



Walpole Public Schools  
Superintendent's Report of Entry Findings

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## **Introduction**

In August 2019, as one component of participating in the Massachusetts *New Superintendent Induction Program*, I developed an Entry Plan. In order to continue our focus on teaching and learning, this comprehensive plan was developed to gain a deeper understanding of the district, identify areas of strength, and recognize opportunities for growth. The outcome will be the basis for the development of a strategy that will help guide our future work.

Although I entered the Superintendentcy with 27 years of experience in the Walpole Public Schools as a teacher, middle school principal, and Assistant Superintendent, the Entry Plan afforded me the opportunity to take a fresh look at the District through a different lens. Between July and December, I systematically collected both quantitative and qualitative data. In addition to analyzing state and district documents relative to WPS, our staff, students, and educational outcomes, I conducted individual and group interviews with a wide variety of stakeholders in the Walpole community, which ranged from meetings with parent groups, community leaders, student groups, town officials, and staff. In the last several months, I visited the schools, attended both community and school events, and participated in district and community meetings.

The goal of this report is to share what I learned and is organized by these prevailing themes: opportunity to learn: meeting the needs of all students; teaching and learning in the 21st century; and district culture. The themes that emerged from this process will lead to a strategy for continued growth. These findings do not include solutions. Instead, they represent patterns that emerged during this process that will require further discussion and investigations as we develop a strategy for district improvement. I am grateful for all of those who gave their time to provide such open and honest feedback. This process has only strengthened my appreciation for the community and Walpole Public Schools. I am honored to have the opportunity to lead a school district as we educate all students to achieve success.

## **Theme 1: Opportunity to Learn: Meeting the Needs of All Students**

### **Strengths**

- Throughout my conversations with stakeholder groups, there was a widespread agreement that Walpole Public Schools is a high performing district with an eye on student learning. Numerous parents expressed that they moved to Walpole because of the school system. There is a widespread perception that WPS has dedicated staff who strive to individualize instruction to meet the needs of all learners and work to provide a safe, nurturing, and challenging environment.
- In addition to providing diverse curriculum offerings, the district focuses on the whole child. Most notable was the high level of feedback regarding the extra curricular programming available to students. Many commented on programming such as the WHS Film Festival, robotics programs, and a variety of student leadership opportunities. These programs provide multiple opportunities for students to become engaged and connected with their school community. As one former parent noted, “Walpole Schools programming is excellent. It motivates students to learn and is designed to be both authentic and inclusive in nature.” For the 2018-2019 school year, aside from the sports program, Walpole High School listed 52 clubs and organizations.
- The district is recognized for committing resources to focus on Social Emotional Learning (SEL). With the support of the community, in the past two years, WPS hired 2 elementary adjustment counselors, 1 middle school psychologist, and 2 high school counselors. An SEL Steering Team was created to develop and implement a district climate survey, audit current SEL practices and establish consistent guidelines at each level. SEL goals and objectives are also reflected in the District’s Strategic Plan, Leadership Team goals, and School Improvement Plans. WHS staff also created P.R.I.D.E. (Positivity, Respect, Integrity, Drive and Empathy) to help improve school culture. Additionally, parents commented that the staff focuses on the “prioritization of the whole child.” “Teachers and administration give their time above and beyond” to develop relationships.

- The district continues to serve our special needs population, and there are many in-district programs to educate our students in their home community. In 2018-2019, the special education population was reported as 13.9% compared to the state average of 18.1%. Less than 1% of the student population represents outside placements, supporting the commitment of quality in-district programs. Over the past three years, audits have been completed for a variety of special education programs, such as the high school co-teaching program, an in-district program at Fisher Elementary School, and the preschool program. In 2018, year-long training was provided for Education Support Personnel on inclusive practices. Families indicated that a collaborative partnership exists between home and school. “Staff is proactive in making suggestions for my child, and he is getting what he needs. It’s a partnership.” This year, the Special Olympics recognized Walpole High School as a National Unified Champion School for achieving national standards of excellence in the areas of inclusion, advocacy, and respect. WHS was one of only 16 schools in Massachusetts and 179 schools nationwide to achieve this status for the 2018-19 school year.
- For the past three years, the district committed resources to reduce full-day kindergarten tuition. With the goal to create equitable opportunities for all children to attend full-day kindergarten, the seven-year plan has reduced the number of students attending kindergarten part-time from 19% in 2016-2017 to 4% in 2019-2020. In the last three years, full-day attendance has increased by 10% as tuition has decreased, and opportunities for financial aid are now available.

### **Opportunities for Inquiry**

- A review of assessment data shows that WPS achieves at high levels. In terms of accountability, 2019 data indicated substantial progress toward achieving targets. However, there is still room for improvement in order to close the achievement gap or the disparities in academic performance among subgroups of students, such as students with disabilities, economic status, English Learners, and ethnicity/race. District level benchmarking measures are under development as there needs to be a consistent

district-wide plan for ensuring consistency across the grades in order to (1) track measures of student growth (2) analyze student data and (3) utilize the data to provide effective interventions and drive instruction.

