

Superintendent's Report of Entry Findings to the Franklin School Committee

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In their voice: Franklin Public Schools students each shared a word that describes their school.

The most frequent words appear larger in the word cloud above.

My priority as the new Superintendent of Schools in Franklin has been to systematically come to learn as much as possible about the district -- the core values that guide behavior, the strengths of the district, and opportunities for growth. Additionally, I have examined the structures and resources that enable us to pursue our collective goals.

I have spent the past six months engaged in a process of gathering data in order to uncover themes and patterns that emerge as indicative of Franklin Public Schools. This report, foreshadowed in the Superintendent's Entry Plan last August, is a synthesis of information gathered from observations of schools and classrooms; conversations with individual stakeholders, forums, and focus groups; and a review of key documents and data.

I am pleased to present this report of findings to the Franklin School Committee and school community. The findings presented here have been initially reviewed for accuracy with the Central Office Leadership Team and, more recently, the Administrative Leadership Team of the district. These findings do not propose solutions; the findings presented here are Big Ideas (themes and patterns) for us to continue to explore more deeply. Within each area, I raise Essential Questions to guide further investigation in order to collectively develop a district-wide strategy over the coming months which will shape future district-wide goals.

Background

Data Collection

Over the fall semester, I visited each school building for the purpose of observing teaching and learning in classrooms and at student events and activities. I visited all 11 buildings multiple times, including 164 classrooms and workspaces. Additionally, I attended selected extracurricular events and activities including athletics, student activities, and the fine and performing arts. I attended professional development experiences across the district as well as building leadership and curriculum committee meetings.

I conducted individual/small group conversations with School Committee members, building principals, central office administrators, union leadership, members of Town Council, the town administrators, town department heads, leaders of local schools, the Police Chief, School Resource Officers, the Fire Chief, clergy, and the media.

I held open forums for educators, parents/guardians, and community members. I gathered focus groups of students from ten of our schools (I did not conduct a focus group with ECDC students).

In order to engage the broader community, I visited local community organizations, including the Senior Center, Office of Veterans' Affairs, the Franklin Food Pantry, and the YMCA.

I reviewed key documents and data, including but not limited to:

I. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

e.g. Previous district and school improvement plans, accreditation reports, curriculum documents, assessment results, social-emotional learning indicators, specialized services for special education and English language learners, student publications

II. Management and Operations

e.g. Previous budget documents and capital requests, class size reports and enrollment projections, facility studies, grants, organizational charts, School Committee Policy Manual, Student Handbooks

III. Family and Community Engagement

e.g. FPS publications, school and community social media, school and district websites, volunteer handbook, local blogs, and newspaper articles

IV. Professional Culture

e.g. Collaborative Bargaining Agreements, Human Resources documents, Educator Evaluation process and outcomes, job descriptions, Mentoring and Induction Program, Staff Handbooks, Professional Development Plan

Observations

Core Values

Core values provide the foundation that governs behavior across an organization. Leaders rely on core values for decision-making, particularly when those decisions are challenging ones. Within Franklin Public Schools, there is a palpable commitment to school-based core values. For example, within my conversations with students, children could recite the core values of their school and many students

selected words (e.g. caring, respect) that coincided with or actually represented their school's values (e.g. REMDAWG and CIRCLE).

The use of core values to guide decision-making and behavior is a goal within the current District Improvement Plan. However, the district's stated core values do not have the same level of vibrancy as the school-based values. The leadership team has begun the process of exploring the core values of themselves individually as leaders and then collectively as a leadership team for the district. The current core values of the district were developed during the last strategic plan many years ago.

Essential Questions:

What are the district-wide core values that govern the Franklin Public Schools?

How can the district leverage core values in order to strengthen an overall sense of community and interdependence among various parts?

School Committee and Superintendent Relationships

The Franklin School Committee provides leadership to the district in terms of budget, policy, collective bargaining, and supervision and evaluation of the Superintendent of Schools. The committee is elected on a bi-annual basis, with all seven seats up for election every other November. It is a very new committee based on recent bi-annual election, with three new committee members, and a new School Committee Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson. There are several new subcommittees and liaison positions including the Public Schools Advocacy Subcommittee, the Ad Hoc Superintendent Evaluation Subcommittee, the MASC liaison, and the soon to be established School Start Times Advisory Committee to the School Committee.

