



Westwood Public Schools

Superintendent's Report of Entry Findings

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Introduction

It has been my privilege to serve the Westwood School Community for more than 20 years. During that time, I have been able to develop a deep understanding of the district. However, my transition last summer to the role of superintendent afforded me an opportunity to look carefully at the organization by systematically gathering information, feedback, and data from a wide range of educators and community members. Through this entry process, I have been able to calibrate my understanding of the district with others' perspectives about our strengths and opportunities for growth and to uncover important questions that warrant further exploration and consideration. This work will provide the foundational understanding necessary for the district leadership team to articulate a strategy for improvement, prioritize goals around the district's instructional core, and consider the structures and resources that will enable us to pursue our goals.

I am pleased to present this report of findings to the Westwood School Committee and the school community. The findings presented here have been initially reviewed for accuracy with the Administrative Council (the PreK-12 leadership team comprised of Central Office administrators, principals, and assistant principals). These findings do not propose solutions; rather they represent themes and patterns that emerged during this process that will require further discussion and investigations as we develop a strategy for district improvement.

Data Collection

Throughout the fall semester, I visited each school for the purpose of observing teaching and learning in classrooms. During these visits, I spoke with students about their experience in the classroom. I attended selected extracurricular events and activities, including athletics and

student activities such as fine arts exhibitions and music and theater performances. I attended professional development experiences at different levels in the district and various committee meetings.

I engaged in individual or small group conversations with a wide variety of constituents including School Committee members, principals, central office administrators, union leaders, town administrators, town department heads and officials, clergy, local media, and leaders of various community groups. I held open forums for educators at each school, hosted open forums for parents and community members, and attended meetings such as school PTOs and SEPAC.

Assistant Superintendent Allison Borchers (also in a new role this year) conducted individual conversations with more than 20 curriculum leaders across the district. Ms. Borchers and I have discussed those findings at length, as well.

In addition to the information I gathered through observation and listening, I examined key documents and data, including but not limited to:

I. Curriculum and Instruction

e.g. Prior district and school improvement plans, accreditation reports, curriculum documents, assessment results, school climate survey data, Coordinated Program Review report

II. Management and Operations

e.g. Prior budget documents, class size data, facility studies, student handbooks, School Committee policy manual

III. Family and Community Engagement

e.g. School and district websites, school and community social media, principal newsletters, parent surveys

IV. Professional Culture

e.g. Collective bargaining agreements, educator evaluator documents, professional development goals, mentoring and induction program, human resources documents and processes

Observations:

There is widespread agreement among all stakeholders about many of the strengths of the Westwood Public Schools. The perception among all constituent groups is that the WPS is a high achieving district with dedicated teachers and a community that invests in education. Parents frequently express that they moved to Westwood so that their students can attend school here. Town officials readily agree that the quality of the school system is a central feature of the community.

Our teachers and staff are highly-qualified, hard-working, and committed to student success. In our hiring process, we are typically able to attract a strong candidate pool and over time the district has developed and implemented strong programs to induct and support teachers.

The leadership of the district is represented by a 15 member team referred to as Administrative Council. This group is comprised of 5 Central Office administrators (Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Director of Student Services, Director of Business and Finance, and Director of Technology, Innovation, and Learning), 7 Principals, the Preschool Director, 2 Assistant Principals and the HS Dean of Students. The leadership team is quite stable with relatively little turnover compared to other area districts. The Administrative Council functions as a cohesive team with clear norms that guide behavior and a shared sense of responsibility for the district. In addition, leadership is provided by several academic department heads and directors, an Athletic Director, Director of Food Services, and Director of Operations.

The relationship between the District Administration and the Westwood Teachers Association is strong and mutually respectful. The administration and WTA communicate frequently and proactively to address issues whenever they arise and in general approach issues with a common sense of mission and a problem-solving perspective. Leaders in the district's other bargaining units (custodians, food service personnel, administrative assistants, and instructional assistants) also demonstrate a commitment to the overall mission of the district and articulate a sense of pride in their role in ensuring that the organization functions well. They also work productively with district administration to resolve conflicts when they arise.

The curriculum of the Westwood Public Schools is deeply grounded in the MA curriculum frameworks and other relevant learning standards and there are significant systems in place to ensure that curriculum is periodically reviewed and updated. However, as discussed later in this report, there are some opportunities for continued improvement.

Our educational outcomes, as measured by metrics such as standardized test data, graduation rates, college placement, attendance data, and school climate surveys, are strong. The district is recognized as one of the best in the Commonwealth, as evidenced by the fact that it received a "level 1" accountability rating from the Massachusetts Department of Education (DESE) in the 2016-2017 school year (the last time that this accountability designation was given) based on MCAS and ACCESS scores and by Westwood High School's recognition this spring at DESE's "Leading the Nation" celebration as one of seven high schools that were commended for students' "high achievement and high progress." Other external measures, such as the national recognition of several of our art students and the success of our student musicians at national and regional festivals and competitions, point to the quality not only of our academic programs, but also our arts education.

