

Superintendent's Entry Plan Report

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Watertown Public Schools

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INTRODUCTION

The Entry Plan Process

Prior to my arrival, the Watertown Public Schools underwent substantial change. This change is evident in the hiring of a new Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent of Finance and Operations, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, and a Director of Student Services. Additionally, there was a reorganization of the roles within the larger administrative team and a new principal was hired at the Lowell Elementary School starting at the same time I did. The District is currently in the process of Building for the Future, which will impact all buildings in the next 10-15 years, with renovations happening at four of the five school buildings within the next five years.

As I began my tenure in Watertown, I set about the entry process in a deliberate and detailed manner in order to learn about the Watertown Public Schools (WPS) and the larger Watertown Community. The purpose of the plan was to identify key strengths of the District to support and to identify key issues and challenges that the District faces. Additionally, I sought to determine what the community hopes for the schools in the future and what traditions should be maintained. The entry process also allowed me to develop and strengthen working relationships with key members of the community and to improve confidence and trust by opening the lines of communication between the School Department and the larger community.

Between the months of July and December, I conducted over 75 individual and group interviews with key constituencies of the Watertown Public School community. During these interviews, my primary role was to listen and to learn as much as possible about the current state of the WPS, about the priorities of these individuals and groups, and about where they would like to see the District make improvements.

The following data sources were employed in the planning and analysis process: meeting with members of the community, conducting focus-group meetings with students, staff, and community members, observing classrooms, reviewing relevant documents, attending meetings and events, distributing a survey and conducting day-to-day operations of the school department. These resources were leveraged to answer the following four general research questions, which guided this study:

1. What are the strengths of our school system and our community?
2. What are the biggest challenges that we face and our best opportunities for growth?
3. As we think about our schools in the next 5-10 years, what would be two of your hopes for the schools?
4. What must we protect or sustain in our system?

From the onset, it was clear that the District was ready to embark upon the improvement planning process, and at the August 2017 School Committee Retreat, the District Leadership Team developed a short-term improvement strategy to bring coherence to the work that was already underway in the District (see Appendix A). The District's already established vision and overarching strategic goals provided a target for improvement and enabled the team to productively and efficiently develop the short-term strategy. This short-term strategy was used to articulate short-term objectives of the District during the entry process completion. The entry plan report as well as the short-term strategy will underpin the more complex strategy development and improvement planning process that will guide

the District over the next three years. That work will begin shortly after the presentation of the entry report. This report will also be shared publicly with the community, as one of the key components for the success of our schools is having strong working relationships with town government, and broad-based community support for our actions.

An invaluable lesson that I learned through this process is that an “entry plan” is never over. The relationships that I developed through the process are just being established, and it is clear that deliberate, planned meetings with students, parents, educators and community groups are a necessary and important part of this profession. Time and again, I heard that this was one of the first times that people had the opportunity to have an open conversation with the superintendent and that they hoped that this type of communication forum would continue into the future. While my entry was thorough and comprehensive, I will continue to make connections within the community by providing updates and information on the great work as well as the needs of our school system.

Current Vision Statement of the Watertown Public Schools

The Watertown Public Schools promote high achievement through inquiry, problem solving, collaboration, creativity and hard work. We provide students with a robust education so they will acquire, apply, and practice the knowledge and skills needed for lifelong learning. All programs support diverse learning styles, civic interaction, global awareness, and personal success.

Current District Goals

- Support high academic achievement
- Foster lifelong learning
- Promote local and global citizenship

My Core Values

- Focus on the instructional core
- Collective responsibility for all students
- District-wide improvement based on collaborative inquiry
- Highly effective communication and promotion of student, school, and District successes
- Facilities that meet the educational needs of the children in Watertown

STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES, AND HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

Over the course of the past six months, I gained deep insight into the Watertown Public Schools, by meeting with students, educators, parents, community members, and town officials; holding focus group sessions with various stakeholders and constituencies; observing classrooms across the schools; reviewing relevant documents and artifacts; and by the very act of being the superintendent. Through the entry process, it became clear that the District has many strengths that need to be maintained and built upon, challenges that should be considered, and many opportunities for growth well into the future. The areas that I have identified are not intended to be acted upon, but rather warrant further discussion and exploration by the larger school community as we embark upon the improvement strategy development process. The content below was extracted primarily from my focus group interviews, relevant survey data, and from my experiences as superintendent over these past six months. Likewise, this list is not exhaustive, but represents recurring patterns in the data.