Beginning in the summer of 2017, the School Committee has been actively working on its management, operations, and relationships through workshops together and with me as the new Superintendent of Schools. The Policy Subcommittee has also been reviewing and updating the Board Governance and Operations Policies (Section B within the policy manual). From my conversation with members and the actions taken at meetings, I have gleaned that the School Committee is eager to set a long-term strategy for the district, examine student-related policies such as homework and school start times, and are concerned with advocating for financial stability for future school budgets.

Essential Questions:

In what sustained activities can the School Committee and Superintendent engage to continue to develop a positive, collaborative approach within their respective areas of responsibility?

District Leadership

The leadership of the district is represented by a 37 person administrative team (the A-team), comprised of central office administrators, building principals, and assistant principals. The high school Athletic Director and Food Service Director often participate as members of this team. Many of the team's members are relatively new to their roles; twenty-eight (28) are within their first three years of their current role, although they may have more years of experience as administrators in differing roles within

Franklin or in other districts. The team members that have more longevity in their positions tend to be those who are in central office.

The team considers themselves to be cohesive; they take pride in having come together to develop a unified message about inclusivity. They are embracing the development of district-wide core values during leadership team meetings. The team operates from a strong set of norms that guide behavior both within team meetings and within individual interactions. There is a feeling of enthusiasm and excitement about working together.

Leadership team members, as well as other stakeholders across the district, have inquired about the structure and roles of the current leadership team, pointing out that there are leadership positions that exist in other districts that may help the team to accomplish district and school initiatives.

Essential Questions:

What strategies and activities would support the administrative leadership team to:

- *engage in more team development?*
- *grow within their professional roles?*
- *serve to retain school leaders?*
- *serve to recruit school leaders from within Franklin and outside of the district?*

What leadership positions might we consider when thinking about pursuing the collective achievement of our district and school goals?

Strengths of the District

Stakeholders from across the district repeatedly praised the dedication of the faculty and staff of Franklin Public Schools. Community members recognized and cited the commitment of educators to go “above and beyond” in order to support students. This sentiment speaks to a strong set of relationships among community members: parents, administrators, Union leadership, educators, and town officials.

The building facilities for the Franklin Public Schools are new and/or are well-maintained by the Facilities Department. Furthermore, the schools are currently well-equipped with technology infrastructure (wireless) and Chromebook devices for students and laptops for teachers. Funding through the capital budget is allocated to continue to support both facility needs and technology across the schools, although funding 1:1 devices for students will not be sustainable under the current model.

Franklin Public Schools experiences a culture of high expectations and internal accountability. The district has an action-orientation and people within the district follow through on what they say they will do. For example, the district has committed to several important instructional strategies and has expectations that educators will use these in the classroom. As a result, there is a commitment to sustained professional development in the areas of Keys to Literacy, Responsive Classroom, Zones of Regulation, workshop models of instruction, and STEMScopes (among others). Within these areas, there is remarkable consistency across classrooms across the district. Educators value the professional development they receive and actively strive to implement learned strategies within their classrooms.

Furthermore, Franklin Public Schools operates curriculum committees, comprised of educators from across the district, to support the review of curriculum against the MA curriculum and relevant frameworks, and to implement changes within the classroom. Current committees include Digital Learning, Science/Technology Education, and Social-Emotional Learning. The impact of the curriculum committees is evident through professional development and observations of educator practice.

Educators (administrators and teachers alike) across the district have committed considerable attention to educator effectiveness including educator evaluation and human resources. Franklin led the way within Massachusetts as an early adopting community. Administrators have invested considerable time in calibrating evaluations and the system is followed with fidelity. There is good communication among administrators and union leadership about the educator evaluation process and the system has improved over time as a result of feedback and collaboration. Processes are in place to recruit, retain, and support highly effective educators. These systems are focused on high quality instruction in Franklin classrooms.

Franklin Public Schools has a focus on inclusivity (esp. Best Buddies, Unified sports teams, A World of Difference™, professional development around Civil Rights) and continues to focus in this area. This value emerges as a core value across the school community as evidenced as one of the common words students ascribe to their school.

