

**Worcester
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Demanding educational excellence for our children



The Research Bureau

The Urgency of Excellence:

Considerations for the School Committee and New Superintendent of Schools in Worcester



January 2016

The Worcester Public Schools provides learners with a quality education in a safe and healthy environment. We believe that all students can achieve at high levels as they prepare to become productive citizens in our changing technological world. We are committed to supporting students, parents, educators, and citizens in their pursuit of learning.

—Worcester Public Schools Mission Statement

...To appoint a superintendent who shall be charged with the day to day administration of the school system, subject to the policy directives adopted by the school committee....

*—Worcester City Charter
Article 4: School Committee
Section 4-1 Composition, Term of Office and Powers*

The Urgency of Excellence: Considerations for the School Committee and New Superintendent of Schools in Worcester

In October 2015, Worcester Superintendent of Schools Dr. Melinda Boone announced her resignation from the Worcester Public Schools (WPS) effective November 30, 2015. At its meeting on October 15, the Worcester School Committee voted to appoint WPS Chief Academic Officer Dr. Marco Rodrigues as interim superintendent until a permanent replacement is appointed. This transition from one chief executive officer and instructional leader to another is an opportune time to critically evaluate the district against key state and self-adopted local indicators and to develop a vision to address urgent needs and issues while strategically moving Worcester forward as a competitive educational choice in Central Massachusetts.

Worcester is Massachusetts’ largest, and arguably most successful, Gateway City—one with a diverse talent base, leading edge businesses (particularly in the life sciences), renowned colleges and universities, strong cultural institutions, a growing creative economy, and a generous business, philanthropic, and civic community that prioritizes public education. A community’s public schools are the incubators, sustainers, and lure of the middle class—critical to any municipality’s economy and quality of life. For Worcester to succeed in this arena, parents must consider its public schools a competitive choice when compared with local private, parochial, and charter alternatives or public schools in contiguous districts.

In the five years since the passage of *An Act to Address the Achievement Gap*, sometimes referred to as Ed Reform II, we have learned much about what is needed for school and district-wide turnaround. In Worcester, Union Hill School serves as an example of state-mandated school improvement while Claremont Academy serves as an example of district-driven school turnaround. Worcester is distinct in the assets it boasts in several sectors—including established cultural institutions, civic-minded businesses, generous philanthropies, and committed non-profit organizations—all of which stand ready to support a strategic plan and vision to move each of our schools toward excellence. In addition to local assets and opportunities, the Commonwealth has rich knowledge and resources available to support broad and deep school and district improvement through the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and a wealth of non-profit, non-partisan organizations specializing in school turnaround.

Strong schools and the opportunity for a rigorous education for every student are central to the health and vitality of our city. The transition to a new district leader challenges us to align our collective efforts in support of the best possible future for our children and for our common life.

Annual Budget	\$369.2 Million
# of Students	25,340
# of Employees	3,902
# of Schools	33 Elementary Schools 4 Middle Schools 2 Grade 7-12 Schools 5 High Schools 1 Head Start School
District Accountability and Assistance Level	4
# of Schools by Level (<i>Head Start not included</i>)	Level 1—11 Schools Level 2—10 Schools Level 3—22 Schools Level 4—1 School
School Committee	6 At Large Members + Mayor
# of Buildings	62
# of Acres	400

Leading by Example

Union Hill Elementary School, Burncoat Street Preparatory School, and Chandler Elementary School have each been through the rigorous process of state-mandated turnaround following Level 4 designations. Changes in instruction, implementation of meaningful professional development, and extended learning time have informed their current success. Union Hill and Chandler Elementary are now designated Level 1 schools.

Worcester, Massachusetts

The City of Worcester, Massachusetts, is the second largest city in New England, with a population of 182,511 according to recent Census Bureau estimates. Located in Central Massachusetts, Worcester is within a one hour drive from Boston, Providence, RI, and Hartford, CT. Known as the Heart of the Commonwealth, the City is home to nine colleges and universities and significant cultural resources. Approximately 40% of the jobs in Worcester are in the educational and medical fields, followed by retail, manufacturing, and professional services. Worcester’s median household income is \$46,105, with 22% of residents living in poverty. Almost 60% of Worcester residents are White, non-Hispanic, 20.5% are Hispanic, 11.1% are Black or African-American, 6.7% are Asian, and 0.3% are American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. More than one in five Worcester residents is foreign-born. Nearly 40% of Worcester’s population between the ages of 25 and 34 years old has a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Government & Education in Worcester

The City of Worcester, as established by the City Charter, is a modified Plan E form of government—a Council-Manager and a popularly elected Mayor. The City Council is the City’s legislative body while the City Manager serves as chief executive officer. The Worcester Public Schools form a quasi-independent department of the City, reporting to a School Committee composed of seven members—the Mayor of the City and six members elected at large. The School Committee sets district-wide school policies, votes on the district budget, and hires and removes the Superintendent.