Areas of Strength

- Strong sense of community within the schools
- Community service at the Middle School and High School, along with expanding opportunities at the elementary level
- Inclusive practices that provide effective Tier 1 instruction for most students in the general education setting (special education, English Language Learners, accelerated learners, etc.)
- Embedded, ongoing professional development through the use of coordinators, teacher leaders and coaches
- Enrichment opportunities at the Middle School level
- Appropriate and effective class sizes that are responsive to the fluctuations in enrollment among the three elementary schools as well as the secondary schools
- A caring community at each school that welcomes all students and families, no matter what their background is, what languages they speak, or what challenges they may have
- Foreign Language at the Elementary School (FLES)
- Extensive courses that are available to students; including options outside of the school building to create additional opportunities (i.e. Dual Enrollment, Virtual High School, Middlesex League Partnerships)
- Strong community organizations that support the work of the schools including, but not limited to: the Parent-Teacher Organizations, the Watertown Community Foundation, the Special Education Parent Advisory Council, the Friends of Watertown Music, the Athletic Association
- WPS Critical Incident Team; WPS has excellent safety procedures and protocols in place

Challenges That Should be Considered

- Continue with horizontal and vertical alignment of the curriculum; develop and implement a standards-based reporting system

- Provide evidence-based social/emotional wellness opportunities and support
- Develop a comprehensive improvement strategy that emanates from a shared vision and District-wide core values for the next three years
- Provide Professional Development for teachers new to the District on the curriculum programs and resources that they will be using in their classrooms: strengthen the existing mentoring program with a focus on the instructional core

- Develop and implement a comprehensive communications and marketing plan to increase access to information, public awareness and perception of the excellent WPS educational program and to celebrate the successes of our school community
- Ensure that the District Leadership Team has appropriate support to tackle the enormity of the Building for the Future projects through possible reorganization and allocation of funding for support personnel
- Maintain continual communication with the Town; capitalize on opportunities to collaborate to maximize efficiency; attend Department Head meetings monthly to learn about the departments and to share information about the schools
- Build fiscal systems and procedures that ensure resources are available, allocated, monitored, and responsibly used to effectively support organizational objectives
- Expand the integration and support for the use of technology at the elementary school to enhance the delivery of instruction and to personalize our students' learning experiences
- Review and revise the District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP) and provide training on both the DCAP and 504s to all staff
- Strengthen transitions between fifth- and sixth-grade and eighth and ninth grade
- Redesign the website to enhance public perception of our schools and to make information contained within it easily accessible and consumable; ensure that there are no barriers for families to access the information at the site

Opportunities for Growth and Hopes for the Future

- Provide every student in Watertown Public Schools with the opportunity to explore deep learning experiences that will challenge them, open their minds, and give them skills they will need to be successful and content after they leave the world of PreK - 12
- Increase student learning outcomes across all groups while narrowing the achievement gap
- Ensure that students in Watertown leave High School with confidence that their experiences in our schools have prepared them well for a lifetime of learning and growing
- Increase home/school communication to foster partnerships with the community and improve communication and engagement to support our students and school system
- Reduce the amount of students who leave the system to attend private schools
- Analyze staffing and resources across the District to ensure that our resources are maximizing our instructional program
- Increase the recruitment, hiring and retention of a more diverse staff that reflects the racial and cultural diversity of our student population
- Establish an organizational norm for open, reflective, effective and consistent communication throughout the District and within our community
- Develop partnerships with local companies and organizations in order to provide students with authentic educational experiences extending their learning outside the confines of the classroom.

- See the Building For the Future initiative through to its completion with three elementary buildings renovated by 2021, a completed MSBA Watertown High School building project by 2023, and exploring options for the Middle School by 2025.

