

APPENDIX 2: Nashville Superintendent's Transition Team Subcommittee on Student Achievement February 2017

The Student Achievement Subcommittee of the superintendent's Transition Team focused on the instructional program of the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools and ways in which the school district might improve student academic attainment. With the goal of being the first choice for Nashville's families, the school district is committed to providing a high quality education to every student. The aim of the working group was to see how well the school system was meeting its academic goals and determine ways in which its vision could be better achieved.

Committee Charge and Scope of Work

The Subcommittee was composed of civic leaders from Nashville, business leaders, higher education experts and state education officials, school system and charter school specialists, a principal, and a teacher. To meet its charge, the group pursued a number of activities. It convened a series of meetings over a three-month period and held conference calls among its members to present, discuss, and synthesize what it was learning. It asked for presentations from staff members on the nature of their work and on trends in academic performance. It held focus groups and conducted individual interviews with principals, teachers, school board members, the chief academic officer, the chief of schools, gifted and talented program staff, federal programs staff, content area staff, special education staff, and bilingual education staff. It examined instructional tools, guidelines, materials, improvement plans, and assessments used by the district to inform what content was being taught and how. And it analyzed data on academic performance and trends, and compared the district with others on a number of academic indicators.

System Strengths

The Subcommittee found a number of school district assets and an important array of challenges that, if addressed, could move the school system significantly forward. For instance, the working group was struck by the strong sense of community support that existed for public education in Nashville. There were critics of the school system, to be sure, but the community wanted the best for its schools and its children in ways that one does not always see in other major urban communities. Undeniably, there is a vigorous debate about the proper balance between the traditional school system and charter schools, but there is little doubt that public education, in all its forms, enjoys the strong patronage of the citizenry. This backing provides a strong foundation for the school system's work that should not be underestimated.

The school system also brings another major strength to the table: its people. There is considerable talent in the school district, talent that would be the envy of many other school systems across the country. One sees expertise and commitment at every layer of the system, from the Central Office to the classrooms. Historically, the Nashville schools have been seen as among the stronger urban school systems in the country because of the capacity of its people. Along with the community's backing, the know-how of the school system's employees present the district's new leadership with the raw material it needs to better serve the children of the community.

In addition, the district has set clear and understandable academic goals and targets, and it has good data systems by which to determine how well those goals are being met. The goals have not always driven the school system's work, but they have been established. In many major school systems around the country, clarity on what is important to the system and on what direction the

system is going has not been present. Other districts have not had data to assess progress. Some districts have had neither clarity of goals nor data.

Moreover, the district has a scope and sequence document that includes instructional notes and content standards as well as a set of “enduring understandings” about instruction. The document lacks the kind of specificity that teachers need to adequately guide their instruction, but it is a good foundation on which to build. The district has also developed considerable capacity over the years with a wide variety of instructional initiatives, such as project-based learning, personalized learning, Reading Recovery, blended learning, and career academies. These initiatives have not always been well-coordinated, but they suggest that the district is not reluctant to try new approaches.

Finally, the school district, which has received numerous grants and ample national recognition, has seen some modest improvements over the last several years in its graduation rates. The graduation rates of other city school systems across the country have been increasing, and Nashville is no different. In addition, the district has seen some improvement on various end-of-course exams at the secondary grade levels.

System Challenges

At the same time, the Nashville public schools face a number of challenges that the district will need to address with some urgency. First and foremost is the academic attainment of its students. However one wants to measure it, student achievement in core subjects is lower than anyone would like. The district’s academic attainment is below statewide averages and it also appears to be below national averages. At the same time, there has not been much movement in performance levels over the last several years. This is particularly true of reading, but probably also true in math.