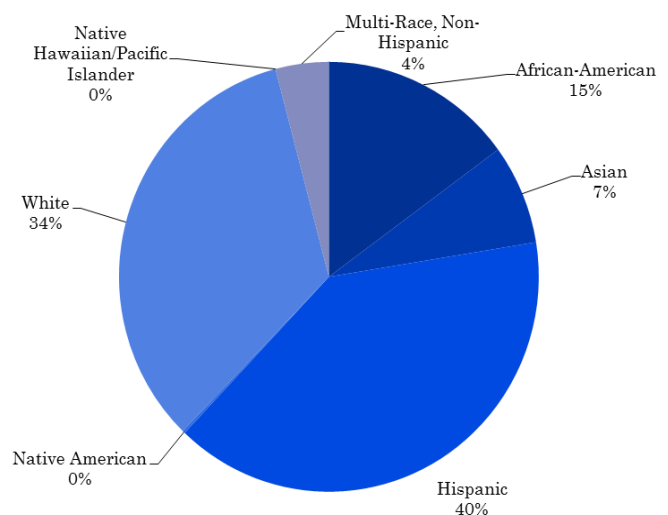
The Mayor is the candidate receiving the most votes in the mayoral election while also winning an at-large City Council seat. In addition to his or her role as City Councilor, the Mayor serves as the ceremonial head of the municipal government and chairs both the City Council and School Committee. Under the rules of the School Committee, the Mayor appoints the committees and committee chairs. The Worcester School Committee has four permanent standing committees: Accountability and Student Achievement; Finance and Operations; Governance and Employee Issues; and Teaching, Learning and Student Supports. While these formal powers are limited, the Mayor also has informal opportunity to highlight issues impacting the city and schools and form coalitions to address challenges.

The Superintendent of Schools serves as the district’s chief executive officer.

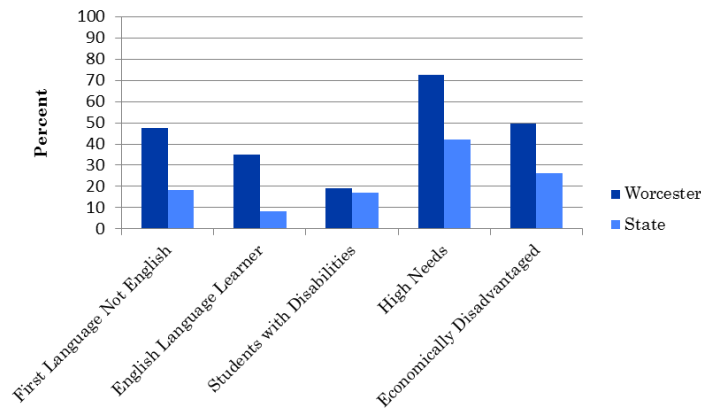
The Students of the Worcester Public Schools

The WPS is an urban school district and supports a diverse student body. Approximately 85% of school-aged Worcester youth attend the public schools. As a Gateway City, Worcester educates a population that reflects our increasingly plural nation. Hispanics, who comprise approximately 20% of the City of Worcester’s total population, make up approximately 40% of the student body of the WPS. White non-Hispanics, who comprise approximately 60% of the City of Worcester’s population, make up 34% of the student body of the WPS. Nearly 90 languages are spoken within the WPS—approximately 50% of the student body speak English as a second language while about 35% of students are English Language Learners. Over 72% of WPS students are characterized as High Needs. A vision for district advancement must rest on the belief that all children can learn and so address the full needs of each of these populations, ensuring equal opportunity for all youth to become vital members of the Worcester community.

Chart 1: Worcester Public Schools Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity—2014/2015



**Chart 2: Worcester Public Schools
Key Student Indicators—2014/2015**



Worcester Public Schools Priorities, Goals, and the Seven-Point Financial Plan

The WPS, through the Superintendent and the School Committee, has identified the following district priorities:

- Deliver High Quality Teaching & Learning
- Provide Reasonable Class Sizes
- Increase Secondary Elective Course Offerings
- Implement 21st Century Technology and Professional Development
- Maintain 21st Century Expectations

These priorities have informed the following goals:

- Guarantee 100% of students a rigorous curriculum resulting in measurable gains in student learning
 - Focus on the percent of students proficient in reading, English Language Arts (ELA), and mathematics
 - Focus on the percent of students successfully completing high school coursework that prepares graduates for college and career readiness
- Increase student academic achievement through instructional strategies resulting in high levels of student performance
- Implement and monitor strategies to ensure welcoming, safe, and secure learning environments in all Worcester schools
- Strengthen communication through strategies to transfer information on needs and effective practices among all stakeholders

Leading by Example

University Park Campus School (UPCS) serves students in grades 7-12 in the Main South area of Worcester and is a nationally recognized exemplar in secondary education. School enrollment is by lottery. UPCS offers an honors-only curriculum with the opportunity for Advanced Placement courses and classes at partner Clark University. Teachers engage in continuous professional development through the Clark University Education Department and through special opportunities at the University's Adam Institute and the Hiatt Center for Urban Education.