Stakeholders praised the special education services in Franklin, including the communication and relationships they feel exist. Franklin Public Schools hosts a variety of in-district programs designed to serve cohorts of students with specific areas of disability. These include STRIVE, GOALS, REACH, and IDEAS. The Special Education Department continually considers opportunities to develop in-district programs as a means of serving students within their hometown, when possible and appropriate.

The district is committed to the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) skills of all students and has a strong, universal (tier 1) curriculum for students. SEL practices are reinforced through Responsive Classroom, which is currently implemented in grades K-6 and is expanding to grades 7 and 8 in 2017-18 and 2018-19. Advisory programs are established at both the middle school and high school and students cited these programs as very important and valuable.

Franklin Public Schools students have many opportunities to explore learning beyond the traditional school day. The middle and high schools all operate large number of diverse and thriving after school clubs and activities. A late bus facilitates student participation. Furthermore, the district's Lifelong Learning program operates enrichment opportunities for students as extended day programs, short courses during vacation periods, and summer enrichment opportunities. Lifelong Learning also offers educational programs for community members, serving to strengthen the relationship between the schools and the community.

Parents are very supportive of the Franklin Public Schools. There is good communication among the schools and parents. Although there is some variability across schools, the Parent Communication Councils are vibrant entities which support student enrichment opportunities and curriculum-related field

trips. Furthering relationships and communication district-wide, a joint PCC committee meets monthly with the Superintendent, School Committee liaisons, and central office team members. Additionally, the Franklin Education Foundation supports innovative grants that educators propose, providing start up funding for some of the districts most successful programs (e.g. Ukeleles, Empty Bowls). Many stakeholders across the district have expressed the desire for additional parent education opportunities.

Essential Questions:

How can we preserve, protect, and maintain momentum in areas of strength for the district?

How can we develop sustainable funding for our instructional technology needs in the future?

What parent engagement activities can deepen parents' involvement as partners in student learning and in extending the learning experiences into the home?

Opportunities and Challenges

In addition to the many strengths (the above narrative was not exhaustive, but represented major themes and patterns), opportunities and challenges also emerged. These opportunities, in many ways, reflect efforts and goals, which are already under way. In other ways, these are as yet unrealized opportunities for Franklin Public Schools. Either way, all data sources -- observations, data/document review, and stakeholder perceptions -- support the following areas as opportunities and challenges:

- Contemporary Teaching and Learning in the 21st Century
- Continuity of Services
- Consistency Framework
- Financial and Enrollment Challenges

Contemporary Teaching and Learning

The curriculum maps of Franklin Public Schools are deeply rooted in the MA curriculum frameworks and other relevant learning standards. The curriculum is framed around Essential Questions and there is an opportunity to extend the Understanding by Design curriculum development model to include a focus Enduring Understandings within the curriculum in order to highlight the most important learning concepts with rigor and relevance that students will need in the future. Most content is taught in traditional instructional content areas (e.g. ELA, mathematics, science, social studies) and interdisciplinary opportunities exist, although programs such as the Franklin Arts Academy at FHS merge this.

Stakeholders lamented the loss of several instructional programs including World Languages and instrumental music at the elementary level. Stakeholders also pointed out other missed opportunities including global educational opportunities and the need to develop students' financial literacy. Personalized learning approaches are in place through the workshop model of instruction and unique opportunities for advanced students at the middle schools. Additionally, students spoke very highly of

opportunities they have to exercise choice and leverage their interests in their learning experiences. Expanding and deepening these opportunities, particularly with the use of technology, will serve the students well for the future.

Social-emotional learning is a major focus of the district and the SEL Curriculum Committee has adopted the Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning Framework. This framework contains three approaches to teaching SEL skills: direct instruction, instructional practices, and teaching SEL through academic content. While the district has many strategies in place for direct instruction and instructional practices, there are further opportunities to blend SEL within academic content to support the development of SEL skills across the entire curriculum.