FINDINGS

Our Community of Learners

Diversity and Equity: Across all groups and data sources, it is clear that Watertown is known for its diverse community and is proud of it. Diversity is most commonly referred to across the data, posing both strengths and challenges. With over 30 percent of our students speaking a language other than English at home and 10 percent considered English Language Learners, both of which are higher than the state average, WPS students are immersed in an environment that celebrates diversity and promotes acceptance across all student and adult populations. But Watertown's diversity goes beyond traditionally defined racial, cultural and ethnic diversity. We are very diverse in terms of socio- economic status, students with a variety of learning and physical disabilities, and a large LGBTQ community. At a recent Watertown Community Foundation event, I became aware of a position statement that was issued by the organization last year: "We are proud to support the role of every member of this community, new or old, regardless of where they have come from, what languages they speak, how they worship or who they love." Based upon my time speaking with members of the community, I believe that this statement rings true for the Watertown Public Schools as well. What I would add to the list would be "what challenges they may have," which speaks to the inclusive environment that the WPS community also resoundingly celebrates and embraces.

With the strong appreciation of diversity in the community comes a great responsibility to ensure equitable opportunities for all of our students, no matter where they come from, what challenges they face, what languages they speak or who they love. Specifically, WPS needs to pay close attention to the expectations gap across our population and we have to work towards hiring a more diverse teaching staff that reflects our student population.

Across all groups and throughout the course of the year, I have been challenged to consider ways in which WPS can recruit, hire, and retain highly qualified educators and administrators of color. In the survey that was sent out to the community, one parent commented, “My hope is to see more diversity in the faculty and administration of Watertown High School and also other schools in Watertown. Children of color need to see teachers who look like them in order to strive for success in their own lives.” This is not unique to Watertown, but that does not mean that we shouldn’t create a plan for addressing this need and actively pursue more inclusive hiring practices.

The District has embarked on a journey in partnership with the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) to “Reimagine Integration: Diverse and Equitable Schools” (RIDES). Last spring, Lee Teitel, a professor at HGSE, contacted the Watertown Public Schools about forming a strategic partnership around issues of equity in schools. This partnership provides WPS with facilitated support to examine a framework to promote equity in our schools in a systemic and focused way. When thinking of equity, we are speaking of providing all students with what they need to be successful in our schools regardless of their racial, ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic background or their disability status. This work focuses on identifying current practices that promote equity, examine the data for disproportionality, and embed

equitable practices into the strategy development process. When examining the data, it is evident that there is both an expectations gap and an achievement gap in our subgroups, particularly in the larger high needs subgroup that contains students receiving special education services, English Language Learners, and economically disadvantaged students. The District has experienced a persistent achievement gap, most notably evident in the MCAS scores for the past several years. The expectations gap is manifested in data sources such as MassCORE completion, college attendance and attrition rates, and discipline data.

Student Learning

Consistency, Coherence, Collaboration, and Coordination: WPS never shies away from taking on new challenges or beginning new initiatives when there is a perceived need. This has produced several initiatives and program adoptions over the years, but with little of the accompanying supports and professional development to fully implement and sustain programs. When a program or initiative didn’t seem to be working, rather than assessing its implementation, a new program would often take its place. However, in the year prior to my start, the District began strategically examining its programs and created several support structures and professional development opportunities to commit to existing programs, identifying any potential gaps in implementation. Two excellent examples of this are the introduction of Math Teacher Leaders and the Math Coach and the commitment to revitalizing the balanced literacy program at the elementary level. Feedback from the teachers indicate that this shows

a commitment to these programs and that the District is providing the accompanying supports for the teachers to be successful.

