



METRO
NASHVILLE
PUBLIC
SCHOOLS

Transition Team Summary of Findings

November 2016

Major Themes

Across the Transition Team, the four subcommittees identified:

- **The strength of the people and the community to do the work**
Multiple subcommittees pointed to the commitment and the talent of the staff in MNPS, from the central office to the classroom level. Further, there is strong community support for public education in Nashville, and the number of willing community partners likely exceeds the number found in other districts.
- **The benefit of diversity and the challenge of achieving equity**
MNPS is diverse in its student population, and as a result, in its students' needs, as well as in the wide types of school options and opportunities available to students. Yet diversity must be accompanied by equity to ensure that all learners have the resources and supports needed to be successful in every classroom, in every school. The persistent gaps in student performance between student populations are continued cause for concern in MNPS.
- **The need for clear district vision and unity of direction**
The lack of a clear vision and direction for MNPS has resulted in a multitude of improvement efforts being pursued by both various offices and by schools, with little accountability for results and few ways to measure the impact of these efforts. While schools need to be provided with clear guidelines and supports to allow them to make some choices to best meet the needs of their student population, the tremendous number of programs and curricula in use, without evidence of their effectiveness, makes it incredibly difficult to support the provision of a high-quality, rigorous education across schools. Establishment of a vision and a strategic plan, accompanied by a clear system of accountability for both central office and schools, is an essential first step for the new administration.
- **Establishment of clear structures and processes to guide the system's work**
In many cases, the lack of clear procedures, and the continued use of outdated processes, serves as cause for confusion among numerous stakeholder groups both internal and external to the system. For instance, there is evidence that applicants for positions, principals who are working to fill positions, and parents who are evaluating school options for their children, as just a few examples, are all affected by the use of inefficient or confusing processes to achieve intended outcomes.

Summary of Findings Student Achievement Subcommittee

Strengths

- New leadership has set a tone of openness and transparency needed to build and sustain public trust
- Renewed focus on literacy as a priority has already been established
- Principals report better district support as a result of the hiring of additional executive lead principals
- Clear and understandable academic goals and targets exist, and good data systems are present by which to determine how well those goals are being met, but do not appear to drive the district's instructional program.
- Existing curriculum guides include instructional notes and content standards, providing a good foundation on which to build, but it lacks the specificity that teachers need
- A wide variety of instructional initiatives have been initiated, such as project-based learning, personalized learning, Reading Recovery, blended learning and career academies, suggesting the district's willingness to try new approaches, but the scattered approach has caused confusion across the district
- Modest improvements have been seen over the last several years in graduation rates as well as on various end-of-course exams at the secondary grade levels

Challenges

- Academic attainment is below statewide averages and also appears to be below national averages
- District testing results reading/language arts show slight or decreased improvement from 2010 to 2015 and reflect challenges other districts in Tennessee faced
- District testing results in math show improvement from 2010 to 2015, but the gains parallel, rather than exceed, those statewide
- Achievement gaps—whether defined by race, income, language status or disability—are not showing any real sign of narrowing
- Employees too often voice low expectations for student achievement
- School autonomy without a clear improvement strategy has led to a lack of guidance and capacity building to help schools improve
- The district has launched numerous programs that appear to be disparate, rather than a coherent set of initiatives that work together to promote higher student achievement
- The lack of a system-wide strategy has resulted in weak instructional guidance for schools and teachers about what needs to be taught and at what level of depth
- Formative assessments are not well aligned to state standards and are perceived to be of low quality
- Professional development has not been differentiated or built around the district's main academic priorities
- The school district lacks a well-calibrated accountability system, a problem that stems from a lack of focus on student achievement from the School Board down
- Test scores provided by the state and the district do not appear to inform instruction or improve practice on any system-wide basis

School Choice Subcommittee

Strengths

- Growing number of families participating in the school choice process
- A wide variety of school choices, including:
 - zoned schools
 - zoned option schools
 - enhanced options
 - thematic magnets,
 - IB, Cambridge and AP programming
 - charter schools
 - academic magnet schools
- The application process and information about schools are now online
- There is an annual school choice fair featuring all schools
- The district has a Diversity Management Plan in which diversity of students, faculty and administrators in schools and performance of those schools is reported annually
- The overall applicant pool of students applying through the school choice process is racially/ethnically diverse
- The district provides all high school students with access to MTA bus service for free and middle schools students may also have access if they attend an out-of-zone school and have parent permission
- Some of the charter schools have chosen to participate in the district's choice application process
- The business community supports the academies

Challenges

- Access and equity in the school choice process is often limited for families who are unable to provide their own transportation and by a lack of information about transportation options
- The wide variety in school choices has made the choice process complex and complicated
- Because of the complexity –
 - many parents do not understand the choice process or all of the school choice options that are available
 - the district has struggled to develop and implement effective strategies for providing outreach and recruitment for parents and students
- Not all charter schools participate in the district's school choice application process
- Some parents in zoned schools have expressed concern that magnet and charter schools have a negative impact on the enrollment in zoned schools
- No one person or department is responsible for the oversight of the magnet and thematic programs
- There is a lack of vertical alignment from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school of academic programming, such as IB or Cambridge
- There is not equitable distribution of advanced academic programming across the district, particularly in the Glenclyff, Maplewood and Pearl-Cohn clusters

