change has been attempted but resisted. This must no longer occur.

5. Individual leaders in the Business Services Department must be given more latitude to make decisions, changes and innovations.

The Business Services Department is large, complex, and generally efficient. Nonetheless, many areas have not kept up with all the technological changes and need improvements. Individual responsibility is key.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS:

6. The District should continue its excellent relationships with the business and philanthropic communities.

The quality of the various partnerships speaks for itself.

7. APS should establish its own Foundation.

Despite the wonderful partnerships and APS being part of the Akron Foundation, the District is large enough to have its own Foundation. There are alumni both locally and nationally who would be willing to participate, as would businesses who are not already involved. It would be a 501(c) (3) with its own Executive Director. It would be financially self-supporting.

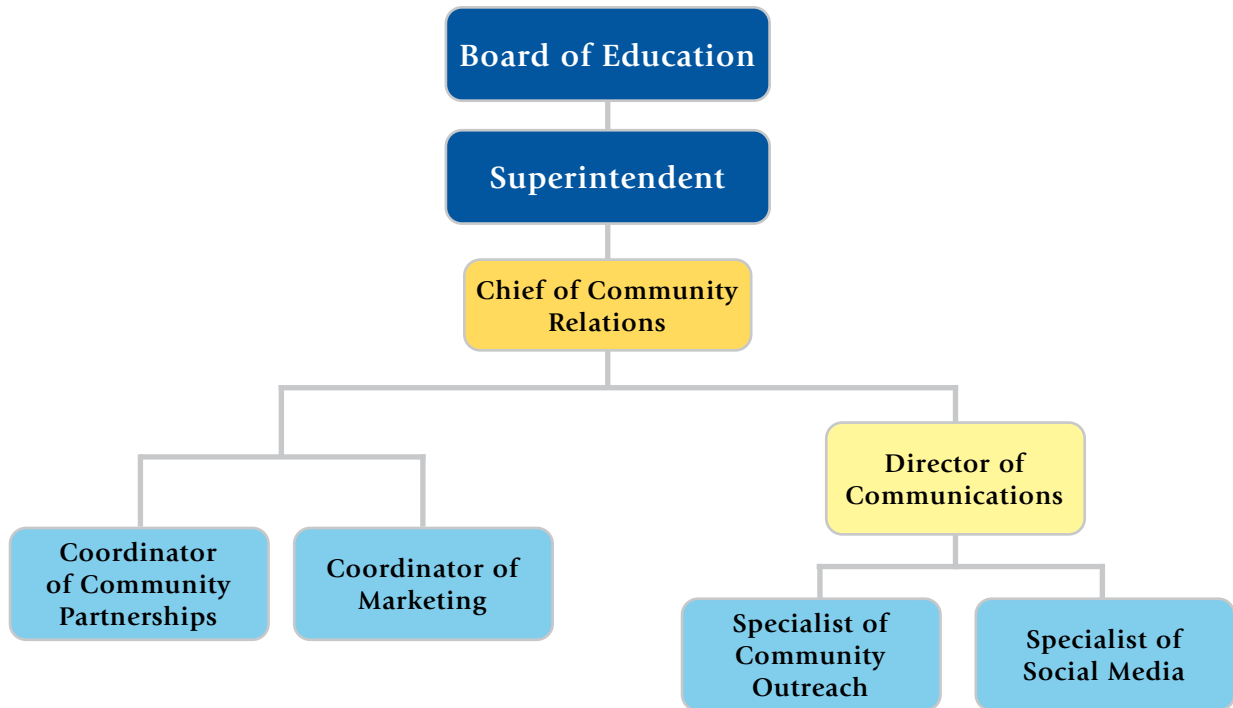
Columbus City Schools just completed the process of creating its foundation and could be a guide.

8. Free passes to APS events should exist for senior citizens who are residents of APS.

Senior citizens often have the least interaction with a school system. Not having to pay to attend athletic events, musical programs, etc. allow seniors to see the positives of APS.

COMMUNICATIONS:

1. The Communication Department's mission must include internal communications.
Emails come from the Superintendent which are helpful. More periodic updates are necessary. Although outdated, some print material may be appropriate
2. The Director of Communications should work with principals and administrators on appropriate methods for interacting with media.
This assistance should consist of formal professional development and informal coaching. Even if seemingly justified, an adversarial relationship with the media is a losing proposition.
3. All staff, especially leadership, must be expected to be positive about APS.
No one is advising being untruthful, but there is much that is good. Speaking negatively about fellow staff, leadership and especially students or parents is unacceptable.
4. Ultimately the number of staff joining the communications Department must be increased.



ORGANIZATION:

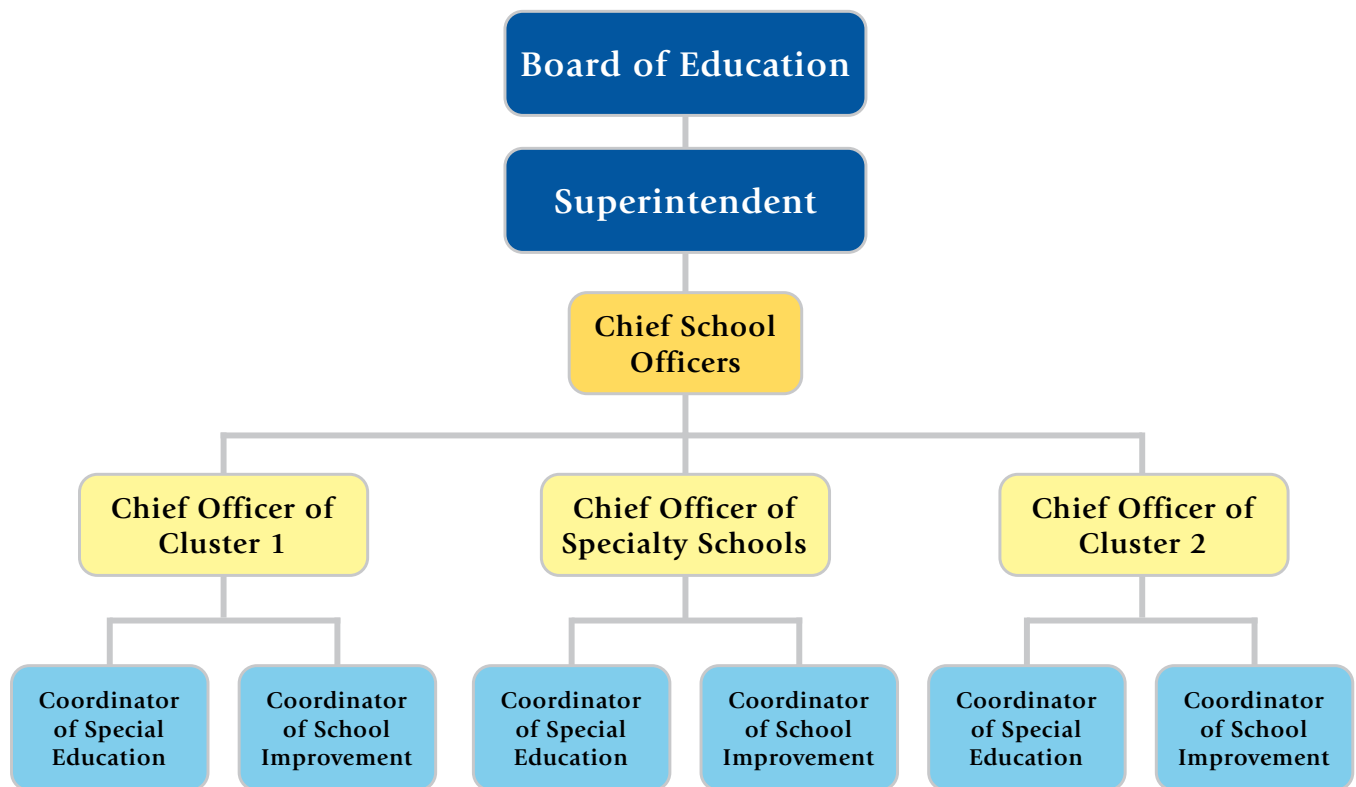
1. The District should be organized vertically rather than horizontally.

