

Rockland Public Schools

REPORT OF ENTRY FINDINGS

Dr. Alan H. Cron, Superintendent

March 24, 2017

Introduction

My first seven months as superintendent of Rockland Public Schools have been extremely exciting, busy and productive. Through critical conversations with my colleagues, parents, members of the School Committee, observations of teacher practice, the strategic planning process, and the scouring of piles of data and statistics that define our learning community, I have acquired a deeper understanding of our strengths and needs and am better prepared to lead our district forward.

My experience as principal of Rockland High School from 2012–2016 has provided me with an adequate amount of foundational knowledge that allowed us to begin work on a 5-year district-wide strategic plan, this year. Leading this comprehensive process is a twenty-one member strategic planning steering committee which includes principals, curriculum leaders and department heads. The purpose of the steering committee is to develop a district-wide strategic plan that will guide us for the next three to five years.

The steering committee has met six times so far this school year and has already completed a comprehensive revision of our district's *Core Values* and *Vision Statement*. Both of these foundational documents were vetted with all faculty and staff Pre-K to 12 and endorsed by our School Committee. As the final step in the district strategic planning process, the steering committee will share and gather feedback from more than 40 stakeholders including teachers, students, parents and community members by holding a retreat. In the end, this comprehensive process will produce a district improvement plan that will guide and align our district improvement efforts for the next three to five years.

The steering committee has provided a means to communicate and gather feedback from teachers, parents and students. Each member of the steering committee is part of a two-way communication network connecting teachers and staff throughout the district with the administrative team. In the coming months, the steering committee will continue to work collaboratively through the strategic planning process to create a set of strategic objectives and strategic priorities linked to action steps that will be measurable and specific. These objectives, priorities and action steps will define the work we will undertake to ensure that Rockland Public School District is exceptional and continually focused on improving.

Background

In my first seven months as superintendent, I have spent a great deal of time in classrooms throughout the district. My purpose was to learn as much as possible about the school system and the needs of all constituents. I have pursued a systematic approach to gathering information, feedback and data from our educators and community members. By meeting with individuals and small groups, I have developed a multi-faceted understanding of the district as a whole.

This exercise has provided me with the opportunity to exchange ideas with formal and informal leaders and has helped me to better understand how to lead effectively in the district. The entry process has also helped me assess where we are and where we want to be. Specifically, my entry plan was designed to enable me to better understand:

- the strengths and needs of our programs;
- the norms, values, expectations and goals the community has for our district; and
- which issues require immediate attention and which needs require a longer-range plan.

These objectives have been addressed by immersing myself in the daily life of the Rockland Public Schools. I have collected data through the review of key documents (e.g. assessment data, MCAS results, district policies, handbooks, curriculum materials, etc.), visited the majority of classrooms within the district, conducted personal interviews with district staff including teachers, administrators, nurses, secretaries, custodians and food service, and led open forums for discussion with parents and community members. In addition, I have met with members of the following groups as well as other key individuals within the community:

- School Committee
- Board of Selectmen
- Finance Committee
- Police and Fire
- Rockland Teachers' Association
- Town manager
- Rockland Education Foundation
- Town accountant
- Council on Aging
- library trustees
- Public Health
- Chamber of Commerce
- Kiwanis Club
- Parent Booster Organizations

Guiding Questions

The following questions were used to collect information during individual and small group meetings with school stakeholders.

- Tell me about yourself and why is the success of our school system is important to you?
- What are the greatest strengths of our school system?
- From your perspective, what have been our most notable recent achievements?

- What do you see as the one or two key issues or challenges facing our school system?
- What are the recent important events (positive or negative) that have impacted our system?
- What lessons can we learn from these experiences?
- What do you feel our most important district goal should be and what will be most critical to our achieving it?
- What is our school system's core strength?
- What is the one thing that needs to be preserved at all costs?
- What are your expectations for me as superintendent?