Leading by Example

Worcester Technical High School has received national recognition, including a visit by President Barack Obama to offer the Commencement address in 2014. Students benefit from deep partnerships with businesses, corporations, and foundations. In addition to its technical and vocational coursework, students complete the Commonwealth's MassCore requirements—subjects essential for public university admission in Massachusetts.

These priorities and goals are implemented through the allocation of resources and the annual budget process. The WPS Seven-Point Financial Plan for Advancing Student Achievement and Program Sustainability outlines the following budgetary considerations:

- 1—Long-term Budget Planning
- 2—Annual Budget Review

- 3—Transparent Budget Process
- 4—Quarterly Financial Reporting
- 5—Supplemental and Sustainable Programs
- 6—Cap Administrative Spending
- 7—Target New Revenues

To ensure continued improvement as a district and the ability to address challenges while seizing emerging opportunities, these priorities and approaches should inform the work of a new superintendent and the development of a new strategic vision for the district.

Part I: PROGRESS TOWARD MEETING THE WORCESTER COMPACT: A Report Card on the District

The Worcester Compact, adopted in 2009, calls for “Delivering on High Expectations and Outstanding Results for All Students” and states that “100 percent of students will be guaranteed a rigorous core curriculum resulting in measurable gains in student learning.” In compliance with the Commonwealth’s waiver from federal *No Child Left Behind Act* standards and *Race to the Top* grant funding, The Worcester Compact disseminated system-wide targets for the school district through 2013. Since extended, the most recent iteration of the Compact calls for specific accomplishments by the 2016-2017 school year. The Worcester Compact sets ambitious, aspirational goals for both academic performance and student participation.

Table 2: Worcester Public Schools Compact
2016/17 GOALS
100% of students will be guaranteed a rigorous core curriculum resulting in measureable gains in student learning.
50% reduction in the proficiency gap in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science & Technology/Engineering by 2016-2017.
A CPI of 88.1 in English Language Arts by 2016-2017.
A CPI of 83.7 in Mathematics by 2016-2017.
A CPI of 80.8 in Science & Technology/Engineering by 2016-2017.
Increase the WPS graduation rate to 90% over 4 years or 95% over 5 years by 2016-17.
50% reduction in the annual dropout rate to 1.9% by 2016-2017.
100% of graduates will successfully complete high school coursework that prepares them for both college and career.

WPS has experienced limited success under the Worcester Compact. While the district has made notable progress on attendance, participation, and certain graduation rates, academic achievement is not on course to meet Compact goals by 2016-2017. (See charts on following page.)

In compliance with the Massachusetts *Race to the Top* grant, public school districts are required to narrow “proficiency gaps” using a Composite Performance Index (CPI). The CPI is a 100-point system that assesses how close a group is to reaching full proficiency. The closer a group is to a CPI of 100, the closer they are to reaching full proficiency. The difference between a group’s CPI and a score of 100 is the proficiency gap. The Worcester Compact encapsulated requirements to reduce the 2011 proficiency gaps in English, Mathematics, and Science & Technology/Engineering by 50% by 2017. These targets were set by formula—not derived from internal evaluation and assessment of feasibility. To accomplish Compact goals, by 2017 Worcester needs to raise the English Language Arts CPI by 6.7 points to 88.1, the Mathematics CPI by 12.3 points, and the Science & Technology/Engineering CPI by 14.8 points. The lack of sustained progress toward these goals has meant that significant numbers of children residing in our city are not on course for mastering core skills in the elementary grades or for cultivating the skills and acquiring the knowledge essential for success in college and career. The implications of this for their futures and the future of our city are profound.