A relentless focus on standards-based curriculum alignment and development will enable the District to provide more consistency across classrooms and buildings at each grade level. As the MCAS data indicate, the lower-than-expected performance on MCAS may in part be attributable to inconsistency in curriculum. In a given grade level, performance on MCAS may seem to be similar across buildings, but a deeper look into the data suggests that the curriculum may not be aligned to state standards and that the delivery of the curriculum may not be consistently applied. With the hiring of both a K-5 Science, Technology, Engineering and Math Coordinator and a K-8 Literacy Coordinator, as well as adding layers of coaching and teacher leaders, curriculum coordination will become more coherent and focused, with ongoing support for teachers. Two initiatives underway that will also address the issues of coordination are the development of a standards-based reporting system, K-5, and the adoption of a curriculum mapping software solution, ATLAS. These initiatives will be rolled out over the coming years and will help to ensure both horizontal and vertical alignment of the WPS standards-based curriculum.

One additional area that I have identified in this process is the need for teacher collaboration, especially at the elementary level. Most middle school and High School teachers are provided collaboration time both within the school day and afterschool during the three contractual meeting times per month, but this is not the case at the elementary level. Principals have been creative about providing teachers time to work together, but often it is not enough time to collaborate on curriculum, student needs, and instructional practice. Teacher collaboration is essential for systems-level improvement and the District needs to commit to exploring ways to increase collaboration at the elementary level and preserve and strengthen the existing structures as the secondary level.

Using Data to Inform Instruction: The District currently does not have a fully developed assessment plan for students, K-12. While several assessments are available and many are used across buildings, there is no clearly articulated assessment plan, which includes universal assessments, schedules and testing protocols, progress monitoring, data analysis, distribution of results, and avenues/structures for teachers to use the data to inform instruction. During this school year, an assessment team has been reviewing universal assessments and will be selecting one in the near future, which is a step in the right direction for determining an assessment plan. However, having an assessment plan merely articulates what data should be considered and the structures in which educators will examine and use the data. The District will need to provide training and support for educators and administrators to meaningfully utilize formative assessment data to target instruction in those areas that have been identified in the assessments. This year, educators are participating in a Cycle of Inquiry in their Professional Learning Teams, focused on improving student learning by providing interventions for students based upon relevant data.

Perceptions About High School Outcomes and Opportunities: When speaking with parents, I often heard the need for improvement at the High School. Some parents believed that the High School needed to improve the academics, course offerings and extracurriculars, while others indicated that there was more of an issue with perception, not of the reality of what happens in the classroom. When speaking with students at the High School, they reported generally positive experiences, both academically and socially. They credited the teachers for being dedicated to their students and for taking the time to build relationships with them. The challenges that they found were centered on the

limitations of the course schedule, which can interfere with their ability to take the courses that they want due to conflicts in the schedule. They also indicated that when the teacher has passion for his or her subject matter, the result is that students want to learn.

As the High School was frequently mentioned during the entry process, I focused much of my attention to learning about its educational offerings and instructional practices. I spent much time at the High School visiting classrooms, and speaking with teachers, parents, and students and learned much about the strengths and challenges that the High School has. The state of the facility and the communication issues that the District has in general have not helped to improve the perceptions of the High School.

This past November, WHS held its first Open House, with over 100 students and parents in attendance. During the Open House, WHS provided families with the opportunity to meet WHS students and teachers and to learn more about the education program and outcomes for our students. The feedback from the Open House was very positive with several parents coming away with a greater understanding of the opportunities available at the High School. The average class size at the High School is 17.5 students per class, with a course catalogue that provides a breadth of class options seldom seen at a High School of its size. WHS students consistently outperform the state on the SATs and the AP exams. In the Class of 2017, 82.4 of students continued on college, with 69.5 percent attending a four-year college. Less than 8 percent of the graduates did not have a clear plan for the next year, with many students already employed or joining the military.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS): One common theme that emerged over this past year is the perception that our core instructional program does not meet the needs of all students across a continuum of skill and ability. Several parents mentioned that students who are accelerated learners do not have the opportunities to extend their learning or have enrichment opportunities in the school day. For teachers, there is an identified need for both Tier I and Tier II interventions for students who need additional interventions and supports to be successful in the core instructional program. Administrators noted that strengthening the core instructional program to meet the needs of more students in the general education classroom as a priority. The District does not have a fully developed Multi-Tiered System of Support that would address all three of these concerns. Developing and implementing this plan will take several years to come to fruition, but given the data, there is much support for developing such a system.

