



NORWOOD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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To: School Committee
From: David L. Thomson, Ed.D.
Re: Entry Plan Report
Date: May 7, 2018

Introduction

Over the past ten months, I have strived to learn as much as possible about the needs, strengths, and challenges facing the Norwood Public Schools. In this endeavor, I have conducted formal interviews, informal observations, as well as examining data in the form of fiscal records and student achievement data. Through my interactions with staff, students, parents, community members, town leadership, and the school committee, I have been witness to multiple perspectives on the Norwood Public Schools.

Through this study, I have been able to identify both areas of strength and well as areas of need. These observations are the result of triangulating multiple perspectives and identifying themes that emerged through the many conversations, observations, interviews, and examination of data. My expectation is that this report will serve as a springboard for continuing work in developing an improvement strategy and plan.

Observations

I have been fortunate to receive a very warm welcome from the community, the teachers, administrators, and town leaders since my introduction early last spring. When I first toured our schools last spring I was consistently impressed with the dedication and passion exhibited by the staff in the Norwood Public Schools. There is a level of ownership that is genuine and something I have only observed in one other educational institution, and thus a rare commodity. This passion for the work and obvious caring for their students is a key ingredient not only to the quality of the Norwood Public Schools, but also the impetus for its continued improvement.

I have observed that:

The faculty and staff are talented, dedicated, and caring individuals who will work tirelessly to improve their students' education. In the areas of elementary mathematics and science new materials, coaching, and consistent professional development have lead to significant improvements in student learning. I have observed teachers maximizing their opportunities to sharpen their craft and positively affect student outcomes.

The Norwood community takes great pride in its schools and the overall quality of their town as a whole. There is a strong desire to improve the schools and an understanding that consistent leadership is key to continual improvement. The parent teacher organizations are extremely active and dedicated to supporting the schools and offering programs and financial support for our schools and students.

The administrative team is talented, experienced and focused on supporting all aspects of the school system. The entire administrative team works collaboratively to maximize student growth opportunities.

The Technology department is both knowledgeable, visionary, and effective training partners. The staff especially appreciates their effort in professional development and technical assistance.

I have also learned that there are also opportunities and challenges facing the Norwood Public Schools. These opportunities and challenges will be presented in three broad themes;

- Budget and Resources
- Currency and Consistency in the Curriculum
- Uniformity of Research Based Instructional Practice

Budget and Resources

The Norwood Public Schools are at a crossroads in terms of securing adequate funding to support growth and improvement in the district. The fact that funding from multiple sources has not kept pace with the increasing demands is not new. However, we need to understand the impact the lack of adequate funding has had on the overall programing and service delivery to all of our students.

There is a critical need for the construction of a new middle school in the district. The building study committee has completed a comprehensive study of the district's current building facilities and future structural needs. This effort determined that the most pressing need is to replace the Coakley Middle School with a new school that will provide a modern learning environment and address the many structural

issues with the current building. To this end, the district has already submitted a statement of interest to the Massachusetts School Building Authority for consideration in gaining state assistance in building a new middle school.

While we have many beautiful and well-maintained buildings, they are older and our budget constraints have reduced our ability to continue maintaining these structures.

The lack of funding has affected our curriculum by delaying needed revisions and improvements as well as limiting the expansion of course offerings at the secondary level. Furthermore, staffing reductions have resulted in less collaborative time of our staff and enrichment opportunities for our students.

Teaching staff has been reduced over the past five years as a result of limited resources. Often the overall full time equivalents have increased, however this is due to a combination of positions no longer being funded by grants (Full day Kindergarten grant) and the increase in mandated needs in special education and most recently an increase in our English language learner populations. Furthermore, this trend is evident by the limited advanced placement options at the high school, inadequate counselors at the elementary level, and stretched staffing throughout the district.

Our Parent Teacher Organizations/ Associations, booster organizations, and the Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC) work especially hard to raise funds to add programming and support the work of the school system. While much of this support has gone towards expanding educational opportunities and programs, the PTOs and boosters have also provided budget relief. One example is the purchasing of mulch for the school playgrounds, purchasing software licenses, classroom educational subscriptions, as well as providing transportation for our fine arts programming.

Federal grants continue to be reduced and in many cases are eliminated. This combined with limited increases in state funding has increased the pressure on the town of Norwood to fill these funding gaps.