There are numerous benefits to a vertical organization (K-12 clusters).

Articulation between schools improves as does positive interaction with parents. The organization is more parent friendly as they are dealing with one entity no matter where their student is attending.

2. The District should return to having a position overseeing all the Specialty Schools.

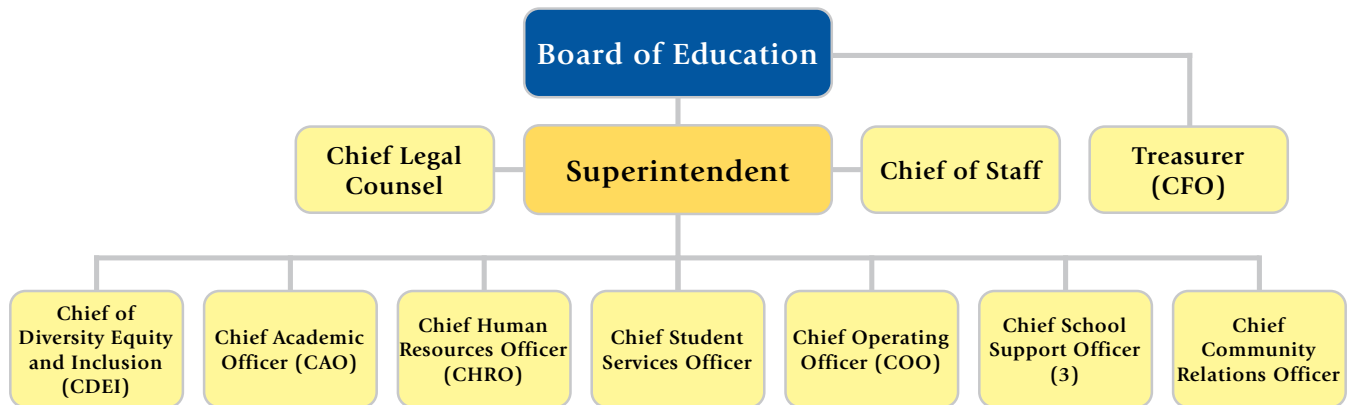
These schools are a major part of APS. Articulation is key. The leader must be sure that the specialty schools do not become a separate elitist school system.



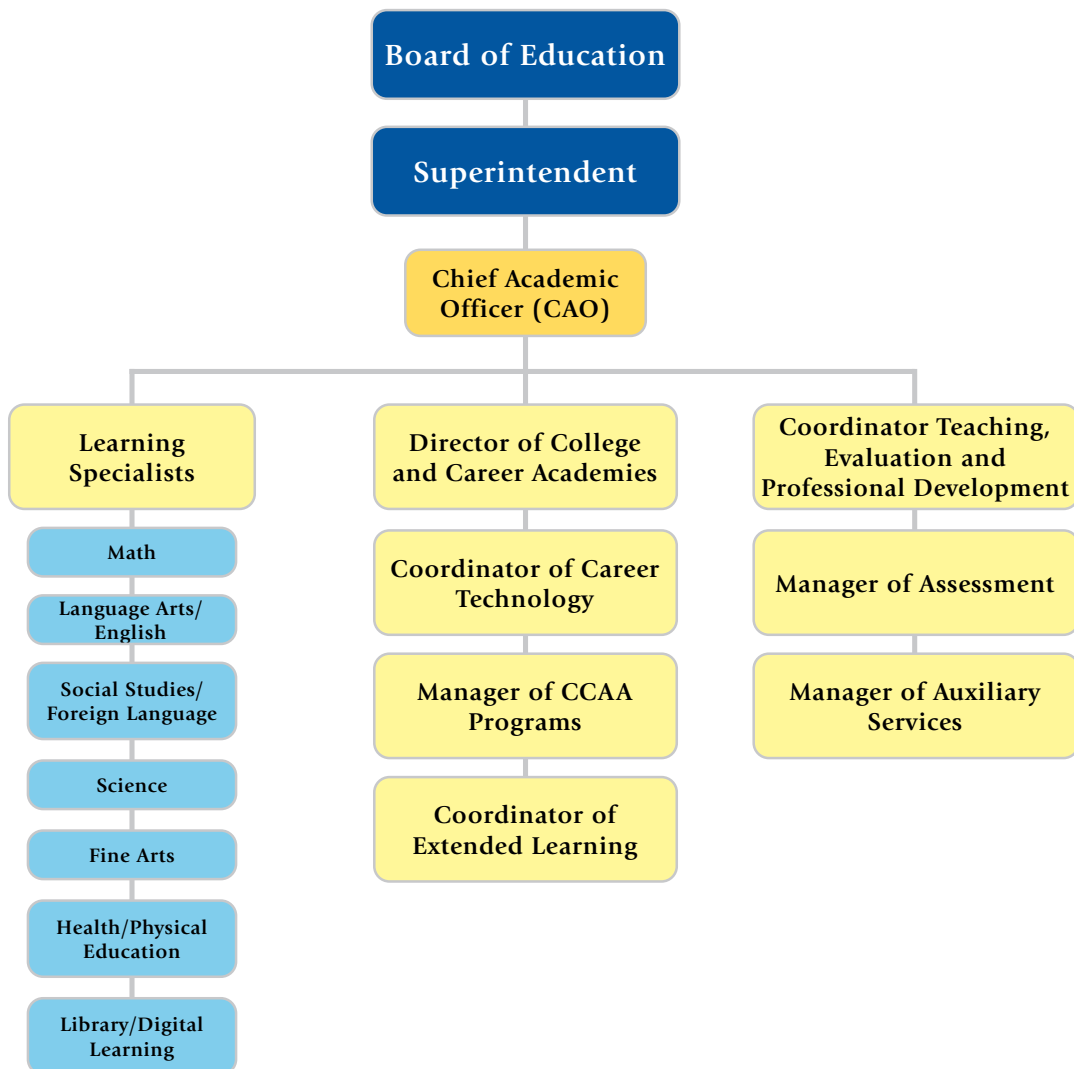
3. The following is one way to provide overall administrative governance (see following page).

ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

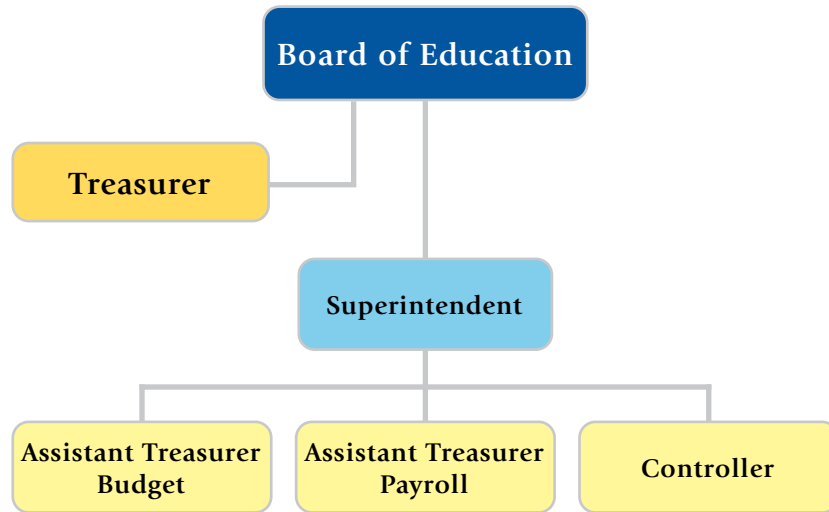
Superintendent



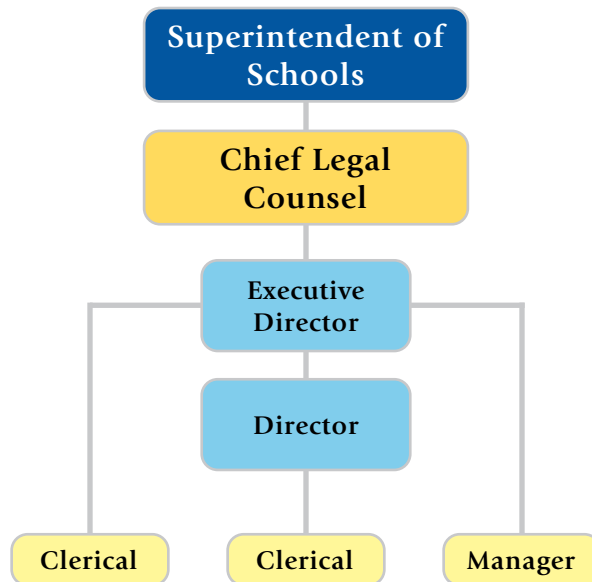
Chief Academic Officer



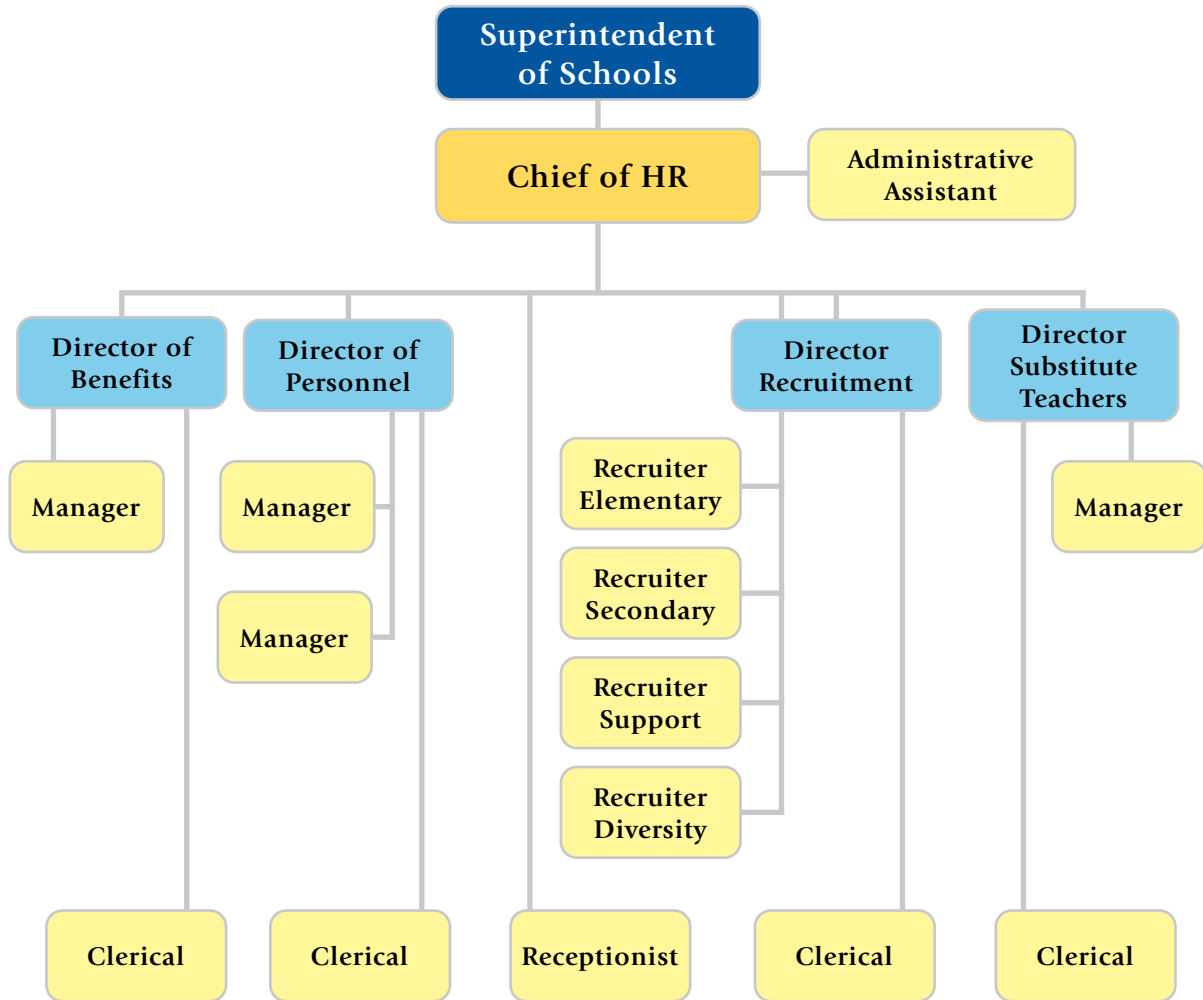
Chief Financial Officer (Treasurer)