Communication, Procedures, and Systems Management

Communication: An area that is most frequently mentioned as a challenge and a hope for the future is improved communication. The feedback is spirited, as it represents different areas of concern for communication. For parents, communication centers on two themes: inconsistency in communication from teachers or varied methods of communication, and lack of information and/or communication from the school District. For teachers, often this was expressed as an issue of not knowing about

decisions that have been made, or the rationale behind why decisions were made. Across groups, participants expressed frustration with the website, or the underutilization of other means of communication, such as social media, for sharing information and news.

Most educational leaders, myself included, are not experts in marketing and communication strategies. To augment this underdeveloped skillset, the District is currently in the process of forming a WPS Communication and Marketing team whose charge is to develop and implement a comprehensive communications and marketing plan to increase access to information, public awareness and perception of the excellent WPS educational program and to celebrate the successes of our school community.

Procedures and Systems Management: Everyday I learn something new in my role, and often I have discovered that when problems arise, they generally stem from lack of clarity of roles, clearly articulated procedures or ineffective systems. For example, in the absence of a clear building use policy and accompanying procedures, avoidable scheduling conflicts between various community groups and organizations have occurred. The School Committee is currently updating its policy regarding the use of its buildings to clearly articulate priorities for building use and the School Department will develop guidelines and a facility use protocol to make for more efficient use of the buildings. This is one example of several systems-level procedures that need to be clarified in order to optimize the effective functioning of the District.

Building For the Future

When I was appointed as superintendent, the District was in the process of submitting a Statement of Interest to the Massachusetts School Building Authority for a core project for Watertown High School. The Master Plan Committee has just completed its work with SMMA, and was just beginning to discuss next steps based on the recommendations from the Master Plan. A short six months later, an Owner's Project Manager and Architect have been hired for the Elementary Building Project and the District has been invited into the Eligibility Period for a core program for WHS.

During the elementary school building project visioning sessions held in December, those in attendance were asked to complete a Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities and Goals exercise akin to the activities that I completed in the focus groups that I held. The subtle difference during the visioning sessions was the lens that the participants used was the buildings. When discussing opportunities and goal, several priorities emerged across all of the teams working on the exercise. These included: spaces that allow for both large group and small group instruction; opportunities for hand-on authentic learning experiences; spaces that allow for easy integration of all students; areas that promote collaboration; green space that can be utilized as outdoor classrooms, just to name a few. One of the other priorities across the groups was the need to make our buildings more community-centered, fostering intergenerational educational experiences in our elementary schools and providing ample opportunities for accommodating community-related events.

Currently, the Elementary Building Project Working Group is considering enrollment at each of the elementary schools, the configuration for the Integrated Preschool and Integrated Pre-Kindergarten. The School Department will be holding a public forum on January 29, 2018 to discuss these important decisions with the community prior to decision making. The Eligibility Period process with the MSBA will begin on April 2, 2018 and in the interim, the School Committee and the Town will be forming a

School Building Committee which guides all aspects of the project including design, schedule, budget, and construction. Watertown is fortunate to be fiscally poised to fully fund the Elementary Building Project, and will be receiving a grant from the State for the High School Building Project. As this was the most frequently recurring hope that was expressed during the data collection, the Town is in full support of making that hope a reality.

Over the coming years, community-wide outreach and communication regarding the High School Building Project will be a priority. An informed community is more likely to support a Proposition 2 1/2 Debt Exclusion vote. Thus, we will clearly communicate the need for a fully reconstructed or a new High School and, once determined, the rationale for the preferred option for its location.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The entry plan process provided me with ample opportunities to gain an in-depth understanding of our schools. While I know that could spend more time with groups of people, it is time to take the insights and information that I gathered and move forward with the process of strategy development and implementation.

Utilizing the Data in Collaborative Teams

The identified findings from my entry plan will provide a basis for further inquiry by the Strategy Development Team and the Communications and Marketing Team, both of which will begin meeting in January, 2018. The teams will use the gathered data to foster the shared vision for the Watertown Public Schools, to determine the strategies necessary to actualize the vision, to develop yearly strategy-driven action plans, and to set benchmarks and outcomes to ensure the success of the plans. Additionally, the District Leadership Team will use the data when considering an appropriate course of action to address the challenges the District faces.