**Chart 3: Composite Performance Index
Actuals & The Worcester Compact Goals**

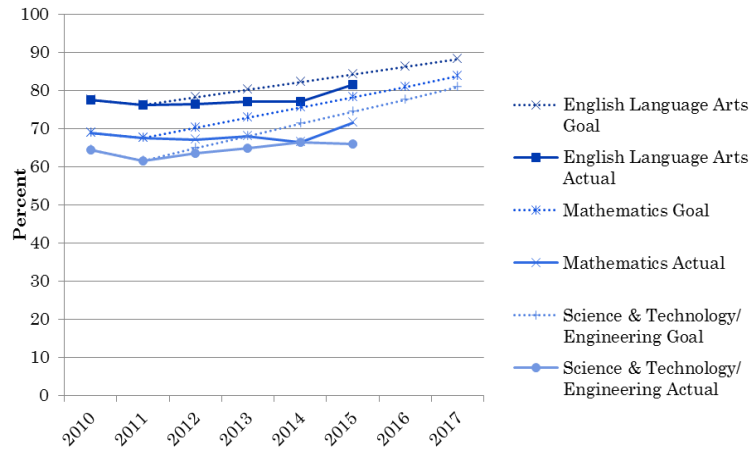


Chart 4: WPS MCAS Tests Results—All Grades

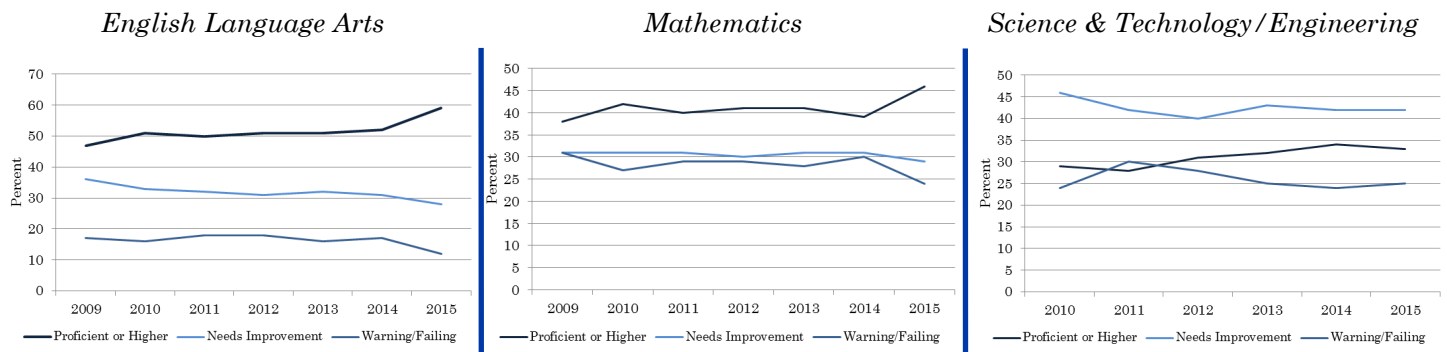


Chart 5: WPS Dropout Rates

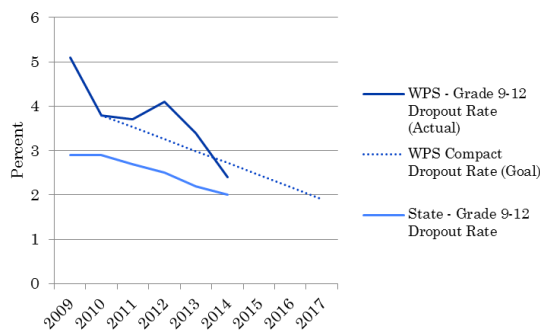


Chart 6: 4-Year Graduation Rates

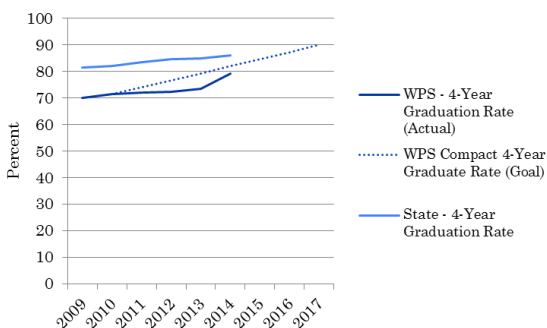
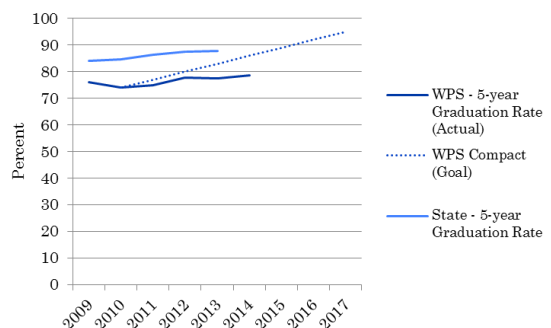


Chart 7: 5-Year Graduation Rates



Worcester's Elementary Schools: Acquiring the Foundations of Learning

Children acquire the foundational knowledge and skills that allow for more advanced learning for college and career in the primary and intermediate grades (K-3 and 4-6 respectively). District and school performance on key metrics for those years indicate that much work remains to ensure that Worcester children are prepared for higher concepts in learning. In 2014, 35% or more of students failed to score proficient or above in both English Language Arts and Mathematics in ten of Worcester's 33 elementary schools. In an additional five schools, 35% or more of students failed to score proficient or above in either English Language Arts or Mathematics. In eighteen schools, 35% or more of students failed to score proficient or above in Science & Technology/Engineering. Many elementary school students move on to secondary school without achieving the base skills necessary for future learning. The WPS needs to assess their primary and intermediate grade programs to determine the best practices necessary in each school to ensure progress through the grades with a foundation of knowledge for future learning and strong life skills.

Leading by Example

Columbus Park and Worcester Arts Magnet Schools serve populations that reflect the district overall and yet outperform their sister schools on many measures. As a result of consistently strong student growth, the schools are rated Level 1 on the Commonwealth's assessment system.