The district's co-curricular and athletic programs serve a vital function in our students' school experience and are integrated into the daily life of the schools, particularly at the secondary

level. Students are involved in a wide array of co-curricular experiences including academic clubs, shared interest groups, and service organizations. 63% of our high school students participate in athletics and in the last 10 years Westwood has won state championships in Girls Lacrosse, Golf, Girls Ice Hockey, Boys Ice Hockey, Unified Track, and Baseball. The elementary PTOs contribute significantly to students' co-curricular experience by offering a robust menu of after school mini-courses.

Over the last several years, the district has grown its ability to serve our students with special needs within the district by expanding in-district programs and partnering with community agencies, local businesses, and universities. Correspondingly, the number of students being educated in outside placements has declined to 4% of our students with IEPs (less than 1% of our total student population). This trend has helped stabilize our special education budget while also supporting our commitment to educating students in their home community. Survey feedback from families collected during the special education TEAM process indicates that families generally feel supported by the district and feel that they are engaged as partners. Our partnership with Lesley University to offer an on-site Master's degree program leading to licensure in moderate special needs or severe special needs serves as a model of the future of teacher preparation programs while benefiting the district with qualified interns.

Both educators and parents express a desire to ensure that all students feel welcome and included in our schools. Educators explicitly point to this as a value of the district and several recent initiatives, such as participation in Inclusive Schools Week, peer leader training at the middle school through the ADL's *World of Difference* program, the high school's *Let's Talk About Race* group and *Courageous Conversations* programming, the student-initiated Equality Coalition, and the district's professional development work around supporting our LGBTQ students reflect this commitment. Though there is work to be done, the results of a recent survey of Westwood's 5th, 8th, and 10th graders by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education reveals that students in Westwood report a positive school climate and generally feel safe and engaged in school. In fact, the district's average overall climate score on the 2017 Massachusetts School Climate Survey pilot ranked second compared to other K-12 districts in the state.

In general, employees throughout the district expressed appreciation for the level of resources they are provided through the operating budget so that they can perform their professional responsibilities effectively. While any budget process will involve making choices between competing and compelling priorities, the School Department budget is stable and sufficient to meet our needs. The WPS has not required an operational override since FY'08. While the district's capital budget allows us to adequately address our day-to-day needs, addressing our long-term capital needs is clearly a significant priority for the district. With the district's acceptance into the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) "eligibility period" in December, we have an important and exciting opportunity to address the needs of our elementary school buildings that will be the focus of the district for the next several years.

At the start of my tenure as Superintendent, I had many conversations about the need to improve the relationship between the School Department and town officials, particularly during the budget process. During these conversations, School Committee members, elected town officials, municipal leaders, town administrators, and school administrators underscored their desire to work together productively and transparently and expressed a belief that a high-quality school system is everyone's goal for Westwood. Improving this relationship has been a focus of my work this fall and winter, and I believe there is a shared sense that significant progress has been made.

Opportunities and Challenges

Though the strengths of the Westwood Public Schools are many, there were themes that emerged that present opportunities and challenges for us as we look to the future. Some of these themes reflect goals and efforts that are already underway, while others were more surprising.

- Contemporary teaching and learning that is future-oriented
- Vertical alignment among levels
- Social emotional curriculum and services
- Instructional time and "fitting it all in"

Contemporary Teaching and Learning that is Future-Oriented

The curriculum and instruction in Westwood is grounded in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and other relevant learning standards. The curriculum often employs a model framed around essential questions and designed with specific learning outcomes in mind.

There is much evidence that teaching and learning in the Westwood Public Schools continues to change and adapt, both in terms of curriculum and instructional practices, in response to a changing world. The 1:1 Chromebook initiative, for example, now in its fifth year, and the changes in instruction and assessment that have accompanied it, represented by the district's *Guiding Principles for Technology* which articulate a cohesive strategy for using technology across the district, is indicative of the system's desire to ensure that our classrooms reflect the world that our students live in as well as develop the skills necessary to be successful in a technological environment. The district's initiatives around science, including the addition of computer science and engineering as required classes at the middle school, new science electives at the high school, and coding as a special class for all third graders reflect our review of the educational landscape and feedback that the educational community has gotten from universities and employers about desired competencies. The high school J-Term pilot reflects a willingness to innovate and provide educational experiences for students that authentically engage students.

What's more, our students are generally successful as measured by external indicators such as standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college acceptance rates. However, there is clearly a desire to continue to improve and ensure that students' experience results in students who have the content knowledge, academic skills, and social competencies to adapt to a changing world.

Guiding Questions:

How will we continue to strengthen our curriculum, instruction, and assessment to ensure that it meets students' needs for their future and reflects contemporary educational issues and a changing world?

How can we provide students with learning experiences that create authentic engagement in learning and not merely strategically compliant students?