For instance, district results on the state’s Reading/Language Arts exam moved up modestly from 34.8 percent proficient in 2010 to 39.3 percent proficient in 2015, but the state itself showed approximately the same gains, suggesting that the district’s improvements may have been largely the result of a broader state effect rather than the result of district efforts. Math gains in the district were more substantial, moving from 27.0 percent proficient in 2010 to 47.4 percent proficient in 2015,¹ but the state changed the math test in ways that it did not change the reading test. Math gains in Nashville paralleled those statewide, again suggesting a broader state effect rather than a district effect. In addition, National Assessment of Educational Progress data for 2015 indicate that Tennessee was not significantly different from the nation in reading or math at fourth and eighth grade levels,² but since Nashville was below the state on its summative assessment results, one might conclude that the district performed somewhat below national averages.

In addition, there is no evidence that achievement gaps—whether defined by race, income, language status, or disability—show any real sign of narrowing. To be sure, the intensity and complexity of student needs have increased over the years, but students who have fallen behind are not catching up. This issue is becoming ever more important to the region as the numbers of English Language Learners are growing faster in Nashville than almost anywhere else in the nation.

¹ “Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools: Student Achievement Trends” PowerPoint presentation to the Transition Team Student Achievement Committee on July 25, 2016.

² National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2015). *The nation’s report card: Reading 2015 state snapshot reports for Grade 8*. Retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2015/pdf/2016008TN8.pdf>.

A second major challenge facing the school system is one of its own making. While the district has well-stated goals, it has not articulated either the vision or strategies for how it will improve academic performance. Combined with the fact that many people in the school system, however skilled and committed, too often voice low expectations for student achievement, the lack of a clear improvement strategy has hampered the system. For the last several years, the district has provided its individual schools with substantial autonomy to improve on their own, without much guidance for how to do so, and without the capacity building that would help them to do so.

The district's overall strategy appears to be built more around launching numerous programs than around defining a coherent set of initiatives that together promote higher student academic attainment. The Transition Team did not hear that staff has a shared understanding of what the district is doing to improve performance across the board other than delegating the job to the schools and asking them to figure it out.

The third challenge is related to the second. The district's lack of a systemwide strategy has resulted in weak instructional guidance for schools and teachers about what needs to be taught and at what level of depth, along with uncertain alignment of instructional tools and resources. Teachers interviewed by the Transition Team voiced their lack of confidence in the main instructional tools the district had developed or was using to spur student performance. These tools included the district's scope and sequence documents, its professional development offerings, and its formative assessments. The scope and sequence documents did not appear to have the specificity that would guide teachers in their classroom practice. Professional development was not differentiated or built around the district's main academic priorities. And the formative assessments were not well-aligned to the standards and were perceived to be of low quality.

The fourth challenge is that the school district lacks a well-calibrated accountability system. This problem starts with a school board that has traditionally not focused on student achievement and has not articulated a culture in which student outcomes are a top priority. Further, Central Office staff has not been held accountable for district results. Accountability is best defined at the school level with principals and teachers, but accountability at the school level, without accountability at the Central Office level, is not really accountability. In addition, the only presence of responsibility across the system is based on scores from standardized tests. The result is what one interviewee described as a race "to move the numbers." Finally, there was very little evidence that test scores provided by the state or the district were used to inform instruction or improve practice on a systemwide basis.

Priority Areas and Recommendations

The following are summaries of suggested areas of focus or priority for the new administration along with a number of short-term and long-term goals.

Priority Area 1: Academic Priorities and Goals

Agree on a broad academic game plan, work together on implementing that plan, and stick with it over a sustained period of time.

One of the abiding lessons of how major urban school systems improve academic performance involves the ability of *district leadership* to coalesce around a broad academic game plan, work together on implementing that plan, and then stick with it over a sustained period of time once it is clear that results are emerging. Studies on urban school systems showing academic improvement indicate that the cohesion of the board and superintendent around student achievement and their notions about how to improve it is an important factor that differentiates improving districts from those that are not.³

Short-Term Recommendations

1. Encourage the school board to, working with a third party, develop clear academic priorities, and then reorient the board's work and its meetings primarily around monitoring the academic progress of the district's children on an agreed-upon set of key performance indicators.
2. Ensure that the school board and the district's new administrative leadership are very clear and repeatedly vocal about the need for high expectations for all children in the district. Begin building a culture of shared responsibility for the academic attainment of all students.
3. Charge the school board and the district's new administrative leadership with rethinking and revamping the district's site-based instructional approach to academic improvement, and define a clear academic direction for the school system.
4. As the district is updating its strategic plan, revisit what worked and did not work in the previous plan and decide what elements could be retained. Revisit the district's goals to ensure they are built around attaining more than one year's worth of growth for students who are behind.

