Superintendent Onboarding Report to the Board

Saint Paul Public Schools

Executive Summary

Dr. Stacie Stanley began her tenure in Saint Paul Public Schools on May 12, 2025. After several weeks of intensive listening, observation, and analysis, Dr. Stanley has gained critical insights into both the strengths that make our district unique and the opportunities that will allow us to illuminate, elevate, and extend excellence.

Superintendent Stanley used a variety of outreach methods to interact with the SPPS and Saint Paul community:

Outreach Method	Number	Type
Focus Groups	12	Principal + 1
	6	Student Listening Sessions
	5	Parent/Caregiver
	4	Director + 1
Engagements	12	Festivals and Events
	23	School/District Meetings
	16	Partner
Group Outreach	30	Department/School Visits
	12	Group & 1:1 Board Meetings
	21	SELT 1:1 Meetings
Media Appearances	24	Broadcast, Print, Digital
ThoughtExchange	4	Parent/Caregiver (1,002 Thoughts & 27,837 ratings)
		11th & 12th gr. Students (143 Thoughts & 5,550 ratings)
		Staff (692 Thoughts & 21,944 ratings)
		Partners (32 Thoughts & 412 Ratings)

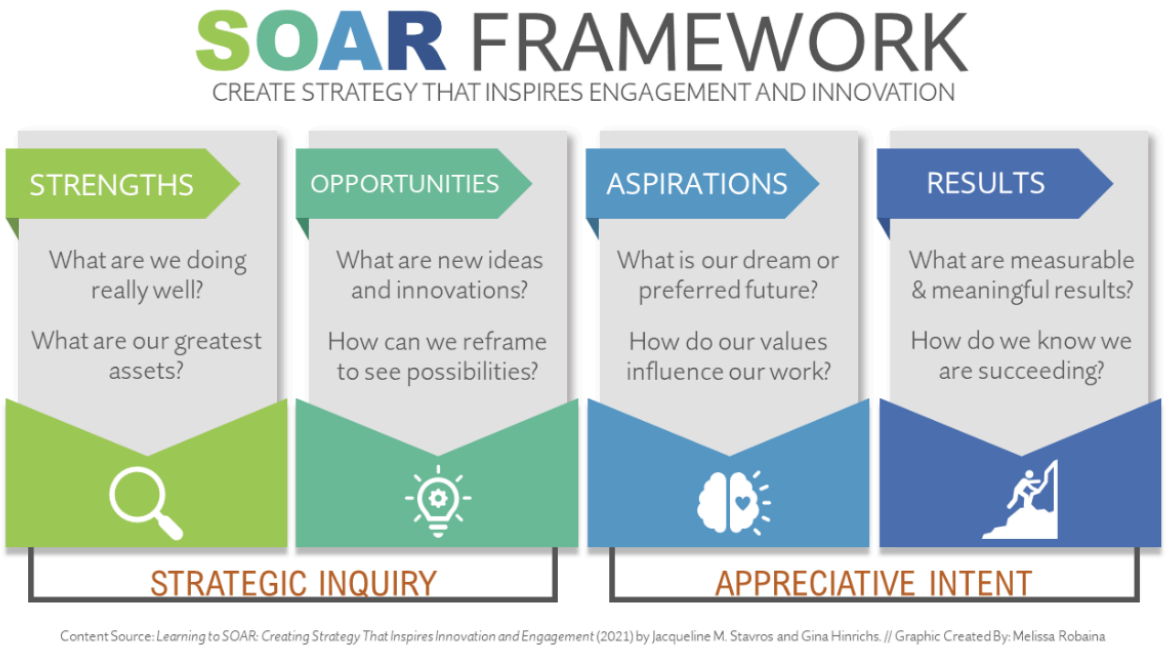
Dr. Stanley used three prompts as a thread for all of her interactions:

1. What is working well?
2. In what ways does SPPS create spaces of inclusion and belonging?
3. How might SPPS get even better?

Our district serves a remarkably diverse student population with innovative programs that are recognized statewide and nationally. From our language immersion offerings to our specialized magnet programs, we demonstrate what is possible when we commit to providing engaging student-focused school and program options. Whether the outdoor programming offered at Battle Creek Elementary, the Unified Special Education Programming offered at Dayton's Bluff or the IB offerings across the district, we have positioned ourselves to meet our mission to ***Inspire students to Think Critically, Pursue their Dreams, and Change the World***.

The voices represented in the analysis—particularly those of our students and parents/caregivers—provide both inspiration and urgency. They tell us ***what is working***: dedicated teachers who go above and beyond, programs that honor cultural identity, and services that transform lives. However, this report also ***reveals significant challenges***: persistent achievement disparities, inconsistent experiences of belonging, facility upkeep**,** systems that offer families a sporadic understanding of how to advocate for basic services and financial stability.