Worcester's Secondary Schools: Building the Skills and Knowledge for College and Career

Sound preparation for college and career in a knowledge and skills-based economy requires a rigorous secondary school curriculum with courses aligned to college standards and professional expectations. While WPS has modified its graduation requirements to better meet Massachusetts public college and university admission requirements, college enrollment continues to lag neighboring public school systems. In Worcester, only 67% of graduates attended college in 2013, with about half attending two-year programs and half attending four-year programs. In neighboring Shrewsbury, Wachusett Regional, and West Boylston, college attendance rates were 89.8%, 89.8%, and 80% respectively. The WPS should find ways to encourage college attendance while ensuring basic and even advanced career skills for those going directly into the workforce.

Leading by Example

Claremont Academy serves students in grades 7-12 and is an example of district, rather than state-mandated, turnaround. In 2012, Superintendent Boone used existing authorities to address years of underperformance by deploying a principal and requiring personnel changes to begin focused improvement. Since that time, the school has engaged on improving student learning skills, a necessary precursor to achieving academic turnaround.

Part II: A STRATEGIC VISION AND A STRATEGIC PLAN: A Critical Need

A number of Massachusetts public school districts have done the demanding work and made the hard choices necessary to improve education for their children. Worcester, for the sake of its students, their families, and the continued vitality of the community overall, can do no less.

A transition in leadership in the WPS offers an opportunity to recommit to public education, develop a strategic vision, and identify the resources and implement the choices necessary to ensure success. Public officials, residents, businesses, non-profits, and philanthropic partners should come together in meaningful partnership to inform and support the public schools in this effort.

An effective public school system includes the following:

- High Academic Expectations and Successful Academic Outcomes for All Students
- Safe and Supportive Environments for All Students
- Enhanced Opportunities for High-Achieving Students
- Avenues for Engaging Families and the Community in the Schools
- Innovative Learning Spaces
- Sustained, Sufficient Funding

High Academic Expectations and Successful Academic Outcomes for All Students

As highlighted in the WPS mission statement, public schools exist in service of quality education. While Worcester's student test scores have improved, they continue to lag behind most communities in Massachusetts. Worcester does well in English Language Arts and Science & Technology/Engineering when compared to other Gateway Cities, but the city does not compete well against many adjacent suburban communities and wealthier regions of

the Commonwealth. In order to serve consistently as the school system of choice for Worcester residents, and to serve as an asset in efforts to attract and retain the middle class, the WPS must compete academically with schools in nearby communities.

In 2009, The Worcester Compact was established to improve student learning and track accomplishments through measureable gains. While the WPS have made significant progress with certain measures, academic progress overall has been stagnant. An intentional focus on the effectiveness of Worcester's curriculum and pedagogy is critical to ensure that all students meet Massachusetts Framework standards and complete MassCore requirements (a comprehensive set of subject area courses and units as well as other learning opportunities to ensure preparedness for college and career). Moving ahead in this area also means working to improve how student achievement is assessed locally and preparing students for MCAS 2.0 while ensuring adequate time for individual learning approaches, non-assessed courses of study, and social-emotional development curricula.

While Worcester offers many educational alternatives, the Worcester district is labeled a Level 4 (out of 5) school district due to the Level 4 status of Elm Park Community School. In addition, with half (22 out of 44) of Worcester's schools at Level 3, there is real concern that without concerted focus some current Level 3 schools may also slide to Level 4. Ed Reform II has made available tools, authorities, and practices to effect both district-driven and state-mandated turnaround. Moving toward Level 2 status, which would place Worcester on a par with neighboring districts, will demand focused attention on Level 3 schools. Using existing authorities, rather than waiting for an individual school to drop into Level 4 status, a superintendent can and must catalyze substantial changes in lower-performing schools.

Like many districts, Worcester has a shortage of teachers, impacting both class size and course offerings. This shortage is particularly acute in certain subjects and specialties, notably English as a Second Language (ESL). WPS has also been criticized for a lack of diversity among its teaching staff. The current shortage provides an opportunity to address this concern by hiring new educators that bring both professional expertise and unique personal experiences and insights to help prepare students for an increasingly global world. Yet incorporating new teachers into existing programs should be strategic and directed. Under current contracts, internal candidates with seniority have significant priority for open positions in the WPS. This hinders the ability of principals to build a team that meets the unique needs of their students. Additionally, the removal of ineffective teachers is challenging due to contractual requirements. It is difficult to hold administrators accountable for student outcomes when they have limited control over the classroom experience. Innovation Schools (Worcester has 8) and Level 4 schools (Worcester has 1) allow principals broader discretion in hiring and firing, conditioned on measurable improvements to overall student and school performance. A strategy that fully utilizes these existing authorities, while balancing legitimate teacher concerns for fairness, is vital for the improvement of the district.

A substantial body of research suggests that principal leadership is a crucial factor in school climate, student achievement, and teacher satisfaction. As Worcester works toward district-wide improvement, the WPS should support the continuing development of professional practice in current principals (with a particular focus on school turnaround) and actively cultivate a cadre of new leaders from within with the skills to meet the demands of education in an urban environment.