Long-Term Recommendations

1. Carefully monitor progress on the district's academic goals, ascertain what parts of the district's improvement plan are working and why, and stick with the broader and most effective parts of the plan for a number of years.

³ Casserly, M., Price-Bough, R., Corcoran, A., Lewis, S., Uzzell, R., Simone, C. et al. (2011). *Pieces of the puzzle: Factors in the improvement of urban school districts on the national assessment of educational progress*. Washington, D.C.: Council of the Great City Schools; and Snipes, J., Doolittle, F., & Herlihy, C. (2002). *Foundations for success: Case studies of how urban school systems improve student achievement*. Washington, D.C.: MDRC for the Council of the Great City Schools.

2. Evaluate the superintendent on progress towards the academic goals that the board and superintendent have set.
3. Ensure that each of the district's major instructionally-related departments has plans and goals that align with the broader strategic plan of the school system. Accompany those goals with a clear set of key performance indicators for each major function, and insist that goals are pursued using cross-functional teams.
4. Structure the Central Office to ensure that it is aligned to meeting the goals that the board and the superintendent have set.

Priority Area 2: Instructional Tools and Instructional Coherence

Address the quality and focus of the district's instructional tools for raising student achievement.

One of the Transition Team's major findings involved the quality and focus of the district's major *instructional tools* for raising student achievement. In general, the team found that the district's scope and sequence documents were not specific or concrete enough to guide teachers in what should be taught—not how to teach it—and at what degree of depth and understanding. Teachers who participated in the Mayor's Teacher Cabinet also appeared to share many of the same concerns. The Transition Team offers the following proposals.

Short-Term Recommendations

1. Have every child read and practice with complex, grade-level text every day in order to begin strengthening the language skills of all students, including English learners, struggling readers, and students of color. This tactic could be accomplished in relatively short order without having to revisit the district's curriculum, per se, and would lay the groundwork for articulating the new administration's instructional priorities.
2. Revise the district's scope and sequence documents to provide more guidance for principals and teachers on what needs to be taught and at what level of understanding and ensure that the documents reflect a level of cognitive demand that is consistent with the standards. Identify the materials, supports, interventions, and technology that teachers could use to best implement the revised scope and sequence documents.
3. As the district is revising its scope and sequence documents, take advantage of sample units found in the Basal Alignment Project on EdModo to help support students in building knowledge, developing academic vocabulary, and reading and understanding grade-level, complex texts.
4. Give the chief of schools final sign-off authority on school improvement plans, and charge the chief of schools, the chief academic officer, and the director of federal programs with working together to ensure that the plans are not approved unless they actually contain strategies for improvement. Develop a mechanism for regularly monitoring progress on the plans, checking formative and summative data frequently, and reviewing whether school activities, expenditures, and hiring comport with them. The frequent monitoring of data should be used to adjust school improvement goals, plans, instruction, and intervention strategies.

Long-Term Recommendations

1. Identify all of the instructionally-related initiatives in the district, determine whether they are actually adding value to students' academic performance, and curtail programs that do not appear to be producing results for students.
2. Develop the evidence that teachers should be looking for in order to determine the quality of student work and provide guidance on how instructional practice might change to improve that work.
3. Revamp the district's walk-through documents to ensure that they are gathering appropriate information on how the curriculum is being implemented at the appropriate depth and whether students are actively engaged in their learning. Build a mechanism for feeding results back to teachers to help them improve practice and use results to inform professional learning communities, professional development, and necessary technical assistance.
4. Build instructional coherence within and across grade levels consistent with college and career readiness standards at each grade level. This should include identifying and communicating major student misconceptions in learning and pinpointing how big ideas and concepts progress across a unit or year. The district should use teams of their best teachers to do this work in tandem with Central Office staff.

