

Act Three: Westford Public Schools Superintendent Entry Plan Findings Report

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Overview

The purpose of the entry plan was to articulate the specific actions taken during the first few months as the new superintendent of Westford Public Schools. Having served as the principal of Stony Brook for the past seven years, I have been able to grow as a leader while learning about the district through a building specific lens. The process of the entry plan helped to establish a reflective practice that utilized the unique lens of the superintendent role to continue my growth as a leader and deepen my understanding of the needs of the entire district.

The entry process utilized multiple means of learning including developing positive relationships within the district as well as with stakeholders in the community of Westford at large, dedicating time to visit and listen to staff and students within each of our school buildings, and reviewing specific district documents and reports that helped inform areas of need for future development and improvement.

Extending the length of the entry plan provided a critical opportunity to include learning and reflection from some very significant events that took place during the winter. The authentic communication and feedback received through January, February and March specifically shaped additional findings that might not have been included if the process ended earlier in December as was initially planned.

The three sources of data that were analyzed through this process included:

- 1) Individual interviews, focus groups and forums with stakeholders
- 2) Observations of schools and classrooms
- 3) A review of key documents and data
 - School Improvement Plans
 - District Strategic Plan
 - School and District Report Cards (DESE)
 - School Discipline Reports (DESE)
 - District/School MCAS, AP and SAT Analysis
 - New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) Reports
 - Special Education Program Evaluations

- Tiered Focused Monitoring Report
- School Safety Plans and Emergency Response Protocols
- Superintendent Search Survey Results and Report
- Collective Bargaining Agreements
- Budget Documents (FY21) – School and Town
- Financial Audits
- Capital Improvement Projects and Facilities Data
- Grants
- Policy Manual

The entry plan:

- Provided a specific process to gather data both qualitative and quantitative for me to assess and analyze
- Built trusting collaborative relationships with key stakeholders. Established efficient, effective and honest and open communications
- Identified the strengths and critical issues facing the schools in order to develop goals and action plans to address challenges as we collaborate to develop a new strategic improvement plan for the district
- Provided opportunities for more members of the community to come to know and understand me in terms of my own values, beliefs and leadership style
- Supported the continuous improvement of school and district operations

During the superintendent search process, the following leadership challenges and opportunities were identified through the focus group discussions and surveys:

- Maintaining and improving high academic performance
- Valuing and promoting diversity, equity and inclusion in students, staff and community
- Committing to social emotional learning, with a focus on student and staff mental health and well-being
- Developing and directing a strong administrative leadership team
- Understanding and recognizing good teaching, encouraging creativity in instruction, and empowering staff to use a variety of teaching methods
- Communicating and collaborating with diverse school and town groups
- Fostering a transparent and open budget process

Entry Plan Phases

1. Act One - Pre-entry/ Preparation: April 2021-August 2021
2. Act Two - Entry process/ data collection and analysis: September 2021-March 2022
3. Act Three - Entry findings Report: April 2022-May 2022
4. Act Four - Development of Strategic District Improvement Plan: June 2022-September 2022

April 2021-August 2021

A successful entry and transition is dependent upon building and maintaining collaborative and trusting relationships. As an educator, fostering those positive relationships has remained a primary focus whether it was in the classroom, as a building level administrator or now as a district leader.

Prior to the official start of date of July 1, 2021, it was paramount for transition plans to begin both with my predecessor Superintendent Everett Olsen as well as the interim administration team stepping up to lead at Stony Brook. Superintendent Olsen was incredibly gracious in inviting me to as many meetings as possible throughout the spring to ensure my participation in decisions impacting the future of the district. In addition to the regular weekly central office leadership meetings, he also included me in the hiring process of some of the open leadership positions. Most specifically, the Westford Public Schools Director of Finance and the Facilities Operations Supervisor.