The Strengths - Opportunities - Aspirations - Results (SOAR) framework provides a roadmap for our work ahead. It honors what we do well while honing in with a laser-like focus on what we must improve. Most importantly, it centers the experiences of those we serve and commits us to action that creates meaningful change.



Retrieved from The Center for Appreciative Inquiry

STRENGTHS: What We Do Well

Exceptional Diversity and Cultural Responsiveness

Saint Paul Public Schools stands out for the breadth and quality of our Heritage, Indigenous and World language and Culture programs. We offer more language options than most districts across the country, including one way immersion and dual immersion programs where students learn in environments that honor their heritage language. Many students earn Bilingual Seals that demonstrate mastery of a variety of languages and English including American Sign Language.

Our Parent Academy program empowers families to navigate the educational system, with parents reporting they now know what questions to ask at conferences and understand concepts like GPA, reading levels, and comprehension. Our cultural liaison model provides critical support, with families reporting that “staff like our Karen liaison are well known” and maintain strong relationships with community and faith groups.

SPPS works to ensure all staff demonstrate strong Intercultural competence skills and embeds training throughout professional development for our teachers.

Strong Staff Dedication and Relationships

Across all focus groups and interviews, the most consistent strength identified was staff commitment. Students at multiple schools praised teachers for being "really kind," noting that "all the teachers I have met here are really kind" and appreciating that they help students when needed.

High school students specifically noted the importance of staff support systems, with one student explaining that "the staff work really hard for students at my school to not fall behind" and appreciating that counselors "keep you on it" regarding graduation requirements.

One parent powerfully testified about our Birth to Three program, calling it "exceptional" and stating "I cannot say anything bad about it. They made it so easy coming to our house to evaluate our child.” This exemplifies the high-touch, family-centered approach that characterizes our best work.

Innovative Student Placement and Support Services

Our Student Placement Center is recognized by other districts in and outside Minnesota as a model, with visitors acknowledging they haven't found anyone doing better work in student enrollment services. The team screens 1,200-1,500 students annually with WIDA assessments and provides comprehensive welcome services, including health screenings, enrollment counseling, and translation support.

One staff member declared that we have moved to centralized enrollment that "has really helped take away bias that can happen for our families, and allowed them to make choices around what they feel is really important for their students based on space, eliminating any practice where schools might selectively accept or reject students."

Operational Excellence in Support Services

Our Nutrition Services department demonstrates innovation and cultural responsiveness. We are one a few districts in Minnesota with a central kitchen, allowing us to produce large volumes of culturally relevant food and distribute it to schools efficiently. Staff work to make family recipes "as authentic as possible while meeting regulations," and engage students through taste tests where students receive purchasing power to show what they would actually buy. This focus serves to increase a sense of welcome and belonging for students and staff.

Our technology infrastructure supports one of the largest one-to-one device initiatives in the state, with 40,000 iPads managed through our own systems. Most buildings have on-site technology support.

Career and College Readiness

SPPS has one of the most robust set of opportunities available for students in the East Metro. Students are able to engage in hands-on real world learning experiences in four career fields: Science & Medical, Human Services, Innovative & Emerging Technologies, and Business & Communications. Students are able to earn industry standard certifications during their high school career; equipping them to immediately enter the workforce if they so choose. Since 2019 students have earned nearly 2,000 certifications in areas including Microsoft Office, Drone flight and several OSHA categories. Some SPPS comprehensive high schools provide access to CNA, Welding and Future Farmers of America (FFA). The AVID program provides students with the college preparation tools needed to succeed in post-secondary education. Business partnerships are critical and we have numerous including the City of Saint Paul, 3M, Junior Achievement and Achieve Twin Cities to name just a few.

OPPORTUNITIES: Areas for Enhancement and Innovation

Achievement Disparities and Educational Equity

Each stakeholder group expressed considerable concern that African American, Asian, Native American, some special education and some immigrant communities are "still not reaching their reading and math goals compared to their counterparts." There is particular concern that many students started kindergarten on Zoom during COVID and are now "either a year or six months behind in their reading and math levels." One parent noted that "the report cards offered through MDE show that the math and reading and science in some of these schools are just heartbreakingly shockingly low."

The need to increase reading skills was expressed by the majority of SPPS stakeholders. Even though there has been a concerted effort with the implementation of Systematic Instruction in

Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words (SIPPS) and the teacher training that has occurred aligned with the Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act; we must strive for a deep implementation of a comprehensive and coherent district-wide system of literacy instruction.