Priority Area 3: Professional Development

Build the capacity of the district's people to do higher levels of work through the establishment of clear structures and expectations for professional development at the school and system levels.

Any major urban school district's ability to improve academically will depend on its skill at building the capacity of its people to perform higher levels of work. This typically means improving professional development, but it could also involve instructional coaching, technical assistance to schools, professional learning communities, and the like. At present, the district's professional development is fractured and not as effective as it could be.

Short-Term Recommendations

1. Set up a structure systemwide for establishing school-level professional learning communities (PLCs) and allocating time to hold them. These PLCs should be built around implementing the standards, identifying and sharing effective instructional practices, reviewing and discussing student work to determine where students are on target and where they are not, determining practices affecting its quality, and reviewing and interpreting data.
2. Identify key short-term instructional priorities (e.g., daily use of complex texts) and begin building systemwide professional development around these short-term priorities. Also begin identifying all the professional development providers and materials being used across the district, and begin thinking about how to realign professional development to the standards, how to create greater coherence across all training, where professional development would be most helpful, and where some professional development may no longer support the district's priorities.

3. Redesign the district's current professional development program around the district's academic goals rather than the individual choices of school staff.

Long-Term Recommendations

1. Develop a multi-year professional development plan to ensure a long-term and coherent strategy for building the capacity of staff at all levels. Differentiate the district's professional development around student needs, prior training, years of experience, grade level, etc. Ensure that training for principals, principal supervisors, and teachers is aligned and accessible to all instructional personnel.
2. Build "non-negotiables" into the district's professional development—that is, ensure that everyone will have to participate in order to build the instructional capacity of the teaching force.
3. Build a districtwide professional development system that will not only strengthen the capacity of current staff but also define a pipeline of talent across personnel levels of the system.
4. Build a system for regularly evaluating the effectiveness of professional development in terms of how well it is implemented and whether it has any effects on student outcomes.

Priority Area 4: Assessments and Data

Revamp the district's system of assessments to ensure alignment and support schools in reviewing, interpreting, analyzing, and discussing data.

A school district's use of data to inform its progress and identify needs is a consistent theme of urban school systems that show significant academic progress. The district currently has excellent talent on this front and reasonably strong data systems. At the same time, there is room for improvement in the areas of assessment and use of data.

Short-Term Recommendations

1. Review and begin revamping the district's short-term interim assessments to ensure their alignment with the state's standards, the revised scope and sequence, classroom practice, and the state's summative assessments. Involve the district's best teachers in this process to ensure quality and build ownership. Resist the instinct to simply purchase another commercial assessment.
2. Enhance the district's training on the interpretation and use of data.
3. De-emphasize, within state guidelines, the use of test scores to determine teacher effectiveness as instructional reforms are being put into place. Give teachers the time they need to familiarize themselves with new instructional tools, professional development, and the like.
4. Begin curtailing the use of differing assessment systems by individual schools.

Long-Term Recommendations

1. Begin building an easy-to-use, data analytic system with as close to real-time data as is possible to provide Central Office staff and school-based staff with better information on where students are struggling academically and where they are making progress. This system should use assessment and other data, but it should include differing kinds of analyses of that data to better inform instructional practice. This work ought to be a joint effort between the research office and the office of the chief academic officer and should include analysis of how various student groups are performing and why.
2. Build a regular calendar of program evaluations to determine what works and what doesn't.
3. Define a standard approach for schools to help them review, interpret, analyze, and discuss data that will help school-based staff ask the right questions and consider the appropriate steps for improving student achievement. Questions should help personnel determine whether they are looking at a teaching issue (instruction) or a student issue (learning gap or misinterpretation).