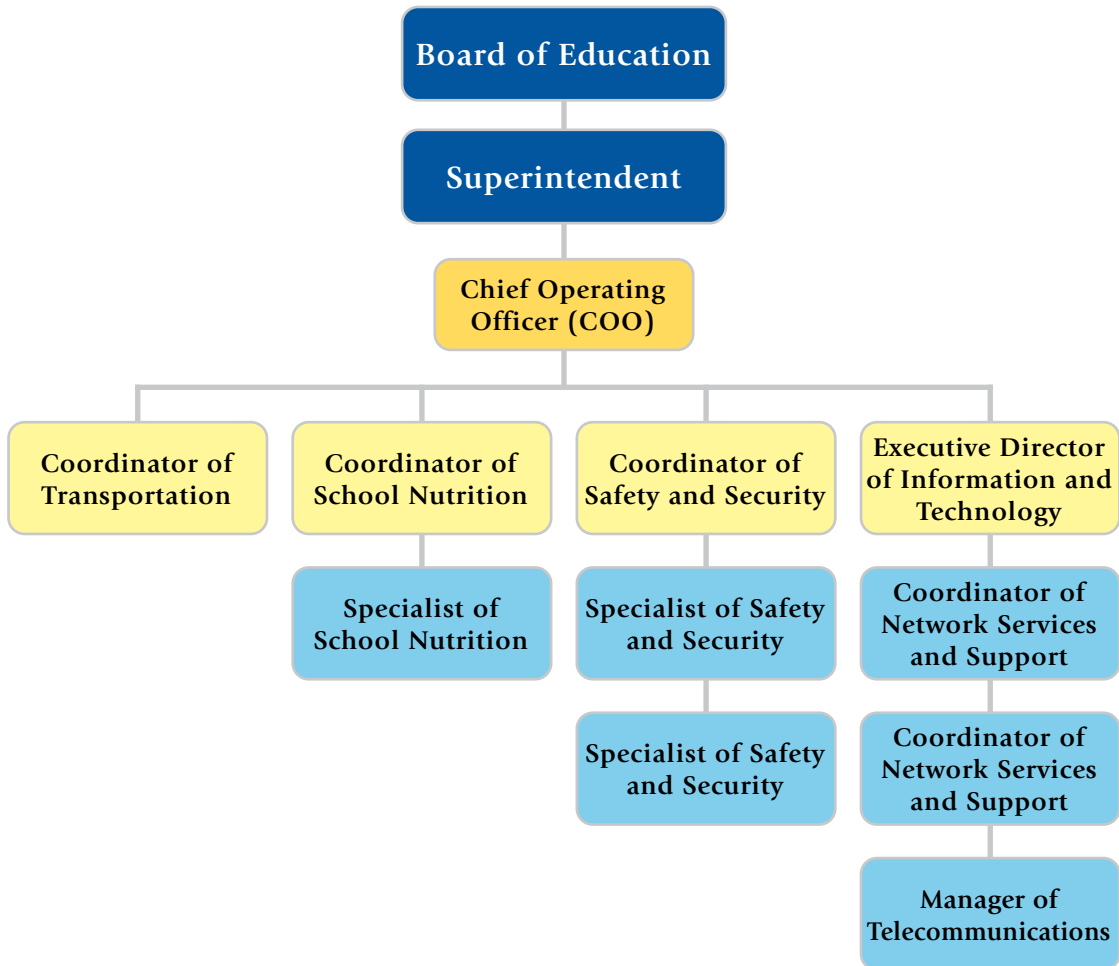
Chief Legal Counsel



Chief Human Resources Officer



Chief Operating Officer



“

Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation."

- NELSON MANDELA

FINDINGS

Equity, Culture, and Climate

CHARGE STATEMENT

SUMMARY

STRENGTHS

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CHARGE STATEMENT

The district is committed to excellence and providing all students with diverse and equitable experiences and opportunities to achieve and reach their fullest potential in learning environments that are supportive, safe and welcoming that will not limit them in receiving rigorous, unbiased and engaging instruction.

The consultant will investigate and consider elements that impact a student's academic progress in Akron Public Schools.

SUMMARY

EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY:

Undoubtedly, APS is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion - excellence not so much. While there are many explanations for the disparity, the two concepts are not opposite. Actually, they complement each other.

In fact, the District has a Chief Diversity officer in charge of a well meaning department. Such an officer is common in urban districts. Sadly, it is an oxymoron.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (hereinafter DEI) should be infused in every aspect of the operation from the Treasurer's office to the Curriculum and Instruction Department. Currently despite everyone's best efforts, inequities are everywhere.

Opportunities for students are a prime example. A couple of high schools have comprehensive offerings, the rest very few. Certain life sports e.g. golf, tennis are available only at a few high schools.

The most depressing illustration is expectations for students. There is a culture of low expectations. Implicit bias is prevalent throughout the greater community and APS has tried to address it with mixed success.

In interviews with principals, it was clear that student behavior is a major issue as it should be. For some principals in lower socio-economic schools that is where it stopped. Learning was inevitably an afterthought.

APS is supportive of restorative practices. Professional development has been devoted to it, but there has been the predictable resistance. The concept that all students can learn does not infuse the System.

The area where diverse, equitable, and inclusionary issues are most debated is the Specialty School (often called magnet schools). The schools include Early College, STEM High School, STEM Middle School, International Baccalaureate and the Performing Arts Middle School and Firestone High School Performing Arts programs. All of these schools/programs except the STEM's and IB have entrance requirements. (The STEM schools are selective in that they attract students whose parents understand the "system.") Critics call them elitist and in some ways that may be true. But eliminating excellence does not create equity. True equity has a positive impact on all aspects of APS and all of its students.

One of the most obvious problems is the diversity of staff or lack thereof. Teachers of color are few; support staff better but not where it should be; Administration is more reflective of the student body. (There is a widely held perception that promotion is based on connection rather than merit. The perception is real even if not accurate.)

Coaches and intervention specialists are very important, but they should be diverse. Leadership in various support departments needs diversity especially as the workforce is multicultural.

Fortunately, there are examples of equity and excellence working as one in APS. The best may be the career and college academies. They are student centered, high expectations are the norm, and outcomes are impressive.

There is strong support both internally and externally. The required business partners are in place as our philanthropic entities, e.g. The United Way, GAR and others. The pathways are student centered and are evenly distributed for the most part among the high schools.

People are treated professionally and with respect. Employee welfare is a priority although the bureaucracy occasionally intervenes and makes it difficult to accomplish.

While there are challenges such as identifying sufficient staff, and a few under-enrolled programs, generally it is both equitable and excellent. There is a plan to expand the programs into the middle grades.

Ending the concepts of equity and excellence with the following anecdote provided by an administrator working at an elementary school may seem disconnected. It really is not, indeed, while probably an isolated incident, still instructive.

A first grader arrived at school about an hour late – obviously not her fault. She requested breakfast and was sent to the cafeteria. There she was told she was late and thus breakfast could not be provided. The District, its employees, and its schools have work to do.

CULTURE:

A subtext of all the concerns above is the culture of APS. It is a significant problem. Almost everyone interviewed lamented the lack of accountability. While many individuals are dedicated and hard-working; the culture does not demand it. Demanding at least satisfactory performance from staff is not the norm. Poor outcomes are often blamed on the students which is offensive. If students are performing poorly, that short-coming, despite outside influences, is the responsibility of the educators.

Combined with the lack of accountability is the aversion to conflict or risk. Difficult employees know that the system can be manipulated and central office personnel often "fold." Outrageous behavior is often tolerated. The outright fear of AEA is a real problem.