Observations

Throughout the entry process I have been impressed by the high degree of interest and passion for the continued development and improvement of the Rockland Public Schools on the part of faculty, staff, administrators, parents, students and community members. The enthusiasm and belief in the bright future of our schools has been demonstrated by the community's overwhelming support of the construction of a new middle school and the complete renovation of the high school. There is clear evidence that many things are being done exceptionally well within the district. Collaboratively defining what we aspire to become and working together to achieve that end is the exciting work ahead.

I have observed that:

- The staff of the Rockland Public Schools are talented and dedicated to student growth and development.
- Teachers and counselors in their respective fields and grade levels are consistently working to improve their teaching practices and ensure that all students learn.
- Our teaching and support staff work tirelessly to support teaching and learning across the district and care deeply about the students of Rockland.
- The Rockland School Committee is a group of talented and dedicated community members who are passionate about supporting the development of a school system that benefits all students.
- Central office administrators, principals, assistant principals and directors are skilled professionals who work collaboratively and relentlessly to establish and maintain systems that maximize student achievement, growth, safety and character development.
- Students are involved in the schools and in their own learning. This is evidenced by student participation in a wealth of after-school and extracurricular activities.
- Parents support the schools in many different ways. Parental support is high in terms of the ongoing school life of students, participation in parent-teacher groups, fundraisers, volunteer opportunities and attendance at school-based events.

Findings: Opportunities and Challenges

The Rockland Public Schools will face numerous opportunities and challenges in the months and years to come. I have organized these opportunities and challenges using three broad themes:

- 1. Student learning**
- 2. Instructional practice**
- 3. Relationships/Communication**

The essential questions at the end of each theme are conversation starters. They are meant to help us begin to unpack complex issues and identify opportunities for growth and further development within the district. My findings and the essential questions do not comprise a plan; they are simply meant to provide a foundation for further discussion, analysis and planning on which specific objectives and action steps will be built.

Student Learning

Assessment: Throughout the district, we use a number of tools to measure student learning. One such measure is student performance results from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). Analysis of the results reveal areas of strength and potential areas of growth. Areas of strength include:

- the number of Rockland students achieving advanced on the MCAS has risen each year.
- continued growth in science.
- overall annual increases in achievement in each of our three elementary schools.

Our ongoing challenges are:

- Elementary math scores remain flat.
- Middle school math and science scores remain flat.
- Despite increases in the percentage of high school students scoring in the advanced range, there is also a widening gap between our “high needs” students and their classmates.

Other formal indicators of student achievement include DIBELS¹ and DRA² scores, grade level common assessments, PSAT, AP, and SAT³ exam participation rates and scores as well as district graduation rates. Our teachers work together in data teams to analyze this data and make

¹ The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) are a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade. They are designed to be short (one minute) fluency measures used to regularly monitor the development of early literacy and early reading skills.

² What is the DRA? The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) is a standardized reading test used to determine a student’s instructional level in reading. The DRA is administered individually to students by teachers and/or reading specialists. Students read a selection (or selections) and then retell what they have read to the examiner. As the levels increase, so does the difficulty level for each selection.

³ <https://www.collegeboard.org/>

adjustments to curriculum and instructional practice, but our efforts are inconsistent across schools and across levels in the district. Our teachers' ability to use student data to make daily adjustments to practice is critical to our ongoing improvement as a school district.

Remediation and Acceleration: Extension activities and experiences do exist for students who are ready to exceed standards, but the degree to which accelerated students are identified, accommodated, and thereby challenged is inconsistent. If our students are to reach and exceed their potential, these activities and experiences need to be more consistent across all grade levels. This goes far beyond simply providing additional work; it involves the creation and accessibility of projects, materials and activities that push students to utilize higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation and creativity in a manner that is efficient and responsive to a student's needs.

Curriculum: There exist a number of inconsistencies in *what* and *how* reading and writing curricula are delivered in and among our three elementary schools. Some of this inconsistency is curriculum-related and some is administrative.