In late spring, the search process for our next Director of Finance concluded with the appointment of Ms. Patricia Leonhardt. Her expertise and extensive experience in school finance from her previous position in New Jersey was critical in her transition as her first task was to rebuild the entire Business Office as the majority of the staff left the district in the spring. Getting all of the personnel in place quickly led to the development of improved standard operating procedures to increase communication and transparency.

The morning after my appointment as the next superintendent of schools, leadership from the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS) contacted me to provide support and invite me to participate in the New Superintendent Induction Program (NSIP). The program is designed to support new superintendents through their first three years of leadership. As a member of Cohort 12 of this program, we met for our first in person session in July at the MASS Summer Conference. Over the course of the conference, I was able to meet and establish connections with the Merrimack Valley Superintendents' Roundtable which communicates regularly with each other to discuss issues surrounding school districts within our area and has been critical to the ability for schools to navigate through the pandemic.

As part of NSIP, I was fortunate to be connected with my coach, Dr. Matthew King. His 28 years of experience as a superintendent has provided significant perspective as well as

opportunities for me to connect with other district leaders with whom I would not have otherwise met. The program includes six hours of coaching per month as well as regular content sessions scheduled throughout the year for the entire cohort. The coaching sessions are both in person and remote. The in-person sessions allow Dr. King to visit Westford Public Schools and participate in leadership meetings as well as school visits throughout the first year. Prior to this process, I underestimated the necessity of building strong relationships outside of the district in order to better support our work here within the district.

Another opportunity for relationship building took place during the summer with the entire School Committee. Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) consultant, Ms. Dorothy Presser, conducted a very successful Summer Retreat with us that helped shape our expectations and established priorities and norms. Our ability to conduct this self-reflective assessment early in the process provided a strong foundation and groundwork for opening up communication between the central office leadership and the committee and exhibiting a greater transparency to our full district leadership team.

The district leadership team Summer Retreat took place over two days in mid- August in the Blanchard Learning Commons. The full team consists of thirty-eight educators from central office, building based administration, district wide curriculum coordinators and special education team chairs. For the first time, the School Committee was invited to participate in working sessions on the second day as we all processed the first three chapters of *Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership* (Radd, Generett, Gooden, Theoharis, 2021). The retreat was grounded in the essential question, "What does it mean to belong in Westford Public Schools?" A clear desire to focus on equity was articulated in the superintendent search process as well as strengthening the district commitment to social emotional learning that supported student and staff well-being. In the previous school year, our Panorama data provided an opportunity for us to initially assess both student and staff sense of belonging and how that correlates with equity and social emotional learning. The summer retreat provided time for the district leadership to explore and develop a consistent district priority around both the importance of each individual's sense of belonging as well as articulating the appropriateness of encouraging a regular level of self-reflection. This work has allowed students and staff at all grade levels the ability to engage in meaningful conversations since the beginning of the school year about what we do as a community as well as individuals to ensure that everyone can experience a strong sense of belonging. It has also provided the framework for conversations to acknowledge and address when actions or events arise that impede or lessen an individual's or groups' sense of belonging.

September 2021- March 2022

The initial goal to schedule one day a week dedicated to visiting two of the nine district schools on a rotating basis, was perhaps the most beneficial decision in terms of organizing my time throughout the fall. The principals in all of the buildings were incredibly accommodating in terms of time and space for me to conduct remote meetings or respond to timely communications if

necessary while I worked out of their building for the morning or afternoon. Meeting with the principals regularly also provided an invaluable perspective for me to better understand the challenges and opportunities that exist within each building. It was also very helpful to combine my school visits with my weekly meetings with our Director of Facilities, Mr. Paul Fox. It provided beneficial face time with each of the principals to advocate for any concerns that they had regarding their buildings.

Most importantly, scheduling the tours directly into my weekly calendar allowed me to witness on a regular basis the most significant work we do as a school district: teaching and learning. The schedule allowed me to initially visit each school twice within the span of a month throughout the fall. Visiting classrooms and observing the tremendous attention our staff and students invest in building positive relationships and engaging in meaningful work is incredibly rewarding to say the least.