While the board has set B.I.G.G. goals for improvement, families want to see concrete progress and accountability.

Special Education Separation and Service Gaps

Concerning testimony from families of students with disabilities came from stakeholders who are troubled about access to learning in the general education setting. One parent explained that while services may be high quality, "you can make those places as nice as you want…you can make it the most beautiful special education classroom or school, and parents like me are still not going to want that for the child if it's completely separate from the general population of students."

Concerns about special education staffing were lifted from parents and some staff. Families offered ideas for increasing staffing stability to ensure that the service needs of every student with an IEP are consistently met with steady staff.

Inconsistent Discipline and Behavioral Support

Students powerfully articulated how discipline practices directly impact their sense of dignity and belonging. High school students identified inconsistency as a core concern and when consequences feel arbitrary or mood-dependent, students experience not just frustration but a fundamental questioning of whether they belong and are valued equally.

Elementary students described similar challenges with collective discipline: 'Whenever somebody does something funny, the whole entire class gets in trouble." For young learners who are trying to understand justice and fairness, whole-class consequences for individual actions communicate that their individual dignity is dependent on others' behaviors— based on feedback, there appear to be circumstances that are undermining the very foundation of belonging we work to build.

A parent connected these discipline concerns to a broader need for and the importance of quality relationships, sharing that "students transition from elementary school, where we're feeding the young ones that this [personal relationship] is the dream," and then "move to middle and high school, where relational support starts to teeter off." This insight is critical, as dignity-centered discipline cannot exist without strong relationships. When students feel known and valued as individuals, discipline becomes an opportunity for growth and accountability rather than a threat to belonging. Discipline data support these conjectures.

Facility Inequities and Infrastructure Challenges

Our facilities serve as important learning spaces, and stakeholders provided thoughtful feedback about how we can make them even better. Stakeholders noted that some school

buildings benefit from more robust parent advocacy networks and resources while others who live in less wealthy neighborhoods, believe their voice is not as powerful or valued. This creates an opportunity to establish more equitable processes that amplify voices from all neighborhoods, particularly those with working-class families who may have limited availability for daytime meetings.

Students of all ages shared specific, actionable ideas for improving their learning environments—from climate control solutions in our older buildings to more welcoming aesthetics and enhanced playground facilities. Their detailed suggestions (colorful walls, diverse play equipment, improved air circulation) demonstrate their investment in their schools and provide a roadmap for facility enhancements.

Communication Gaps and Language Access

Internal and external stakeholder groups discussed the need for more timely and responsive communication throughout our organization. Although stakeholders have compassion for the “busyness” of all staff, they believe that late and at times non-response has eroded the trust in SPPS. They desire open and prompt communication across our system in every school and every department.

Our investment in translation services, bilingual staff, and cultural liaisons demonstrates our commitment to language access. Now we have an opportunity to ensure these tools translate into consistent, excellent customer service experiences for every family at every entry point. Stakeholders want the services to have an impact on family engagement and student learning.

Stakeholders helped us understand that having the right tools isn't enough—we need clear service standards and adequate and ongoing staff training to follow them effectively. Families shared that responsive communication—even when it's simply an open and honest update on progress—builds the trust and partnership essential for student success. Some noted that during busy periods, families may not receive the attentive welcome they deserve, and that while support staff engage with families when possible, their primary student-facing responsibilities limit this capacity. With this in mind, stakeholders want all staff trained to use the language line and customer service strategies that are welcoming.

This feedback creates a clear pathway forward: establishing district-wide communication protocols, customer service training, and response-time standards that ensure our families, and bilingual families in particular, experience the same welcoming, responsive service in every school, every time.

Enrollment Decline and Marketing Challenges

There is grave concern over finances. Families worry that cuts in programming will impact the success of their children and limit their preparation for life after high school. Many stakeholders are aware that the district has lost thousands of students to charter schools. Some staff have recognition that "we took it for granted" that families would automatically choose us. One leader noted, "We have schools, charter schools, that are bold enough to open up in our city and call

themselves St Paul City School." Despite decreased marketing budgets, charter school marketing has increased, creating an urgent need to tout our district strengths.

ASPIRATIONS: Bringing Transformation into Vision

Create Genuinely Inclusive Schools

Create an inclusive space where students with disabilities have greater opportunities to play and learn alongside their typically abled students.

- Increase greater access to the general education experiences such as morning meetings and opportunities for students to actively engage in recess.
- Provide all staff with a foundational understanding of neurodiversity,
- Incorporate creative human resource marketing tools to increase fill rates for special education staffing,
- Increase unified learning opportunities throughout the school district, and ensure students with disabilities are visible throughout school life—in hallways, assemblies, field trips, and social activities.