Taking risks is subtly discouraged. Numerous administrators pride themselves as "not making waves," a concept that is probably good for job security but not student achievement. Promotion often goes to the cautious. Independent thought is usually not rewarded.

Anyone who has been tasked with changing an organizational hierarchy understands the difficulty. If even achievable, it is a long complex difficult process. Incredible persistence and patience is required. Opposition will be fierce. If successful, APS will be far better for it.

CLIMATE:

Climate is closely related to culture but easier to improve. In shorthand, culture is the values, norms and traditions of the organization. Changing those is difficult. Climate is the working conditions for the adults and the learning atmosphere for the students.

The District acknowledges the importance especially in the schools. It has devoted climate coaches to each school but that may be the ultimate oxymoron. First of all, the role is unclear and they are often used as behavior specialists. Moreover, they have little formal education for the position.

The bigger problem, however, is that the concept is likely unworkable. The staff and students, within the parameters of the District, create the climate. Beyond that, the principal is key. Like all large school systems, climate varies even though the climate coach positions were created to bring consistency.

Like instruction, climate is no better than the principals. Most of the principals believe they are constrained by the MA; it is not an acceptance excuse – Union leadership dominates many schools. Very few schools have a student centered climate.

Innovation and change is encouraged at the school level by senior staff but very little occurs. The result, naturally, is stagnation.

APS itself has done an excellent job of undertaking bold projects.

Interesting programs are a result when experimentation is allowed. Decision making is not transparent and poorly communicated.

People are treated professionally and with respect. Employee welfare is a priority although the bureaucracy occasionally intervenes and makes it difficult to accomplish.

STRENGTHS

- ▶ Commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the district's operations.
- ▶ Existence of a Chief Diversity Officer overseeing efforts to address equity issues.
- ▶ Promotion of diversity in staff and leadership positions to better reflect student demographics.
- ▶ Success of career and college academies in providing equitable and excellent pathways for students, with strong internal and external support.
- ▶ Recognition of the need to address implicit bias and low expectations, particularly in student behavior management and learning.
- ▶ Initiative to expand equitable and excellent programs like career and college academies into middle grades.
- ▶ Despite challenges, dedication to addressing disparities and promoting excellence and equity across all aspects of APS operations.
- ▶ Dedicated and hard-working individuals within APS who are committed to their roles.
- ▶ Professional treatment and respect for employees, with a priority on employee welfare.
- ▶ Undertaking bold projects and innovative programs within APS, demonstrating a willingness to experiment
- ▶ Support for innovation and change at the school level from senior staff, albeit with limited actual implementation.
- ▶ Commitment to addressing cultural issues, such as lack of accountability, aversion to conflict, and risk, although challenges persist in implementing meaningful change.

CHALLENGES

- ▶ Inequitable availability of Advanced Placement courses across high schools.
- ▶ Disparity between commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion versus excellence.
- ▶ Implicit bias affecting expectations for students and staff diversity.
- ▶ Limited staff diversity across various positions.
- ▶ Success of career and college academies contrasts with equity challenges in other areas.
- ▶ Lack of accountability and aversion to conflict or risk.
- ▶ Resistance to change and independent thought.
- ▶ Difficulty in changing organizational hierarchy.
- ▶ Varied working conditions and learning atmospheres across schools.
- ▶ Importance of principal leadership in shaping climate.
- ▶ Need for innovation and transparent decision-making.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY:

1. By insisting that through the Office of Diversity all aspects of the school system are responsible for emphasizing DEI.
2. Obviously, initially the recommendation appears to be an oxymoron. Rather DEI needs to be infused into every department having a part or whole position devoted to DEI, especially in curriculum, HR, student services (special education) and community relations. An add-on suggests that DEI is not the responsibility of all.
3. Academic opportunities for students must allow for excellence and equity.

Certainly the college and career program is both excellent and equitable as noted in the Findings. However, other parts of the curriculum are not available to all. The most glaring example is the number of AP courses which vary from over twenty (20) to almost none. (In fact, one principal was unsure if they were available.

Offering these courses will admittedly stretch the schools resources but the program will grow with proper nurturing.

4. The Specialty Schools need to be more inclusive.

The Specialty Schools pose a real challenge to be both equitable and excellent. An effort is made through marketing and entrance criteria. Marketing must be directed to underserved communities (students).

Where there are legitimate admissions criteria, they must be multifaceted and correlated to the objectives of the program.

Even in those schools without official entrance criteria, some parents understand the "system" better and this disadvantages certain communities. More outreach is required.

5. All students must have access to comprehensive extracurricular activities.

All secondary students should be able to participate in golf, tennis, swimming along with more traditional sports. Drama and dance should be offered as well as comprehensive art and music programs.

APS should be commended for its commitment to the arts in the elementary and middle schools along with devoting administrative positions to the fine arts.

6. Professional development should be devoted to understanding implicit bias and its effect on inequities.

Like many urban districts, low expectations for students permeate. Making progress in this area will be difficult, but it is essential. Most students will not achieve at high levels in an environment of low expectations.

7. Equity and Excellence can be improved by having a more diverse staff, especially teachers. The eliminated position in the HR Department devoted to Equity/Recruitment should be restored. It is obvious that APS staff does not reflect the student demographics. This is a major problem. There was once a position in HR addressing these inequities. It should be restored immediately.

CULTURE:

1. The Board of Education must set the proper tone.

It is unfair to blame so many District problems on a group of well-meaning volunteers. Public perception is not positive, whether created by the District or its portrayal by the media; many in the community perceive the Board as not setting a professional tone. Much of this is a result of the Board's relationship with its previous Superintendent. A new beginning is certainly possible.

2. A culture of accountability should be non-negotiable.

Every group the Consultants interviewed lamented the lack of accountability.

Solutions to unacceptable outcomes do not drive the District. Unacceptable performance is far too often ignored. Until there are real staff consequences, this lack of accountability will likely continue.

3. Consequences for infractions must be meaningful and swift.

Currently, some employees openly defy policy, procedures, and directions. It is often done with impunity. Such behavior is demoralizing to all the dedicated employees.

This situation is an absolute failing of the administration.

4. Great teaching must be encouraged and rewarded.

Too long "no waves" has been the norm. Improvement is impossible with that outlook. Divergent thinking is essential.

5. Change is difficult and will have many critics.

The Board and senior staff will be tested. Change agents necessarily need strong support. The mission must be uppermost.

CLIMATE:

1. The role of climate coaches should be reviewed.

Climate is created by leadership and staff. If these positions are behavior specialists, then they should be so identified and filled. Otherwise, these positions should be eliminated.

2. School leadership must understand the importance of climate.

APS is dedicated to building a positive climate. The principals need to be helped to make sure it is a reality.

3. Innovation should be allowed and in fact encouraged at the building level.

At least some principals feel constrained to experiment and implement creative programs. Within the basic confines of the system, individual schools should be permitted to implement meaningful programs and strategies.

“

Good governance is about the processes for making and implementing decisions. It's not about making correct choices, but about the best possible process for making those choices."