As part of my data collection, responses to five interview questions were received from the Central Office Cabinet Leadership as well as all of the principals and members of the School Committee. Additionally, the questions were shared through a survey with members of our Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (SEPAC) and the Westford Education Association (WEA) Leadership team. The five questions were:

1. What do you appreciate most about WPS?
2. What does equity in WPS look like through your lens?
3. Describe how you believe WPS has grown through the COVID pandemic?
 - a. Examples of things we should allow to sunset
 - b. Examples of things we should amplify and continue
4. What do you believe to be the biggest challenges facing the district?
5. Can you identify any barriers or obstacles that I can remove for you to be successful in your role?

In addition to those direct questions, data was collected from email communications from families within the district along with remote meetings that took place with various stakeholder groups in the community. Throughout the year, I was honored to participate in meetings with organizations such as the Westford Rotary, the Town of Westford Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Subcommittee on Schools and Education, the League of Women Voters, Healthy Westford, Westford Climate Action, and our WPS SEPAC to name a few.

The original timeline for the entry plan included wrapping up the data collection in December and working to prepare the findings report for a January or February presentation. Not only was that aggressive timeline not feasible due to the attention necessary for preparing the FY23 budget proposal, but the additional time allowed me to continue reflection through some significant events in our community during that time. The return to school following the winter break was incredibly challenging due to the increased surge of COVID cases impacting the district and the growing strain it was putting on students, staff and families. Varying opinions

regarding the district's mask requirement and physical distancing expectations only grew during this time. More significantly, two different racially charged events happened within the district causing great concern about the urgency with which our anti-racist commitment was developing.

The debate around mask requirements and other COVID mitigation strategies developed quickly this school year. The stream of email communication from families in support as well as those against mitigation strategies remained relatively consistent. Spending regular time visiting schools helped me understand the different challenges and opportunities that each of our buildings had in terms of available space for mask breaks, snacks and lunches. Observing students at all grade levels also presented valuable information as to how successful they were following the mask requirement. It also provided very specific examples of how much an obstacle the masks could be for communication throughout the school day.

Emerging Themes

The three most significant themes emerging from the data revolved around the tremendous pride people have in the staff and students, transparency and communication in the budget process and our commitment to equity and social emotional learning. Challenges in the future tended to include concerns about the budget and transparency in the process while barriers and obstacles or responses to how WPS has grown through the COVID pandemic included concerns about equity and or the social emotional impact the pandemic has magnified.

Individuals consistently expressed how proud they are to be a part of our school community. Staff praised their colleagues and their ability to collaborate with such caring, well-trained professionals. Families repeatedly shared how grateful they were for the commitment of our staff and the care and attention they give to developing positive relationships. Both staff and families commented on the pride students exhibit in their work and how much students enjoy coming to school. The district's focus on prioritizing students' social emotional well-being as well as that of the staff was highlighted with a sense of pride even when acknowledging that there is more work to do as we recover from the impacts of the pandemic. It was clear that there is tremendous pride in the people who make up the district.

Transparency around the development of the FY23 budget was identified as an early priority based on even initial entry investigation. In conversations with the Town Manager, members of the Select Board and members of the Finance Committee, multiple references to the importance of open communication and transparency and the desire to collaborate as partners were made. Out of the School Committee Summer Retreat, we established the importance of regular ongoing meetings with the SC Finance Subcommittee. Those meetings have been effective in exhibiting increased transparency as well as facilitating stronger communication both in the development of the FY23 budget but in the exploration of the possibility of finally bringing full day tuition free kindergarten to Westford Public Schools.

The priority of establishing tuition free full day kindergarten in Westford has been on the radar for a long time. The unique opportunity of having access to federal funds through the ESSER III grant allowed us to think creatively to develop a plan that could have significant change to the foundation of our school system providing equitable access to full day kindergarten for all of our families.