Horizontal and Vertical Alignment of Curriculum and Practices

Over time, the district has made a great deal of progress in aligning curriculum and instruction in order to ensure a consistent and cumulative experience for students at a particular grade level or in a particular course, as well as over time. Structures such as the district curriculum review cycle, summer curriculum work, weekly opportunities for teachers to collaborate with grade-level or course partners, structured collaboration time for elementary specialists across buildings, biweekly elementary principal meetings with the Assistant Superintendent, and dedicated professional development time for department alignment work have facilitated this work, particularly within departments in a given building and across elementary schools.

However, fewer structures exist to ensure the vertical alignment of curriculum and instruction across grades or from level to level. Opportunities for collaboration between grades 5 and 6 or between grades 8 and 9 tend to be focused on student transition, rather than issues such as curriculum documents, examination of student work, or instructional methods. Conversations with curriculum leaders, observations in schools, and parent feedback suggest that the district may benefit from greater alignment in students' experience over time. For example, a theme that I heard in parent forums is the sense that there is a "dip in rigor" in grade 6 as compared to grade 5. Observationally, instructional methods vary greatly between elementary and secondary. And, when teachers do have opportunities to learn what is happening in classrooms at different levels, they often express being surprised by what they learn.

Guiding Questions:

How do we ensure student mastery of learning standards over time?

How do we ensure that students continue to make progress toward learning goals from year to year and building to building without repetition or gaps?

Social Emotional Curriculum and Services

The issue of the social emotional development of our students is on the minds of educators and parents. In recent years, the district has experienced an uptick in students at all levels who are struggling with mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression and students who exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom. Beyond some of these explicit challenges, there is an increased recognition, both in Westwood and in the broader educational community, of the need to build students' core social emotional competencies such as self-awareness (e.g. accurate self-perception, self-efficacy), self-management (e.g. impulse control, stress management, goal setting), social awareness (e.g. perspective-taking, empathy, appreciating diversity), relationship skills (e.g. communication, teamwork), and responsible decision-making (e.g. analyzing situations, solving problems, acting ethically). Both parents and educators express concern about the impact to a first generation of students who are growing up in the age of social media. Universities and the business community point to a desire for students to develop collaboration skills, an ability to persevere, and skills at thinking flexibly and creatively.

Some of the data in Westwood points to good news. Over the last decade, the district has built its internal capacity to serve the wide spectrum of student needs from preschool to age 22. For example, the district has created a continuum of therapeutic programs for students across all levels so that student needs can largely be met in district. As another example, there is preliminary evidence that additional resources such as an adjustment counselor at Thurston Middle School and a social worker at Westwood High School has resulted in a decrease in students requiring hospitalizations.

However, there is a strong desire to continue to integrate social emotional learning in all of the facets of school functioning: explicit curriculum and instruction, school wide practices and policies, and family and community partnerships.

Guiding questions:

Do our current curricular programs and school structures meet our goals for students' social emotional learning?

How can we effectively and authentically integrate social emotional learning into our classrooms?

How can we provide the necessary resources, professional development, and family programming to support students' social emotional learning and meet the needs of students within our classrooms?

Instructional Time and “Fitting in All In”

Throughout all of my conversations with educators around the district, but particularly apparent at the elementary and middle levels, teachers communicated concerns about instructional time.

Specifically, at the elementary level teachers expressed concern that curricular demands have increased without a corresponding increase in instructional time. They often expressed being overwhelmed that there isn't enough time to “fit it all in,” and that this circumstance has resulted in less time to do important, but not necessarily “academic,” things that in the past were hallmarks of elementary students' experience. In addition, they expressed that the increased structure in the schedule at our elementary schools has lessened their ability to exercise discretion with class time and to respond flexibly to their class's needs. These sentiments were strongly expressed by elementary teachers.

At the middle school, a consistent theme was a belief that the length of class periods (42 minutes) is too short to allow for 21st century instruction and/or sufficient time to meaningfully engage with the expected learning standards. At the same time, middle school teachers expressed strong support for the breadth of programs at the middle school, such as the arts programming.

Guiding Question:

How can we effectively balance our belief in supporting the whole child with current academic demands?

Next Steps

This year has been an important opportunity to listen, observe, and learn while also moving forward the work of the district. While the annual district improvement goals are clear and lived, the district's last strategic plan is out-of-date. Over the next few months, I will be engaging the School Committee and Administrative Council in the development of a district-wide improvement strategy. The themes that have emerged during this entry process will form the basis for the district strategy work beginning with a leadership retreat after school is out in June. As a team, we will engage in a process to look at the root causes of some of these themes and then work to articulate a vision for the district, establish district-wide strategic objectives, and identify priority initiatives to achieve them. We hope to have a draft strategy to discuss with the School Committee in the fall.

I want to thank the School Committee, town officials, town administrators, building principals and assistant principals, faculty, staff, community members, parents and students for sharing their feedback and insights with me throughout this process. The fact that so many people were

so generous in sharing their perceptions with me underscores the deep investment that members of the Westwood community have in educating our children and reminded me once again of what a privilege it is to lead this district.