Establish Equity in Resources and Experiences

Families desire "continual progress" toward achievement goals with "realistic" targets, culturally relevant classroom materials such as “[books] in the classrooms and in the hands of the students," where "children see themselves riding bikes in the story, being the hero of the story, just having fun and being a kid in the story."

We must address concerns systematically, ensure technology refresh cycles match actual need rather than multi-decade renovation schedules, and eliminate the two-tiered system where some schools receive robust resources while others struggle.

Non-binary students face daily barriers, including needing to navigate complex processes just to use the bathroom: One family shared that their student has to "get the bathroom pass, go down two flights of stairs, go across the building, talk to the front office staff who unlock a door, talk to the nurse, and then were able to use the bathroom if no one was in it." Beyond infrastructure, "knowledge and training among staff" is critical, as gender-expansive students are repeatedly misgendered by "the bus driver, front office staff, substitute teachers, cafeteria staff"—requiring students to constantly educate adults rather than simply attend school in a way that they belong.

Build Consistent, Relationship-Centered Systems

Quality relationships are critical for students to learn. Research indicates that a sense of belonging precedes learning. As one parent powerfully stated about elementary school: "It was the relationship...my son went and met with his teacher, and the first thing he asked her was, ‘How important are relationships?’ And she said, ‘Well, I've never had that question asked by a kid, but it's very important.’ Yet once students enter middle and high school, there’s a disconnect.”

Also, stakeholders, in particular parents and caregivers, shared concerns about safety and security. They want to make certain that SPPS is doing all that we can to protect their students' physical and psychological safety. We know from the research and audit through the partnership with the Violence Prevention Project Research Center that relationships are critical in establishing a strong culture and climate where everyone (adults and youth) understands the role they play in supporting safety in our schools and programs.

We must extend human-centered relationship building throughout our K-12 schools, deeply implement social emotional learning and maintain mental health supports, create consistent structures for teacher-family communication, and consistently implement trauma-informed approaches to discipline that maintain dignity.

Center Family Voice and Cultural Identity

Our families are at the center of the work of our district. As oneOutreach to families should not be seen as "fluff" but recognized for "providing a direct service" as "that direct connection with schools" for bilingual families. We must expand rather than contract these supports, particularly as some communities report "everybody wants to feel seen, everybody wants to feel heard, everybody wants to feel appreciated, but then when it shows up in attacks against each other," different communities feel "I'm not being seen in the district. My community is not appreciated in the district."

RESULTS: Key areas for study and goal setting

The following areas were identified based on the information outlined in the Strengths-Opportunities-Aspirations (S-O-A) sections of this executive summary. The “R” element of the SOAR Framework is designed to help organizations identify areas of focus and set goals and Key Progress Indicators (KPIs). Through collaborative strategic planning with our board and community, we will determine sequencing and establish specific, measurable goals and KPIs for each area.
Note: It is recommended that all of these areas will be examined through an overarching **belonging and dignity lens, ensuring that our strategies strengthen rather than undermine students' sense of worth and connection to our schools.
The following key areas of study *are not* listed in an order of priority.

1. Facility Equity Assessment & Longitudinal Plan
2. Family Communication and Language Access Standards
3. Discipline and Belonging Review
4. Achievement Gap Reduction & Academic Acceleration Initiative for every student group
5. Staff Retention and Recruitment Strategy
6. Marketing and Enrollment Recovery Campaign
7. Special Education Programming Enhancement
8. Analysis of Current Resource Allocation Models
9. Continuous Improvement Infrastructure

Conclusion

These 100 days have reinforced my conviction that Saint Paul Public Schools has extraordinary strengths—dedicated staff, innovative programs, and deep community connections—alongside urgent challenges that demand immediate attention and planning. The voices in this report provide both the inspiration and the roadmap for our work ahead.

Our families and students are not asking for perfection. They are asking for consistency, equity, dignity, and follow-through. They are asking us to see them, hear them, and create systems that serve all children with the same excellence we provide to some.

I am committed to transparent leadership that both leans into our hard truths and celebrates genuine progress. This SOAR framework (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results) will serve as a blueprint as we engage our community in the development of our next strategic plan. Once our strategic plan is approved by the school board, I will commit to regular community monitoring and reporting to the board and community on our progress toward meeting the identified goals and key indicators of progress ()KPIs). Together, we will ensure that every student in Saint Paul Public Schools receives an education rooted in dignity and aimed at excellence that inspires critical thinking and allows EVERY SPPS student to pursue their dreams and change the world.