- JOHN THAIN



FINDINGS

Governance

CHARGE STATEMENT

SUMMARY

STRENGTHS

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FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CHARGE STATEMENT

Board governance is an essential part of the functionality of the Board. Akron Public Schools Board of Education desires to be its best version for its constituents and the scholars and employees of Akron Public Schools.

The consultants will provide recommendations for the Board of Education for continuous improvement.

SUMMARY

Governance is problematic in public education. In theory there is a Board of Education – usually elected – which was created to have an oversight role, set policy, evaluate the superintendent and reflect the communities goals for education.

The Superintendent is the Chief Executive Officer. She/he is responsible for the entire operation of the schools including personnel, facilities, instruction etc. The Superintendent has the added job of helping the Board deal with significant issues and work harmoniously together.

Often, the roles become blurred and APS is a perfect example. While it is hard to criticize hard-working, well-meaning volunteers, the APS Board or at least some members are way out of their lane.

Recounting the past or casting blame is pointless, but a little history is relevant. APS has had relatively stable superintendents and boards. A few years ago that ended.

A long term Superintendent exited and a new Superintendent was selected. That turned out not to work. The Board became dissatisfied with the Superintendent's performance and decided to enter into a separation agreement. It needs to be emphasized that the decision is well within the Board's right.

The public airing of grievances was not helpful and caused a great deal of consternation in the community. An interim superintendent was chosen and a national search for a permanent superintendent was begun.

Understandably, as there were leadership voids, the Board members became more involved. Lines were crossed. Board members became intimately involved in the daily operations and interacting in an administrative capacity with various groups, especially AEA.

Confusion appears to be in a belief that individual Board members had individual authority which is absolutely incorrect. It takes a public meeting where Board members make a decision. That is clearly the law.

It is understandable that individual Board members wanted to assist especially if he/she found the administration ineffective.

Unfortunately, that is not how it is supposed to work.

The Board has a new Superintendent and will have two new Board members. The opportunity to return to traditional roles is available. It is important to emphasize that the Consultants are not questioning anyone's motivation.

The Consultants chatted with six of the seven current members and each was clearly dedicated to the success of APS. Events, however, caused issues to become public and confused.

Among the Board's responsibilities beyond working with and evaluating the Superintendent, overseeing the budget in a macro sense, and

reflecting community expectations is making policy decisions that guide the operations of the District.

Policy review is beyond the parameters of this Report, but there are two glaring areas that must be addressed: the first is nepotism and the second anonymous complaints.

Nepotism is addressed in PO1520 and 3120. Both prohibit any employee from directly supervising a relative. Relatives are not defined. However, a staff member may supervise an individual who supervises a relative. Whether such a practice is prohibited is unclear, but the practice does place some administrators in unfair situations.

Good governance is essential to a smoothly operating school district. The Board and administrators must work cooperatively. While there is no definitive line, each has important duties that must be performed in concert with the other.

The proper response to anonymous complaints is tricky. Improper behavior must be addressed but how does the accused confront her accuser? Policy 2260 addresses it tangentially but there does not seem to be a clear policy. Without a definite policy, responses are not uniform and consistent.

Good governance is essential to a smoothly operating school district. The Board and administrators must work cooperatively. While there is no definitive line, each has important duties that must be performed in concert with the other.

STRENGTHS

- ▶ The Board of Education has the authority to set policy, evaluate the superintendent, and reflect community goals for education.
- ▶ The Superintendent is responsible for the overall operation of schools and assists the Board in dealing with significant issues.
- ▶ Stability in superintendent and board positions historically.
- ▶ Ability to make decisions regarding superintendent performance and leadership changes.
- ▶ Dedication of current board members to the success of APS.
- ▶ Opportunities for returning to traditional roles with new superintendent and board members.

CHALLENGES

- ▶ Blurred roles between Board of Education and Superintendent
- ▶ Over-involvement of Board members in daily operations
- ▶ Lack of clarity on individual Board member authority
- ▶ Issues with policy review, particularly nepotism and anonymous complaints



FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ENROLLMENT:

1. The role of individual Board members should be clarified.

It is clear from the Ohio Revised Code that individual Board members have no power. The authority is corporate and can be exercised only in its official capacity. Unfortunately, individual Board members have clearly exceeded their authority and other Board members and the administration have acquiesced. Not only is it improper but it has caused confusion and hurt morale.

2. The new Superintendent and Board should meet to clarify roles and responsibilities.

There's an opportunity for a reset. Clarity is necessary as to how the working relationship between the Superintendent and the Board will continue. Outside assistance may be necessary. The understanding should be reduced to writing.

3. A strong orientation program should be available for new school board members.

It is natural for prospective and new board members to be unclear as to a board member's actual duties and limitations. The Board should have its own orientation program possibly using the resources of the Ohio School Board Association.

4. The Board needs to insist that its nepotism policy be enforced and expanded.

APS has a clear policy of relatives not supervising other relatives. There are instances where this policy may be violated. What is a greater abuse as someone supervising his or her relatives is a direct supervisor with a position in between. This practice should be eliminated; current employees should be "grandfathered."

5. A policy regarding anonymous communication should be created and implemented.

Dealing with anonymous information is a complex issue. On the one hand, it is unfair to an employee, but the information may be crucial. Officials are making decisions based on anonymous sources and need guidance. A policy with clear and concurrent procedures will make a tricky situation a bit easier.

6. APS and AEA should work cooperatively to present a positive picture.

There are many positives which should be stressed. Making parents and the greater community believe that the schools are unsafe in order to achieve a negotiating position is shortsighted and counterproductive. Parents, obviously, will not send their children if they perceive the schools as unsafe. The administration has an obligation to ensure safety as much as possible in these turbulent times.





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*Education is
not preparation
for life;
education is
life itself.”*

- JOHN DEWEY

FINDINGS

Student Services and Supports

CHARGE STATEMENT

SUMMARY

STRENGTHS

CHALLENGES

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CHARGE STATEMENT

Akron Public Schools believe that every student must receive a well-rounded, quality education that is equitable. Students should have access to supports and services that will foster a positive culture that meet their diverse needs.

The consultant will explore and do an alignment of the various components of student services and services to ensure systems and structures are in place for all students.

SUMMARY

ENROLLMENT:

Like most urban districts, APS is losing enrollment. It appears that the current year's decline is about seven hundred (700) students. There are many reasons for this, numerous of them beyond the control of APS.

Northeast Ohio's population is declining and growing older as is the City of Akron. Predictable middle class/white flight occurs. The current governance of the state of Ohio is blatantly antagonistic to urban education, e.g. vouchers, open enrollment, etc.

There is no point in dwelling on variables that cannot be altered. Rather APS should address: (1) competing with charter and private schools, (2) expanding options, (3) improving instruction, (4) using the City's resources; and, (5) changing the community's image of APS.

The administration understands the importance of marketing; it has historically devoted itself to "selling" the career and college program. While the position has moved to the Communications Department, the concept is the same – APS has much to offer. It has options not available to surrounding districts. The environment of open enrollment and vouchers have become the reality and APS must compete.

With all its options, more are necessary. The specialty schools are the most obvious. There may need to be more. Equity will be an issue, but the specialty schools can be equitable in admission, operations, and expectations for all students.