The following questions that emerged from the data will provide direction for the various representative teams that will soon begin the work of improvement strategy development.

1. How can we embrace our diversity as community and be culturally responsive to the unique variations in our student population? How can we engage all parents as parents in the education experience?
2. How can the Watertown Public Schools recruit, hire, and retain highly qualified teachers that reflect the diversity of the community?
3. How can we implement and sustain a consistent standards-based curriculum that promotes teacher-driven instructional practices and craft?
4. How can we ensure meaningful opportunities for teachers to collaborate on student learning outcomes and instructional practices?
5. How do we improve our perception to the larger community given all of the strengths of the system? There is a seeming disconnect between the reality of our schools and the people's perception of what we offer and what our students accomplish.
6. What policies and procedures are needed to ensure organizational efficiency to optimize student learning?

Core Value Compatibility

The past six months have served to confirm that my core values are solidly aligned with the values of the District. The community values the need to focus on the instructional core while maintaining collective responsibility for all students. The community resoundingly expressed the desire for strong collaboration, the need to develop a plan for District improvement, and a commitment to continuous learning, all of which strongly resonate with my core values. The community has identified a need for improved communication. I will further public trust by developing effective mechanisms for

collaboration and communication among all stakeholders of the Watertown Public Schools. Finally, together we will enact and support a positive District climate and culture centered on every child, in every classroom, every day. and I, along with my colleagues, are willing to commit to making these improvements.

Acknowledgements

I would like to give credit to the New Superintendent Induction Program for providing guidance, training and support for developing the entry plan and the report. I especially want to thank my colleagues in the Leicester Public Schools and the Grafton Public Schools for sharing their entry plans to use as exemplars for report development. This program has proven to be invaluable for me as a new superintendent and I appreciate the support that the School Committee has given me to participate in the program for the next two years.

Appendix

Watertown Public Schools Improvement Strategy, 2017 – 2018

Objectives 2017-2018 Initiatives

Provide all students with a rigorous, relevant, standards-based curriculum throughout our core instructional program

1. Ensure the curriculum is articulated and aligned to standards, PreK-12 2. Create standards-based common assessments that ensure a deep

understanding of the curriculum, K-12 3. Strengthen foundational literacy skills, K-8 4. Strengthen math instructional practices, K-5, with an emphasis on problem-solving, conceptual understanding, and skill-building

Increase student engagement, agency, and authorship over their own learning in an inclusive educational community

1. Meet the needs of all learners through inclusive, equitable instructional

practices 2. Implement the practice of collaborative inquiry through Professional

Learning Communities (PLCs) 3. Continue implementation of research-based, instructional practices 4.

Enhance technology integration across disciplines

Ensure effective communication among families, students, staff, and the greater community to increase student learning

1. Foster two-way communication with families 2. Build and utilize collaborative structures to enhance communication 3. Strengthen communication within the larger Watertown community 4. Provide avenues and opportunities for intra-district communication

Establish effective systems of support and allocate resources to maximize organizational success

1. Build fiscal systems and procedures that ensure resources are available,

allocated, monitored, and responsibly used to effectively support organizational objectives 2. Enhance personnel practices and procedures to recruit, support, and

retain highly qualified staff 3. Develop schedules and utilize time in ways that maximize teaching and learning

Support High Academic Achievement

CORE VALUES / GOALS

Foster Lifelong Learning

Promote Local and Global Citizenship

VISION The Watertown Public Schools promote high achievement through inquiry, problem solving, collaboration, creativity, and hard work. We provide students with a robust education so they will acquire, apply, and practice knowledge and skills needed for lifelong learning. All programs support diverse learning styles, civic interaction, global awareness, and personal success.

THEORY OF ACTION If we commit to provide ALL students with a rigorous standards-based curriculum that engages students through relevant content and inclusive instructional practices; to communicate effectively with the

community; and to create systems of support that utilize district resources effectively; then the outcomes for ALL WPS students in ALL classrooms will improve.