

To: Members of the Board of Education
From: Dr. Laurie Heinz
Date: March 23, 2015
Re: CEC System Assessment Overview Findings

Background

As you know, we hired the Consortium for Educational Change to conduct an external audit of District 64 with an emphasis on learning, collaboration, and results. A 29-member team worked in District from February 3-5.

I am a firm believer in continuous improvement. I have repeatedly stated: “While we may be good or even really good - we can always get better.” It is because of this strongly held belief that I engaged an external organization to help us identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement within District 64 through conducting an audit. This District-level process -- called a “System Overview Assessment” -- is an opportunity to benchmark our District against effective practices of other “high performing” districts.

This decision came at a critical time -- new leadership, the crafting of our new Strategic Plan: Vision 2020, the creation of a new Health Life Safety Study/Master Facilities Plan, and updated financial projections to guide the allocation of resources to match our future needs. My goal has always been to honor the past, while visioning for the future of District 64.

Our Partner for the Audit: Consortium for Educational Change

The organization we chose to conduct this audit is the Consortium for Educational Change. Their mission is to build collaborative structures, processes and cultures among key stakeholders to transform educational systems to continuously improve student learning and achievement. The CEC utilizes a framework built around the Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, which is our nation's public-private partnership dedicated to performance quality. CEC is steeped in this quality improvement mindset, and also embraces the Professional Learning Community model. In PLC's, educators focus on learning rather than on teaching, work collaboratively with one another, and hold themselves and one another accountable for meeting the needs of children through increased learning and results. With this combined emphasis on Baldrige quality standards and professional learning communities, we believe CEC was the right partner for our audit.

To prepare for the visit, District 64 conducted an organizational self-study to reflect on where we are in the implementation process as it relates to the use of research-based best practices. The self-study involved responding to key questions and providing evidence in three key areas: learning, collaboration, and results. The self-study drafts were shared with District and building

administrators, members of the special education department, District curriculum facilitators and instructional technology coaches before being submitted for the audit.

On February 3, 4 & 5, the CEC team visited District 64 to review our self-study materials and evidence, and interview stakeholders. The 29-member team was comprised of members from other CEC districts and schools that are committed to the continuous improvement model and operating at peak performance.

During its visit, the CEC team fanned out to visit all eight of our schools, interviewing students, teachers and parents -- almost 1,000 stakeholders in all -- to evaluate how accurate the self-study reflected current practice throughout the District around the three key indicators.

Sharing the Audit Findings

The CEC audit focused on three areas: learning, collaboration and results. Based on set criteria in each area, the CEC identified strengths and opportunities for improvement. The report also suggests some next steps, which are framed by the professional experiences, criteria and opinions of the assessment team members.

These findings are being shared in many ways with our community:

- At the conclusion of its visit, the CEC team leader immediately provided an oral report to our administrative team, which was videotaped to share with our staff members within 24 hours of it being delivered in public.
- On March 4, the CEC's team leader met with our administrative group to review the findings.
- A series of four podcasts (Overview and three focus areas) will be available for all staff, parents, and community members for further reflection and conversation on Tuesday, March 24.
- Staff viewed the System Overview podcast #1 on Wednesday, March 18 as part of District-led Staff Development.
- The Board of Education at its regular meeting on March 23 will review the CEC report.
- The report will be shared with the Strategic Planning Steering Committee at its March 26 meeting as it works this spring to create our Vision 2020.

Broad Themes for Conversations Moving Forward

Keep in mind that District 64 has not previously adopted a continuous improvement mindset. Therefore, we view the CEC report as a launching pad to many conversations about what we stand for and where we strive to be over the next five years.

Because the continuous improvement framework is a “growth” mindset, CEC has NOT provided a list of things that need to be “fixed.” Rather the feedback is a guide to the areas that are the critical levers for improvement.

Here are the compelling, broad themes that we believe will inspire important conversations going forward:

- The CEC team observed that the District appears to be more a “system of schools” than a “school system.” As a result, there is a need for the District to determine: “What do we guarantee will happen in every school, in every classroom?” and working to standardize those beliefs across the District.
- In this same vein, CEC pointed out that autonomy is valued at the school level. However, there must be clear expectations for what everyone is to know and do across the system, before letting the uniqueness of each school use its own creativity and autonomy to implement those District-wide expectations with fidelity. District committees will continue to develop the “what” to be learned, while encouraging teacher creativity and autonomy to deliver the “how”.
- The CEC team noted that more can be done to develop a culture of trust and respect among labor and management, or in other words teachers and administrators, to improve communication, collaboration, shared decision-making and continuous improvement.
- In addition, CEC encouraged bolstering our efforts to provide a culture where data about student performance is viewed as a “critical friend” to assess what is working and what needs attention. In this culture, staff would be comfortable progress monitoring and reporting results of these expectations.
- CEC noted that there are inconsistencies in our efforts to hold high expectations for all children and in providing equal access to learning opportunities for students at all learning levels, from special education through the Channels of Challenge program. As CEC observed, however, it can be difficult within the current schedules -- at both our elementary and middle schools -- to provide additional time and support for students who are struggling, especially in reading and mathematics.
- CEC also affirmed what we ourselves know, namely that people are our greatest resource. School environments are welcoming, warm, caring, and generally collegial. There appears to be a strong sense of “family” and “community.”

The CEC report is just the start of looking at our District through a new lens - a lens of continuous improvement. Many groups will use this data to inform our Vision 2020 plan, such as the Strategic Planning Steering Committee, Mastery Learning Committee, District Coaches and Facilitators, Administrative Council, and others.

I look forward to discussing these key-themes with the Board on Monday evening.