While the district is well-equipped with technology and many educators are using technology in their practice to further student learning, there is an opportunity to deepen a cohesive vision and strategy for teaching and learning with technology across the district. The Digital Literacy Curriculum Committee has begun this work with the Students' Bill of Rights and a new Digital Literacy curriculum which is aligned to the new MA frameworks within this content area. During my research, questions and opportunities emerged about the ability to support its implementation within classrooms and the need for more support for teachers with technology integration. Stakeholders also spoke of missed opportunities with respect to a STEM/coding curriculum, particularly at the younger grades. Furthermore, with technology changing with lightning speed, Franklin Public Schools educators need to be able to adapt to the ever evolving technology landscape.

Additionally, stakeholders identified a missed opportunity when learning spaces are confined to classrooms. Stakeholders, observations, and review of documentation identified opportunities to expose students to emerging technologies, develop new literacies, and engage socially through library/media centers.

Essential Questions:

How can we strengthen our curriculum, assessment, and instruction to ensure that it is designed to meet students' needs for their futures and reflect modern, contemporary educational issues?

How can we expand offerings to students so that we ensure that students are exposed to a broad variety of curriculum areas, including new literacies such as digital literacy, media literacy, and coding?

How can we expand opportunities for students to exercise choice within the curriculum? Where might we be able to build in opportunities for students to build upon their interests?

How can we connect and strengthen the academic curriculum of Franklin Public Schools with the social-emotional curriculum?

How can we provide students with modern learning environments that reflect the impact technology has on our world today?

Continuity of Services

The Franklin Public Schools has been working to advance Social-Emotional Learning skill development as well as advance academic learning among students. Students vary widely with skill development in a variety of areas and many districts are moving toward a greater continuum of services through a Multi-tiered System of Support, which creates a more flexible continuum of services within the skill areas of greatest need for them individually. Absent a Multi-tiered System of Supports, there are indications in Franklin that general education and special education are often operating as separate entities rather than part of a larger continuum of student learning within one public school district. There is a demonstrated need (based on student learning data, indicators of social-emotional skills, and feedback from stakeholders) for additional “tier 2” services to support students who require additional support, but do not necessarily require modified instruction, per an Individualized Education Plan through special education.

Historically, special educators in Franklin have experienced professional development opportunities separate from their general education peers, yet a co-teaching model is employed across classrooms. In the 2017-18 school year, educators across the district experienced the same professional development with Jessica Minahan about responding to students with challenging behaviors. This was met with excellent feedback from general and special educators alike. Additionally, special educators experienced professional development on Executive Functioning on the second professional development day, and the feedback from that day included a wish that general educators could have attended. When content specific professional development is provided, special educators are not always able to attend.

From a curriculum standpoint, preschool representation is often missing from the curriculum committees. The preschool educators have expressed an interest and a desire to be more included in curriculum development, further extending the idea of a learning continuum -- one that extends from Preschool to graduation.

Essential Questions:

How can we create a more seamless continuum of services for students in order to support their academic and social-emotional needs?

How can we create experiences to foster greater connection between general education and special education educators?

How can we foster greater continuity between our preschool and elementary schools?

Consistency Framework

Collaboration occurs regularly among the leaders of buildings across the developmental levels. My research from observations, conversations, and document review also demonstrate that consistency across the district is an area for further exploration.

In many ways, there is great consistency and collaboration across schools, particularly across the same level (e.g. elementary, middle), which manifests most notably in observable, instructional practices. Conversely, concerns abound about inequities within and across buildings including communication, homework, inequitable learning experiences (e.g. field trips, instructional resources), curricular units of study, and some cultural experiences. In some places, perceptions about consistency among different groups of stakeholders do not align.

Some of this work is underway. The district's Homework Committee has begun the process of examining a framework to articulate common expectations around best practices for homework across a developmental continuum, while leaving educators room to exercise their professional judgement based on their knowledge of the needs of the students in front of them. The high school has been engaging in a deep and meaningful conversation about grading practices and is exploring new methods with pilot teachers in an effort to generate a more consistent set of practices within what research shows to be effective. Furthermore, there are ongoing discussions with PCCs about the field trips students experience in an effort to make sure that all students are exposed to the same learning opportunities.

Within neighborhood schools, differences are to be expected; each school has its own culture, student population, history, traditions, unique facilities, personnel, and other factors. On the other hand, all students should be experiencing the same opportunities to learn and the same guaranteed student learning outcomes, based on the state standards. Clarity and communication about what ought to be consistent and what ought to be within the realm of each individual school, grade level, or teacher's practice would be a helpful foundation around which to examine current practices.