One of the most effective programs is Akron After School. It is a great partnership between the City of Akron and APS. Currently, It is limited to targeted students because of funding which is generously provided by the City.

Certainly more can be done.

Instruction must be improved. Involved parents need to believe their children are being challenged. (Obviously, all students must receive high-level instruction.) A culture of high expectations must be the norm. Poor instruction should not be tolerated.

While being an urban district brings unique challenges, it also provides numerous benefits. There are so many opportunities in the City; the zoo, museums, government, religious organizations, businesses.

While being an urban district brings unique challenges, it also provides numerous benefits. There are so many opportunities in the City; the zoo, museums, government, religious organizations, businesses.

Being an urban district is actually an advantage if the District uses the resources available.

It should be noted that APS has historical partnerships which are exemplary. The District may occasionally see some of its partners as intrusive, it is certainly worth it.

Finally, APS has a perception problem or maybe even a reality problem. This is true of almost all urban school systems. The media concentrates on them, usually reporting the negative. Sadly, on occasion, violence occurs in the schools which is clearly troubling, but sometimes overblown.

Staff being negative does not help. If one does not want to work in APS and respect its students, then the honorable move is to resign.

Outrageous presentations by teachers at Board meetings is ridiculous. AEA choosing to scare parents and the greater community by claiming the schools are dangerous to further its own ends is unfortunate.

Much of the public's perception is created by the Board, by its statements, decisions and behavior. Proper behavior starts at the top!

STUDENT SERVICES:

Student Services is usually a major division of any school district, especially a large one. Generally, all the non-academic student services are provided by that department. These services consist of traditional guidance support, psychological services, social workers, and various therapists – speech, occupational, and physical – work under this rubric.

Special Education is generally the major aspect of student services.

Often organizations have special education programs as a separate department. Occasionally, the various support services are provided through the special education department.

The former APS organizational chart does not actually provide clarity as to where student services fall. Special Education is a major part of the academic program, but nowhere do the various services lie. This seems to be a meaningful oversight.

APS devotes numerous resources to the Family Engagement Department. Its major purpose is also support but in different ways. These services are more general and do not require as much formal training.



Despite a lack of organizational clarity, APS does provide essential support services. These services, however, are greater than just in the context of special education. All students benefit from the many services.

Student mental health and psychological well-being is a major concern of APS. The traumas of urban living and the pandemic have only increased the necessity of the services. Providing them in a comprehensive manner is extremely important.

Various services are divided between special education and family engagement. Student Services does not seem to receive a great deal of attention. With the additional social – emotional challenges students face, these services are more essential than ever.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT:

The goal of the Family Engagement Department is clear in one aspect: have meaningful interactions (engagement) with families. This is accomplished by providing community-based assistance to families. There are community engagement coordinators, climate coordinators, enrollment coordinators, coordinator of community partnerships, etc.

The Department also is responsible for discipline hearings, and coordinating services for homeless students.

Engaging with families inevitably enhances students' educational experiences. It recognizes the reality of urban education and the struggles many families face. Moreover, having assistance provided by individuals who are part of the community and often live in APS is a real benefit.

Three issues are of concern. First, important concepts like engagement and climate should be an integral part of each school's culture and climate, not an add-on. Also, these services provided within a community context is commendable, but the formal education requirement for these positions is lacking. Finally, often these roles are being defined by individual principals rather than a system-wide consistent job description. Sometimes, these positions are being used for discipline rather than intervention. Having the hearing officers assigned to the Department is a prime example.

Using resources to support families is worthwhile. While process is important, meaningful outcomes are as essential in this area as in all other parts of the System. Accountability is key.

STRENGTHS

ENROLLMENT:

- ▶ Awareness of declining enrollment trends and acknowledgment of factors beyond APS's control.
- ▶ Focus on addressing competition from charter and private schools, expanding options, and improving instruction.
- ▶ Emphasis on marketing APS's offerings and leveraging partnerships for community engagement.
- ▶ Recognition of the benefits of urban living and access to resources within the city.
- ▶ Historical partnerships with businesses, philanthropic organizations, and educational institutions.

STUDENT SERVICES AND SUPPORTS:

- ▶ Provision of essential support services for student well-being, including mental health services.
- ▶ Recognition of the importance of family engagement and community-based assistance.
- ▶ Utilization of community engagement coordinators and partnerships to enhance student experiences.
- ▶ Commitment to accountability and meaningful outcomes in supporting families.
- ▶ Acknowledgment of the need for organizational clarity and focus on holistic student support.

CHALLENGES

ENROLLMENT:

- ▶ Declining enrollment, especially in urban districts.
- ▶ Competition with charter and private schools.
- ▶ Need for expanding options and improving instruction.
- ▶ Addressing community perception of the district.

STUDENT SERVICES AND SUPPORTS:

- ▶ Lack of organizational clarity in providing support services.
- ▶ Focus on student mental health and well-being.
- ▶ Importance of comprehensive support services beyond special education.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT:

- ▶ Need for integration of engagement and climate into school culture.
- ▶ Lack of formal education requirements for engagement positions.
- ▶ Inconsistencies in defining roles and functions.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ENROLLMENT:

1. APS should adopt a competitive posture.

The key to increasing enrollment is for the District to become entrepreneurial rather than bureaucratic. The State is continuing to force competition, often unfairly. The District must adjust.

2. Addressing the enrollment decline must be a priority throughout APS.

There is currently an attitude that the enrollment decline is inevitable. It is not but creative solutions must be presented and effectively implemented.

3. Reconfigure the schools to Pre-K-3, 4-6, 7-12 where possible or else 7-8, 9-12. Creating ninth grade centers should also be helpful.

Clearly, this is a major change but it has numerous advantages.

Enrollment declines at grades four and six. Parents move their children to specialty schools or private schools. Parents of sixth graders are concerned about the middle school environment.

Each of the six clusters would have two elementary schools Pre-K-3, one intermediate 4-6, one secondary 7-12 where possible, or 7-8, 9-12 where not.

The advantages are numerous. Students will be with their age peers. More targeted instruction will be possible.

Facilities in poor conditions will be shuttered.

North High School presents a unique problem. The facilities might be configured to use Innes as a ninth grade center for North. The Consultants see the distance issues but they can be addressed.

North HS would be renovated rather than replaced.

Litchfield MS would become a part of Firestone Secondary School grades 7-12.

4. While keeping the issue of equity at the forefront, APS should create more specialty schools.

The following should be considered:

- A. K-8 Spanish Immersion School. This school would serve two populations: students whose primary language is Spanish and not yet proficient in English and English speaking students who want to be bilingual. A separate ESOL program should be offered to other non-English-speaking students.
- B. K-8 advanced academic school. This school will serve students who are excelling academically and want to be challenged even more. The entrance criteria must take into account DEI but also have high standards for admission. While the school will be attacked by critics as elitist, the advantages should outweigh the negatives.
- C. The Akron School for Performing Arts (hereinafter ASPA) should become a separate school within Firestone High School and serve grades 9-12. ASPA will have its own administration and infrastructure. For the purpose of athletics it will be part of Firestone and may need to share a school number.
- D. Middle School STEM will begin at grade 4.
- E. Using the resources of the City, a new Law and Public Services School should be created and located in a City facility downtown.