Leading by Example

The Engineering and Technology Academy (ETA) is a "Smaller Learning Community" at **Doherty Memorial High School** that emphasizes technology and engineering, using an interdisciplinary project-based learning curriculum. The program is a state-certified vocational-technical program and students who successfully complete the program receive a vocational certificate. The program is open to all students across the district.

Recommendation

With half (22 out of 44) of Worcester's schools at Level 3, WPS must prioritize the stabilization and improvement of Level 3 schools through district-driven turnaround initiatives prior to a drop into Level 4 status.

Recommendation

The appointment of new teachers offers an opportunity to target skill sets with individual school needs. In order to do so, however, existing contracts must be amended to prioritize classroom needs and individual school dynamics.

Recommendation

Principals are crucial to individual school success; current leaders must be offered ongoing professional development opportunities, especially in management and school turnaround, while a new cadre of leaders should be cultivated from within the ranks of existing educators.

Creating and Maintaining Safe and Supportive Environments for All Students

Student and teacher safety arose as an issue during the 2014-2015 academic year and during recent municipal elections. As a result of a series of high profile incidents on the grounds of two secondary schools, School Resource Officers from the Worcester Police Department are now present in all high schools. The district administration has taken steps at individual schools to address concerns, and commissioned a safety audit of the system overall. While the WPS audit found that the vast majority of parents and students interviewed believe the schools are safe, Worcester needs to combat *community* perceptions. As the WPS work on matters relating to safe, supportive, and secure schools, it is important to develop strategies, policies, and practices that achieve balance in school discipline that holds students accountable for behavioral infractions while not compromising their own or others' learning.

Leading by Example

The Worcester Public Schools has been working in partnership with The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts and others to develop and implement a leading edge, evidence-based, and holistic strategy for addressing student behavior and social and emotional needs. The **Worcester-HEARS** initiative, active in the District's North Quadrant, employs a variety of school and community approaches to address the burden of exposure to childhood trauma on learning.

Recommendation

WPS students are increasingly High Needs, with growing numbers of English language learners and students in poverty as well as students with disabilities. WPS must find new ways to address High Needs students through expanded wrap-around services that address linguistic isolation, combat the impacts of economic disadvantage like nutrition, access to extracurricular activities, and general adult involvement, and provide necessary supports to students with disabilities.

Leading by Example

The **Latino Education Institute (LEI) at Worcester State University** was recently recognized with a MassINC Gateway Cities Innovation Award for its work with the Worcester Public Schools. The Institute offers a broad range of education programs that support the needs of Latino students. LEI offers programs in education, literacy, leadership, civic engagement, health, and violence prevention. Their work boosts family-school involvement, highlights the strengths of Latino families, and employs gender-specific design to reduce school dropout rates and improve rates of college enrollment.

Recommendation

In order to compete to retain high-achieving students, WPS must expand its pilot Academy concept to provide additional advanced offerings to exceptional students at every grade level.

A significant percentage of WPS students—nearly three-quarters—qualify as High Needs. High Needs students are economically disadvantaged, English Language Learners (ELL) or former ELL, and/or students with disabilities. As an urban center, Worcester is home to significant numbers of students within each of these categories. An overwhelming body of evidence indicates that these factors, alone and in combination, have a significant impact on teaching and learning and accountability measures, including some of the “soft” indicators of district health such as churn, mobility, and chronic absenteeism among others. Over one-third of the students enrolled in the WPS are ELL. Spanish is the home language of the majority of this population. While Worcester provides core language skills for non-native English speakers, it struggles as a district in teaching advanced knowledge and skills to students learning English. The district has made the least progress in narrowing the proficiency gap experienced by Hispanic students.

As a part of district strategy to provide supportive learning, Worcester should consider the role of our schools in addressing family and environmental factors (e.g., parental involvement, poverty, nutrition, community crime) that influence student success. Often parents choose educational settings that not only address children's academic needs but that also support the social and emotional needs of students, providing opportunities beyond academic learning.

Enhanced Opportunities for High-Achieving Students

A robust school district offers options for a range of student interests and needs. In Worcester, the current discussion has focused on a selective program for advanced achievers at the high school level. In December 2014, the district announced that it is working to establish a pilot Academy utilizing the International Baccalaureate (IB)—an academic program founded in Switzerland for the children of diplomats that certifies schools to provide a structured curriculum focused on intellectual, personal, emotional, and social skills. Admission to the Academy is to be based on a range of criteria—not an entrance exam—with enrollment capped at 250 students. While such a program will add to the suite of options for Worcester students, it is targeted at a relatively narrow secondary

school population. To be competitive with our neighboring districts, WPS should offer meaningful choices for advanced study to all qualified students at every grade.