Despite these fiscal challenges, the town government has been as supportive as possible maximizing the limited funds available to assist the school district.

Currency and Consistency in the Curriculum

Three years ago, a concerted effort was made to adopt and support a new math curriculum at the elementary level. This effort, with extensive professional development, and the addition of a math coordinator serving as a coach, has reaped

significant results. This effort illustrates what is possible in the Norwood Public Schools with funding; professional development, teacher empowerment, and support, combined to maximize the instructional process.

Two elementary science specialists have provided Grades 1-5 teachers with professional development to assist in the implementation of drastically new Science standards. The results again demonstrates the commitment of the faculty and administration to developing and supporting impactful curriculum. Furthermore, this effort will need to be supported for the next several years.

Conversely, due to limited resources, the elementary English Language Arts curriculum has not been updated for many years. As the Massachusetts's Frameworks have changed, the curriculum, materials, and instructional approach have not kept pace. This is especially evident in the multiple methods used in writing instruction throughout the district especially at the elementary level. The inability to revisit and refresh this curriculum area has led to inconsistency. A rededication to the investment of curriculum resources and staff training is greatly needed in the district.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is an area where skills in self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relational skills, and responsible decision-making are specifically taught. The district has completed some training in this area, but due to fiscal constraints has not been able to continue to expand training in this important area. Next year we will be working to set the groundwork in SEL; however, financial support will still be needed in the near future to provide more intense training and resources.

Although the MCAS tests represent only a portion of what ultimately makes a student successful, there is concern in some areas that our scores seem to have plateaued or peaked. The districts' experience in both Math and Science indicate that combined with the dedication of the NPS staff as well as resources in the form of curriculum and professional development, improvement can and has occurred. The district must work to replicate this model throughout the district.

Uniformity of Research Based Instructional Practice

Throughout the district, teachers are focused on their students and provide a stable learning environment. There is a strong commitment by teachers to meet the needs of our students.

Recent work in math and science professional development at the Elementary level has resulted in instructional gains in the classroom. Teachers are dedicated to providing research based instructional practices and student gains are obvious.

The middle school has previously worked to incorporate instructional practices that maximize student learning and these are incorporated throughout the school.

However, at the high school and middle school levels, there is a general need to increase a uniform approach for using research based instructional strategies in the classroom to increase student engagement and students' individual responsibility for learning.

The lack of financial resources has led to inconsistent implementation and focus of instructional strategies and instructional approaches. Furthermore, a focus on project based learning, interdisciplinary projects, and authentic assessment practices should become the norm. The gains made are a result of individual effort and cobbling together free resources. Although credit should be given for these efforts, improvement based in this fiscal reality is difficult to coordinate, remain consistent, and sustain.

Again, the evidence is strong that where the district has provided resources, training, and coaching, our dedicated teaching staff incorporates these methods to the benefit of our students.

Essential Questions for the Norwood Public Schools

How will the town of Norwood work to address the revenue shortfall and structural deficit affecting both the general government and school department?

How will the town address the facility needs of the school district starting with the middle school?

How will the district work to ensure exemplary updated curriculum is consistently implemented with fidelity throughout the district?

What mechanisms can be used to establish a universal vision for instructional methodology and higher-level student work and outcomes?

How will social emotional learning be incorporated into the district's everyday instruction leading to better student mental health and ability to learn?

How will the district provide continued professional development resources and expertise to continue growth in instruction, curriculum, authentic assessments, and improved student outcomes?

Next Steps

The Norwood Public Schools has many strengths, the most important being the talented and dedicated staff working in our schools. To maximize these strengths, the resources must be realized to move the district forward in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and facilities. It is obvious from my study of the district that the talent and resolve is present for the continued growth and development to move the district in a positive direction. These findings should serve as a foundation for further discussion and debates in the development of long-term goals and action steps.

Over the coming months, I will be working with a committee to create a long-term strategic plan to reach these goals. This strategic plan, with objectives, will be focused on improving the district, overall, as well as our student outcomes. I look forward to working closely with the School Committee, administrative team, teachers, support staff, parents, students, and community leaders to collaboratively develop a new strategic plan for the Norwood Public Schools.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David L. Thomson, Ed. D." The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

David L. Thomson, Ed. D.
Superintendent of Schools