STUDENT SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

This school, the Akron High School for Law and Public Service, will not be a pathway nor will it replicate the Criminal Justice Program at Garfield. This core will be civics, community service and participating in the "real" world. Students will be held to the same standards of behavior and professionalism as the adults working in the building. City employees will be involved as mentors.

5. More alternative options should be made available.

There are alternative programs but they are insufficient. Excellent partnerships like Project Grad Akron help fill the void. More emphasis needs to be placed on students who are not being successful in traditional programs.

6. Marketing efforts need to be greater than college/career recruitment.

There are several thousand students who are residents of Akron that do not attend the schools. These students should be the target of the marketing program. Why are they not attending and where are options of which they are unaware?

STUDENT SERVICES:

7. Student Services should be separated from Academics and Family Services and be a separate department.

Student services is bigger than Special Education. It should have all the support positions, e.g. psychologist, speech/hearing, etc. Social/emotional learning should be located here.

8. An actual program for identified gifted students is essential.

Currently, there are just disjointed services. This new emphasis would not necessarily require additional staff. An internal teaching force should be formed to develop a comprehensive program. An administrative position will be required.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT:

9. Placing an emphasis on Family Engagement is commendable, but a separate department is unnecessary.

Much of the services should be part of the Student Services Division. The discipline aspects should be assigned to Legal.

10. Climate Specialist positions should be eliminated.

The goal here is excellent, but climate needs to be created by staff and to a lesser degree parents and students. An outsider with no formal training is unlikely to make much impact.

11. Family engagements need to be just that – family engagement.

Discipline e.g. hearing officers and using climate specialists as disciplinarians is inconsistent with the family friendly goal.

12. The operation of the central office lobby should be examined.

It is an excellent idea to have family engagement staff available to greet visitors, but some duties are security's whose office allocation is not conducive to efficiency.



Themes for Improvement

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase professional development, especially around the concept of implicit bias.
2. Aggressively recruit pre-k students and place the existing early childhood programs in the comprehensive school.
3. Insist that the principals are the instructional leaders in the buildings.
4. Negotiate the return of the principal's authority.
5. Clarify the role of individual Board members and their authority.
6. Vigorously recruit a diverse teaching force.
7. Reconfigure the organization of the schools to pre-k-3, 4-6, 7-12 in most cases.
8. Provide additional specialty schools including expanding current offerings.
9. Expect a culture of high expectations for all students.
10. Eliminate the position of climate coaches.
11. Move labor relations from the HR department to Legal Department.
12. Offer employment early to the Districts quality student teachers.
13. Reduce dependence on retired principals especially as daily substitutes and recruiters.
14. Transport seventh and eighth grades by Metro.
15. Build a comprehensive athletic facility.
16. Expand admission criteria for Akron After School.
17. Implement a true gifted and talented program.
18. Organize the schools by clusters rather than grade levels.
19. Discuss the pros and cons of starting a separate APS Foundation.

Conclusion

APS is at a crossroads – will it continue to be a viable, diverse school system or evolve into a traditional urban district overwhelmed by students who face extreme obstacles including poverty, language barriers or serious learning challenges? The Consultants believe the infrastructure, talent, and community support exist to assure its viability.

Historically, the District despite its challenges has had a positive reputation and a community proud of its schools. The image of APS has changed in the last few years to a more negative viewpoint. There are many reasons as have been enumerated in this Report. It should be noted that some of the perceptions are inaccurate and unfair.

What is not debatable is that test scores are abysmal. Assuming that those tests measure proficiency – which is a significant assumption – then far too many APS students are not prepared for their future. This is certainly unfair to them.

This Report tries to provide possible solutions to the obvious deficiencies. While acknowledging that there is much to be proud of, the purpose of this Report is to allow the new Superintendent to address the District's shortcomings.

The Report provides far-reaching Recommendations. Many of these will improve student mastery, save a great deal of money or provide a better working organization. Some of these recommendations may be seen as radical, but APS is leaning towards a crisis. Resistance will be inevitable.

The Consultants admit that some of these recommendations may not be worthwhile because of logistic, financial, or political obstacles and others may not be very good. The hope here is that the recommendations will be given due consideration. A commitment to progress is non-negotiable.

Despite the negative aspects of parts of this Report, there is a major reason for optimism. A new Superintendent will have many ideas and a partially new Board will make the necessary governance changes. There is much good that is a basis for the excellence that all stakeholders want to see.

APS has tremendous potential, but faces huge obstacles. Bold leadership is required. Hopefully this Report will provide a meaningful roadmap for dialogue, change, and most importantly a better education for APS students.





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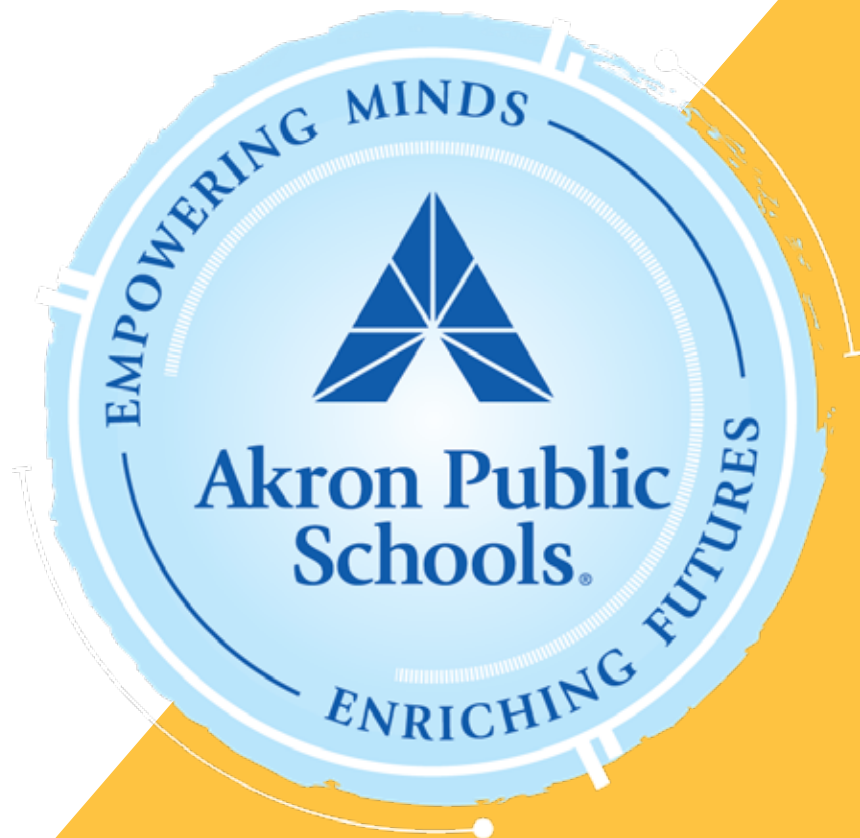
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“

The questions which one asks oneself begin, at least, to illuminate the world, and become one's key to the experience of others.”

- JAMES BALDWIN