Engaging Families and the Community in the Schools

Research is unequivocal that meaningful family and community engagement leads to increased student satisfaction and achievement. However, given the press of daily business, regular and meaningful communication with the public and interested stakeholders can often be overlooked. A sound strategy for consistent and robust communications that provides appropriate transparency and accountability to the public must be in place. Open and straightforward communication should respond not only to urgent issues, but work to inform public opinion and discourse on long-term concerns related to teaching and learning. The district must also continue to build long-term relationships with community stakeholders, including businesses and not-for-profit organizations, and use the expertise of education turnaround specialists to enhance the human, financial, and educational resources of our school system.

Worcester is home to a range of established cultural institutions, non-profit organizations serving special populations, and private-sector businesses. The WPS has engaged many in partnerships offering substantial benefits to both parties. However, unlike other districts with urgent needs, Worcester has not worked effectively with partners to effect district-wide turnaround. The WPS should identify organizations with resources and breadth for long-term partnership on seemingly entrenched issues impacting the schools. For example, Clark University's Adam Institute for Urban Teaching and School Practice has been instrumental in the development of University Park Campus School and Claremont Academy; Mass Insight Education houses The School Turnaround Group; and, The Rennie Center is home to the Massachusetts Education Partnership. Each of these organizations offers significant expertise on school and district-wide improvement.

Building Innovative Learning Spaces

The WPS manages 62 public buildings throughout Worcester consisting of 2.3 million square feet on 400 acres of land. Eleven of these buildings were built prior to 1900 and only four of these buildings were built or substantially renovated in the last fifteen years. An older building stock brings challenges of maintenance and modernization. The recent school security audit called for facility master planning. The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the regional accrediting agency, often cites technology, libraries, and laboratory facilities as needing upgrade.

While energy upgrades have been completed recently through the City's Energy Services Company (ESCO) contract, the City typically provides only \$3 million annually for school renovation projects according to the WPS FY16 Budget. A facility master plan should ensure that each school is an environment that is conducive to learning. If public resources are not adequate, WPS should work with public and private partners to identify school improvement programs that can be accomplished with outside contributions of time and money.

Leading by Example

The **Goddard Scholars Academy** is a program for high-achieving students based in **Sullivan Middle School** and **South High Community School**. The program starts at grades 6-8 at Sullivan Middle School and continues in grades 9-12 at South High. Students are required to take a minimum of five Advanced Placement (AP) classes, from 21 offerings, to graduate from the Goddard Program. The program enrolls 48 students in two classes per grade.

Recommendation

WPS must build stronger partnerships with families, non-profits, and businesses to leverage Worcester's significant non-school resources into teaching and learning opportunities for schools and students throughout the district. This includes formal arrangements with organizations and institutions to provide enhanced services as well as informal relationships through improved communication and coordination of programs and initiatives.

Leading by Example

Worcester has been aggressive in its use of the resources and expertise of the Massachusetts School Building Authority. In 2011, **North High School** moved to a new state-of-the-art facility. A new building is under construction to replace the old **Nelson Place School** and plans are in development for a new **South High Community School**.

Sustained, Sufficient Funding

Unlike neighboring communities such as West Boylston, Shrewsbury, and Wachusett Regional, Worcester regularly funds its schools at the minimum required through the state Foundation Budget, although recent negotiations have resulted in slight annual increases. Worcester students generally have less access to educational resources than those in the districts with whom Worcester competes. The WPS should continue its efforts to work with the City Manager and the City Council to identify and secure needed funds.

The Foundation Budget Review Commission recently completed its work and recommended changes in the state’s funding of public education. Adjusting the current inflation factor, supporting employee health insurance, and fully reimbursing Special Education costs would mean the infusion of millions of dollars into the WPS. The district must be intentional and assertive in its work with the region’s legislative delegation and local political and civic leaders to ensure that the Massachusetts General Court makes the necessary changes.

Recommendation

WPS must actively recruit allies in efforts to implement changes to the Commonwealth’s funding formula recommended in the Foundation Budget Review Commission’s final report. While new local and private resources may materialize, only a revised state formula promises a predictable, recurring source of revenue. A coalition of local partners should work together and with other Gateway Cities to secure adoption.

Conclusion

Leadership matters. According to the Council of the Great City Schools, the average tenure of urban superintendents was 3.18 years in 2014, up from 2.8 years in 2003. It is a challenging and unforgiving role. While Worcester has offered its superintendents more latitude and longevity than most, much is expected from our instructional leader. Under the Worcester City Charter, the School Committee has broad authority to take “general charge” of the public schools in the city. While the Superintendent of Schools is hired to manage the day-to-day administration of the system, the School Committee is charged with setting policy direction and appointing officers and employees and defining responsibilities. Too often, the School Committee is perceived to act not as a policy body but rather as a collection of individual priorities and agendas. In order to support the work of a new superintendent and accelerate the pace of district-wide improvement, the School Committee should work intentionally to develop a strategic vision to improve the district as well as each individual school.