During the three elementary superintendent/faculty forums I hosted as part of the entry process, teachers expressed similar if not identical concerns regarding our current Pre-K to 4, ELA programs. Specifically, teachers expressed a need for materials such as leveled readers and exemplar texts for their classroom libraries. They also expressed a need for more time to effectively plan and deliver the expected and prescribed literacy program. As a result of this strong response from each of our three elementary schools and after discussing the concerns raised by teachers with principals and curriculum leaders, an ad hoc elementary literacy committee was established.

Literacy Committee: The literacy committee is comprised of one teacher from every grade from each of our three elementary schools. Committee members are expected to provide two-way feedback between their school's grade level team and the literacy committee. The literacy committee's task is to develop a list of short and long-term goals in response to the concerns articulated above. This important and timely collaborative work will result in a more efficient and effective Pre-K to 4 elementary literacy program.

Data Systems: In addition to some inconsistencies in curriculum among our three elementary schools, how and when we use student assessment data is also inconsistent. Testing is expensive and time consuming. A district-wide strategy for processing student test data will help to improve student performance. If our goal is to maximize learning for all students, we must invest in the capacity of our teachers to use assessment data to inform moment-to-moment decisions about the strengths and needs of each student. This requires an effective data system, time to

train and plan collaboratively with colleagues, and a leadership structure that realistically can support the plan in Literacy and Math in grades Pre-K to grade 4.

Social Emotional Wellness: Our schools provide a positive and safe environment for learning. The Rockland Public Schools staff is committed to the well-being of students and strives to create a learning environment that is positive for all. In the face of some challenging financial times, the district has maintained a strong commitment to social emotional wellness. Our infrastructure of social workers, psychologists and therapists, along with our highly professional teaching staff, provides multiple layers of support and care to hundreds of Rockland students and families each day. Personalized attention and examples of staff going far beyond typical work duties exemplify the very best in education and are commonplace in each of our schools.

Rockland's high percentage of students who are considered "high needs" coupled with a recent increase in the number of students whose primary language is Portuguese [English Learners (EL)] continues to challenge our ability to deliver academic and social emotional services in our schools. Expanding these efforts will serve the district well as positive school cultures directly impact learning and student development.

School Safety: In cooperation with the Rockland Police Department (RPD) and the Rockland Fire Department (RFD), a district-wide emergency management team has been in place for 4 years. The purpose of this committee is to conduct an ongoing review of all potential school emergency response situations. This team also reviews, plans and leads the emergency response drills in each of our schools. In addition, the emergency management team conducts table top exercises multiple times a year. These table-top drills are designed by the RPD and RFD and can reveal potential issues with our current state of emergency readiness while providing a way to mentally prepare for the unexpected.

Essential Questions for the Rockland Public Schools:

- Considering the fiscal climate, how do we best meet our current and future curricular needs in an efficient and fiscally responsible manner?
- How do we effectively focus on developing student creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaborative skills? How do we measure and track the development of these critical skills?
- What data is most critical and valuable in terms of an ongoing understanding of who is learning and who is not?
- What tools for the collection of data are most useful and practical for ongoing use?
- How can we meet the challenges posed by our increasing EL student population as well as our "high needs" students?
- What programming is available for students ready to exceed standards? What could be

- created to best meet the needs of these students and what would this look like in practice?
- What opportunities for student learning can be created outside of the school day and school year that will further opportunities for student growth?

Instructional Practice

Rockland educators have a great number of recent initiatives on their respective ‘plates’. It is clear that over the past few years, there have been a mix of building and district-based initiatives that have been put into action. An overload of initiatives has led to some of these initiatives not being implemented with fidelity and a consistent focus while others have begun and then not been carried through to full implementation. Prioritizing and planning for long-range support of existing initiatives and carefully considering any addition of initiatives is critical. Efforts that tie most directly to student learning, are consistent with the goals of the district, and connect with other initiatives must be prioritized.

Increasing student engagement and focus on high-level thinking skills are critical. In thinking about and discussing student engagement, an understanding of what exceptional student engagement looks like in practice is essential and must be clear throughout the district.

Communication and collaboration between staff at different grade levels and in different schools is inconsistent. Increasing communication and collaboration will build consistency in student learning experiences and help maximize student growth over the Pre-K through 12 continuum.