Essential Questions:

How can the district articulate what ought to be consistent across classrooms, grade levels, and schools and what can be flexible depending upon the local environment?

How can we foster equity across classrooms, grade levels, and schools while retaining a balance that honors and values the individual culture, tradition, and people of each individual school?

Budget and Enrollment Challenges

The five-year fiscal forecast, a report written by the Town Administrator in 2017 forecasting FY18 through FY22, for the Town of Franklin highlights numerous financial challenges looming for both the town and the schools. The school department has been spending down its revolving accounts (e.g. Circuit Breaker, athletic revolving, transportation revolving, remaining school choice funds) in order to meet operating budget requirements. This strategy helped in previous years but will be unsustainable going forward as in FY18 the district has budgeted use of \$6 Million in revolving funds, \$3 million of which are non-recurring. While it is very early to know the details of the FY19 budget, there is an anticipated gap in revolving fund revenue that can not be relied upon in developing the operating budget for FY19.

The Franklin Public Schools, like many Massachusetts districts, is experiencing an enrollment decline, which began after the 2008-2009 school year, when the district was at its peak of 6196 students (Source:

NESDEC Enrollment Projections Report). The current enrollment for FPS is 5330 and is predicted to drop to 5180 next year (Source: NESDEC Enrollment Projections Report); due to the birth rate, NESDEC predicts a continued decrease in enrollment. A decrease in enrollment has not been felt universally across schools, however, at the current time. Enrollment at Franklin High school is at a peak, increasing in 2014 after the new high school was built, with nearly 1800 students and high class sizes. It is predicted to remain near 1780 for four years, after which a decline is predicted.

Despite decreased enrollment, there are 850 projected new housing units across town. These include 2 and 3 bedroom apartments, 2 and 3 bedroom condominiums, and single family homes. While the student population among these units is uncertain, enrollment projections may be estimated to yield approximately 100 students within the single family homes, with additional students living in the apartment and condominiums, which is harder to predict.

An additional variable potentially affecting enrollment is the proposed expansion of the Benjamin Franklin Classical Charter school. The school seeks to expand and projects completion of a new building in the 2019-2020 school year. The student population of the school will increase from 450 to 900 over five years and the capacity for students at each grade will increase from 50 to 92. This expansion may further affect enrollment at Franklin Public Schools.

Essential Questions:

What forecasting can the district complete to predict future enrollment trends?

Considering the fiscal climate, how can we further our school and district improvement efforts in an efficient and fiscally responsible manner?

Next Steps

The Franklin Public Schools has many strengths, which are most evident in the talented and invested students, supportive families, and the committed and dedicated faculty and staff. There are many highlights and strengths upon which to build including educator effectiveness, curriculum development, professional development, high expectations and internal accountability, and sound facilities and technology infrastructure. By many measures, Franklin is a high-performing district. But Franklin is also a district interested in continuous improvement.

Over the next several months, I will be engaging the School Committee and the Administrative Team in the development of a district-wide improvement strategy that will outline strategic objectives and key initiatives to meet them. This process will begin this spring with the further development and exploration of district-wide core values. Strategy development will continue throughout the spring, by more deeply exploring the themes from the entry findings, with a draft strategy being completed by the time school ends in June. The Administrative Team will spend the summer retreat refining the District-wide strategy, bringing it back to the School Committee for approval in August. The process builds on the entry process and will be similarly transparent, providing opportunities for staff, parents, students, and community members to continue to be engaged.

I am excited about the opportunities for growth that exist within the welcoming and inclusive Franklin community. While there are challenges with which we must contend, I believe in the dedication, commitment, and optimism I sense from the committed members of the Franklin school community. This community is action-oriented and has a can-do attitude I deeply respect. I look forward to continuing the work ahead.

I want to thank the School Committee, Town Council members, central office administrators, town administrators, building principals and assistant principals, faculty, staff, town department heads, community members, parents, and students for sharing honest perceptions, questions, and feedback throughout this process. I look forward to continued engagement and conversation as we work together to improve the learning experience for each and every child in Franklin Public Schools.