As we transition to a new instructional leader for our complex and dynamic school district, it will be vital for us, as a community with a vested interest in the future of our children as educated and productive citizens with integrity, to hold ourselves responsible for both good leadership and good governance. The School Committee and the Superintendent must work in tandem to develop an aggressive, meaningful, and robust strategic plan to which all parties—including the public—will be accountable.

Worcester deserves the best possible leadership to ensure that we also have the best possible urban school district in the Commonwealth and the country. Asking the right questions, and demanding the right answers, is just the beginning of the work toward a great school system.

Developing a targeted, focused strategic vision and adopting a strategic plan with a goal of being the district of choice known for excellence is critical to the work at hand. These are the questions and choices that we face. The quality of our common life, now and in the future, depends upon our answers and our decisions.

Recommendation

Develop a Vision and Strategic Plan for the Worcester Public Schools

A strong Worcester Public Schools is critical to attract, cultivate, and retain Worcester's middle class and lure new talent and new business to the city. Family location decisions are often driven by the actual and perceived quality of public school districts. When job holders in Worcester choose suburban homes, the city's property values decline, robbing remaining residents of asset wealth and government of property tax revenue, all while the need for infrastructure and services increases to accommodate additional stress on the transportation network and the needs of lower-income residents. In this environment, the WPS struggles as dual-income (and often more highly educated) families depart and the number of High Needs students grows.

With the transition in leadership at the WPS, the city has an opportunity to engage in a detailed review of where we are, what works and what does not, and what should be done to stabilize and improve the schools so that they compete as the education institutions of choice for all residents.

In support of a new Superintendent of Schools, the School Committee should commit to a timely, comprehensive evaluation of the schools including operations and finance as well as teaching and learning.

We have identified three options for undertaking such an evaluation, which in isolation or in combination could enhance outcomes for the public schools: 1) a city-wide appointed task force; 2) engagement of an education organization focused on academic improvement and school turnaround; or 3) engagement of a management consulting firm focused on structural reorganization and effectiveness.

If the goal is locally-driven review, a task force composed of no more than nine members could meet every two- to four-weeks over a period of two years to review elementary, middle, and secondary education and evaluate policies, practice, and leadership. Meetings would be open to the public and minutes would be made public, with opportunities for public comment offered at key junctures. The task force would be charged with releasing a final report, and potential interim or issue-specific reports, with detailed recommendations on the above as well as a timeline for implementing recommended changes within the WPS. To be effective, the task force must be reputable, empowered, committed, thorough, and timely with a true sense of urgency. Members of the task force should include: a City representative (preferably with a municipal finance background); a WPS representative (preferably a Principal or Quadrant Manager); a CPPAC representative (preferably with a professional background in education); an EAW representative; an educational policy expert; an education practice expert (preferably with a background in teaching and/or school management); a youth health/behavior policy expert; a school safety expert; and a business community representative. The task force would be staffed by a dedicated working group composed of WPS staff and non-profit/corporate partners and given direct access to WPS leadership and school information.

If the goal is professional review, a number of non-profit education consulting organizations have amassed considerable expertise working with multiple districts to effect school and district-wide turnaround. For example, Mass Insight Education's School Turnaround Group partners with districts to rescue low-performing schools by transforming their structures and practices. The Rennie Center's District Capacity Project (DCP) works with districts to identify reform strategies that address student needs and support educators in skill development. Engaging organizations with deep educational expertise would ensure that a WPS review is holistic, viewed through the lens of educational best practice, and benefits from the experience of other urban districts. Traditional management consulting firms also often provide expertise to public sector entities including schools and districts. For example, Public Consulting Group (PCG) provides both consulting services and technology solutions to gather, manage, and analyze data on student and school performance. McKinsey & Company's Center for Government identifies best practices, gathers benchmark data, and partners with experts to generate new solutions on school-system performance. A management consulting firm would approach the WPS as a mission-driven organization working under challenging conditions with constrained resources to produce college- and career-ready graduates. A management firm would review inputs, systems, and outcomes to identify implementable interventions that would improve WPS competitiveness and outcomes.

In order to ensure priority and the engagement of educational leaders, any evaluation effort should work directly with the Superintendent, School Committee, and an Advisory Committee composed of local education, government, and management experts. Efforts should proceed in several phases: 1) initial assessment and public reporting on the state of the district with respect to operations, finance, and teaching and learning; 2) the development and presentation of areas for action; and 3) implementation of both short-term and long-term strategic plans to firmly establish the Worcester Public Schools as the schools of choice.

Recommendation**Lasting Change: Develop a Worcester Public Schools Governance Institute**

Transformation is not instantaneous or irreversible. For the Worcester Public Schools to offer a competitive education to the city's students, the work of several entities must be aligned—the School Committee and City Council, the WPS and City Administration, and the private and non-profit education communities. A short-term, annual governance institute would allow the various sectors to come together to better understand the intersection of their distinct roles and to support an aligned and strategic agenda for action. The Massachusetts Association of School Committees and The Rennie Center, among others, are organizations that could lend expertise in crafting such an annual initiative.

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