The professional development of faculty and staff is another key tool that will help to ensure ongoing district improvement. When aligned to a district and school level strategic plan, a well organized and targeted professional development plan will increase teacher effectiveness and improve student performance.

Essential questions for the Rockland Public Schools:

- What are the formal structures and practices that exist for the support of ongoing collegiality, collaboration and reflection to improve student learning?
- How can we build instructional leadership capacity to lead the ongoing development of curriculum, teacher supports and learning environments that maximize growth and instructional practices?
- What training and support do staff need to develop and strengthen professional learning communities within each school?
- In what ways are professional development opportunities that are integrated into school and district goals, responsive, individualized, and ongoing?
- How can the supervision and evaluation process be used most effectively to support staff growth and, in turn, boost student learning?

- What training and support are needed for staff in terms of creating collecting and analyzing data and differentiating how we assess what students know and are able to do?
- Do ongoing curriculum review and development procedures maximize rigorous content, flexibility and collaboration and promote best practices?

Relationships/Communication

Relationships: The Rockland community has historically exhibited a high level of support for their schools. This support is evidenced by active parent-teacher groups, high levels of volunteer participation in school activities, and attendance at school-sponsored events. Building on the interest and support of the community will be critical for the future success of the Rockland Public Schools.

Community awareness of the district's strengths and needs is inconsistent. Ongoing communication with the community needs to be strengthened through use of a variety of forums and media. The focus needs to be on telling the stories of the district and building a sense of the goals, achievements and opportunities of the school district.

Excellent programming for students that is focused on character development and building and maintaining positive relationships exists within our schools. An excellent foundation exists, but the curriculum is inconsistently utilized from classroom to classroom and school to school.

Partnerships between the schools and community members, organizations and businesses do exist, but could be strengthened.

Communication: Today perhaps more than ever before, effective two-way communication is critical to the school improvement process. Although email, Twitter and Facebook are a fast and efficient ways to disseminate information to the community, social media can also be a source of misinformation, create confusion and lead to a reactive approach to challenges rather than proactive. While the district's website and social media presence is much greater than it was five years ago, our current website (www.rocklandschools.org) and social media presence remains somewhat disjointed and limited in its effectiveness. The district would benefit from a more formalized communication plan and a substantial investment of time and resources.

Essential questions for the Rockland Public Schools:

- How do we continue to proactively build positive school cultures that encourage positive behavior and demonstrations of character, in turn minimizing bullying and unkind behaviors?
- How do we maximize the effectiveness and consistency of character development efforts across the school district?

- How do we utilize the tools and time available to increase staff collaboration and communication?
- What mechanisms can be utilized to connect community member and parent interests and talents to students, school and district needs?
- How can we collaborate more effectively with the community to build partnerships and opportunities that will be beneficial to all?
- Given our limited resources, how can we more effectively communication with all school stakeholders?

Next Steps

The Rockland Public School District has a wide range of strengths and resources to support our mission to prepare students for life after high school. Our broad organizational challenges are both internal and external. Internally, we must aspire to be a large organization that is nimble enough to adapt and meet the rapidly changing needs of our students, many of whom are preparing for jobs that have yet to be created. Externally, we must continue to be visionary and bold when designing curriculum and selecting programs such as our ongoing, multi-year commitment to pre-engineering coursework including advanced math and science, middle-school and high school robotics, and most recently, computer science and coding.

In the coming months I will continue to work with the strategic planning steering committee as well as the School Committee and administrative staff to complete our district improvement plan that will guide the district for the next three to five years. Through the collaborative work required to complete this plan, I am confident we can build on our many existing strengths and provide our students with even more powerful learning experiences that will fully prepare them for their future.

Finally, I want to thank the teachers, support staff, administration, faculty, parents, community members, committee members and students who have made my transition to the superintendent's office a personal and professional pleasure. The information, guidance and support I have received over the past seven months have been remarkable and I look forward to the important and exciting work ahead of us.

Respectfully,

Dr. Alan H. Cron, Superintendent