- The district loses a significant number of students between elementary and middle school
- The district has no strategic marketing plan for its schools
- Many schools are not diverse and high levels of racial and socioeconomic isolation remain at a number of schools
- *The new, more challenging state assessment TNReady could impact diversity at schools with academic entrance requirements

Communications and Community Engagement Subcommittee

Strengths

- Early steps by Dr. Joseph and his administration to seek community input and communicate openly and honestly is a critical first step to rebuilding trust and confidence in district
- The administration's early focus on system-wide culture efforts with the Arbinger Institute is an important step in developing a consistent, well-adopted customer-driven culture, thought that must be paired with significant efforts to dramatically deepen the customer service focus and mindset of the district
- The new website is a tremendous improvement and further enhancement and simplification and streamlining is possible
- The existing communications plan, while only in place 18 months, has already led to some significant improvements
- There are many community partners committed and willing to help MNPS address its needs – perhaps more so than is the norm in other districts
- There are many resources dedicated to family engagement and some innovative work in place (though not fully utilized) that could be strong building blocks to help schools create a more welcoming environment for families and the community
- While there is concern about the lack of an effective proactive communications strategy in the district, the committee found a great deal of very strong content on various MNPS blogs that can provide a foundation to building a stronger, positive case statement about our public schools
- The Family Information Center is a well-run division with deeply dedicated staff who work to quickly respond to constituent interests and moreover, resolve issues
- Lowering the ratio of executive lead principals to schools and ensuring they are only responsible for supporting schools may streamline communication and help the district be more strategic with partner engagement
- The MNPS staff is hard-working and passionate about serving children and families and is open to innovative and expanding solutions

Challenges

- There is an overarching lack of clarity around the direction of the district and measures of success. That is sometimes born out of a lack of clarity about what the priorities are, a sense there are too many priorities and a feeling that the priorities change constantly.

This lack of clear priorities has created a cultural breakdown that leads to confusion, lack of consistency/unity and the build-up of silos within the organization and even within departments

- Unless these deep, systemic cultural challenges are addressed, communications efforts will be limited in their success
- Communications about the district today are overwhelmingly reactive. There is not nearly enough focus on delivering a proactive vision of the district's direction or success/good news. While good news about the district exists, it not methodically communicated to key audiences with the right frequency and reach. There is also not a cohesive effort to leverage "ambassadors" of the district (i.e., teachers, students, parents, community partners). In addition, there is no clear marketing strategy and resources for this area are limited
- While there are many community partners committed to supports schools, matching partners to needs is challenging for both sides
- Compared to other urban school districts, MNPS invests less and has a smaller, less modern operation. In particular, MNPS lacks some of the more modern tools for communicating (i.e., video/multi-media capacity, text message delivery options, etc.)
- There seems to be organizational confusion related to the job of the Communications Office, which has led to an under-utilization of this resource compared to other districts nationally and a focus on reactive rather than proactive communication
- The district lacks clear structures to support and measure ongoing engagement and solicitation of feedback with key groups
- Despite a great deal of attention around the need for family engagement, there does not appear to be a consistently-held belief that family engagement is an essential part of improving student academic achievement and there is considerable tension between what should be communicated centrally versus what individual schools have the freedom and discretion to communicate
- Many school leaders struggle to appropriately staff meaningful, ongoing, school-based engagement efforts and are not evaluated on their ability to do so, leading to a gap between intent and action
- The district does not have a sufficient means of measuring family, employee or public satisfaction year-over-year, which is a critical management and communications tool
- There appears to be no accountability of individual departments or schools to be responsive to customer/constituent inquiries. Unless the complaint is sent through the Family Information Center, there is no unified tracking system to manage all constituent issues with guaranteed response times

Human Resources/Talent Management Subcommittee

Strengths

- Employees in the Human Resources Department (HR) understand the importance of human capital as a driver for student achievement and have good institutional knowledge of the district
- Process improvements have been made to better serve schools and the district, such as the automated applicant tracking system for filling open positions

- An HR dashboard has been established, giving the department the ability to utilize data to make strategic decisions
- The HR Department has a clear strategic plan with goals, objectives and timelines for meeting those goals built upon good HR understanding and best practices.
- A number of surveys and focus groups have been conducted with various employee groups to obtain input from key customers in order to improve their services
- Several staff noted that there are a variety of opportunities to grow in MNPS
- The new teacher orientation has been revitalized for the 2016-17 school year and was recognized as a great success

Challenges

- Outdated and convoluted processes and compliance activities are preventing the ability for MNPS to think about human capital in a strategic way to meet the system's needs
- There are no clear procedures around key HR processes to ensure a strong and deep pool of candidates and hiring in a timely manner
- The quality and quantity of substitute teachers is a concern, and there are uneven substitute fill-rates across the district
- Support staff is rarely provided the same level of training or attention as the certificated staff, a disparity that is even more apparent in the way that performance evaluations are implemented
- While HR generates a significant amount of data, these data are at times difficult to access and often from stand-alone databases
- There is no coherent orientation or induction program for employees, resulting in new hires showing up at their work sites without an understanding of expectations for their work.
- Broad consistency and agreement that customer service from HR is poor
- Teacher and principal turnover is further complicated by significant shortages in certain teaching and administrative positions
- In the 2015-16 school year, the average retention rate for teachers was 83.92%, which is below the benchmark goal of retaining 90% of effective and highly-effective teachers
- MNPS lacks a clear or integrated approach to performance management that includes intentional and aligned professional development linked to the roles and responsibilities of each employee, as well as a fair and transparent evaluation system