Feedback during the entry process helped to encourage early communication regarding the development of the FY23 budget with both our town partners and our SC Finance Subcommittee. The original analysis of the FY22 budget indicated a deficit for FY23 due to the use of one time use funds utilized to close just over a half a million dollar gap in the FY22 budget. We communicated this concern early as we were in the process of developing the FY23 budget request. By working with both our Town Manager and the Town Director of Finance in early December, we were able to communicate our initial projections and exhibit our commitment to analyzing our enrollment and basing our budget request on our current student numbers. Additionally, we shared regular updates with our SC Finance Subcommittee and even presented an initial budget update as to work we were doing to the entire School Committee in December before presenting our first budget proposal in January. The result of the previous consistent communication was our ability to both secure an increased allotment from the town as well as identify additional cost saving measures in our budget proposal.

In addition to the overall commitment to belonging, one of the emerging themes from the entry process was recognizing that for such a high performing district, there were concerns about equity of resources and programs between buildings. While resources tended to be equally distributed especially within the general education structure, they did not always provide equitable support or circumstances. The growing needs of students in one school were different from the needs of students in the same grade level at a different school. Westford has a robust Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), but there have been disparities in how the support is communicated and or how the support is utilized. Additionally, the differences in the Integrated Arts offerings and the grade level team configurations in terms of Project Based Learning strategies at the two middle schools were identified. The differences have not impacted student academic performance but have at times impacted the overall student experience. While the different environments and personalities of our district schools are a tremendous strength and benefit in helping to foster creativity and belonging in each school, we recognize a need to prioritize comparable joy throughout the district. Conversations, activities, humor might be different based on the varying characteristics of human interaction that exists in all of our classrooms, but students and staff need to be able to expect a similar sense of joy when engaging in purposeful, meaningful learning throughout their experience in Westford Public Schools. As a school system, with children as our primary clients, we should always remember the importance of joy in learning.

Establishing specific leadership within the realm of our district's equity work was also highlighted. While developing the FY23 budget, we were able to reimagine the structure of our

district leadership team. The ultimate responsibility for all equity work remains with the superintendent of schools. However, by ensuring that a dedicated equity focus is used to lead all of our curriculum and instruction, Westford Public Schools will center this critical component where it will impact students and staff the most; as mentioned earlier, the most significant work we do as a district: teaching and learning. The development of the new Director of Equity, Curriculum and Instruction position moves us forward in our commitment to equity.

Next Steps

We are now positioned to begin the process of building its next Strategic District Improvement Plan (SDIP). The previous strategic plan followed an earlier template of higher-level vision development and articulation with less measurable action items. The current model presented to districts focuses more closely on shorter term actionable goals. Rather than a five-to-ten-year plan, districts are encouraged to create three-year plans with specific goals that can directly support and guide the individual School Improvement Plans (SIPs) which must be developed each year. The templates are more similar and provide teachers and administrators a process in which their professional growth and student learning goals can all be connected through the SIPs to the overall SDIP.

Successful development of the SDIP requires the establishment of a dedicated advisory group that is reflective of the stakeholders across the district. The members should include representatives from the School Committee, district and building leadership, School Advisory Councils, Special Education Parent Advisory Council, English Learner Parent Advisory Council, Parent Teacher Organizations, Westford Educators Association, various student voices, as well as representation from the Westford community at large. This process will include a schedule that allows maximum participation. The advisory group will collaborate to identify specific priority focus areas for the SDIP. The feedback and input provided will help to further guide the district leadership team's development of the measurable goals, Theory of Action, as well as the overall action plan that will lead the district through the next three years.

The next Strategic District Improvement Plan will be presented to the entire School Committee for review and approval during the 2022-2023 school year. This process will allow the building principals to develop their respective School Improvement Plans for the 2023-2024 school year during the spring of 2023. The previous district timeline did not follow this pattern which unfortunately prohibited educators from using the school goals to guide their individual goals as the annual School Improvement Plans were not approved until mid-fall after the educator goals were established.