- Research shows that there is a direct correlation between attendance and student achievement (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; National Forum on Education Statistics, 2009). DESE defines chronic absenteeism as a child who is absent 10% or more of the school year (18 out of 180 school days). Chronic absenteeism is also one factor of a district’s accountability report.

Student Group	Attendance Rate	Average # of Absences	Absent 10 or more days	Chronically Absent (10% or more)	Unexcused > 9 days
All Student	95.5	8.0	27.0	7.1	14.4
Female	95.5	8.0	28.1	6.8	14.4
Male	95.5	8.0	25.9	7.4	14.4
Economically Disadvantaged	92.9	12.0	39.8	18.3	25.4
High Needs	93.7	10.8	36.7	15.6	22.2
LEP English language learner	94.4	8.7	38.1	17.7	25.9
Students with disabilities	93.1	12.0	36.1	16.4	20.1
American Indian or Alaskan Native	95.2	8.7	33.3	8.3	25.0
Asian	95.9	7.2	30.8	7.3	16.6
Hispanic or Latino	94.2	9.8	34.2	11.5	20.1
Multi-race, non-Hispanic or Latino	94.8	9.1	20.4	9.7	11.7
White	95.6	7.8	26.4	6.4	13.6
African American/Black	94.3	9.5	27.0	13.5	21.6

Table 1: Overall District Student Attendance 2018-2019

Group	2018 Rate (%)	2019 Rate (%)	Change	Target	N	Points	Reason
All Students	3.5	4.9	1.4	2.5	2,349	0	Declined
Lowest Performing	4.2	8.3	4.1	2.1	318	0	Declined
High needs	7.6	10.4	2.8	5.7	671	0	Declined
Econ. Disadvantaged	10.5	13.5	3.0	8.1	275	0	Declined
E.L. and Former E.L.	-	-	-	-	221	-	-
Students w/ disabilities	7.8	11.0	3.2	5.4	325	0	Declined
Amer. Ind. or Alaska Nat.	-	-	-	-	9	-	-
Asian	-	-	-	-	180	-	-
Afr. Amer./Black	-	-	-	-	89	-	-
Hispanic/Latino	-	-	-	-	146	-	-
Multi-race, Non-Hisp./Lat.	-	-	-	-	84	-	-
Nat. Hawk. or Pacif. Isl.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
White	3.2	4.6	1.3	2.0	1,577	3	Met Target

Table 2: Chronic Absenteeism Non-high school 2018-2019

Group	2018 Rate (%)	2019 Rate (%)	Change	Target	N	Points	Reason
All Students	11.4	11.7	0.3	9.6	1,167	1	No Change
Lowest Performing	20.9	14.9	-6.0	15.5	67	4	Exceeded Target
High needs	26.6	26.9	2.3	25.7	273	0	Declined
Econ. Disadvantaged	31.1	36.2	5.1	25.5	116	0	Declined
EL and Former EL	-	-	-	-	44	-	-
Students w/ disabilities	27.7	29.9	2.2	24.2	154	0	Declined
Amer. Ind. or Alaska Natl.	-	-	-	-	3	-	-
Asian	-	-	-	-	59	-	-
Afr. Amer./Black	-	-	-	-	47	-	-
Hispanic/Latino	-	-	-	-	65	-	-
Multi-race, Non-Hispanic	-	-	-	-	23	-	-
Natl. Hawk. or Pacif. Isl.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
White	11.0	10.9	-0.1	9.2	970	2	Improved Below Target

Table 3: Chronic Absenteeism - High school 2018-2019

As Table 1 indicates, although WPS had a 95.5% attendance rate, the chronic absenteeism rate was 7.1%. Further analysis shows that 18.3% of economically disadvantaged students, 17.7% of students categorized as Limited English Proficient, and 16.4% of students with disabilities were considered chronically absent.

- Shifts in our demographic patterns have created an increase in diversity at WPS. Since October 2019, 133 (3.6%) of our student population is classified as English Learners compared to 2.7% three years ago. Today, 10% of our students' first language is not English, and over 30 students recently arrived in the United States. It is important to address these changes in the student population and investigate both delivery models and resources to support staff in order to effectively meet the needs of our diverse learners.
- Although much has been accomplished in terms of supporting SEL in the classrooms, it is important that WPS continues to integrate social-emotional practices and competencies into all aspects of the school environment. The district continues to see an increase in students who struggle with mental health challenges. There is an opportunity to build on fair and equitable discipline and bullying prevention practices, strengthen family and community partnerships, and focus on the five key skills of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships, and responsible decision-making.

## **Theme 2: Teaching and Learning in the 21st Century**

### **Strengths**

- A large investment and a high level of support exists for professional development. Staff members participate in training year-round. WPS teachers took well over 250 courses during the 2018-2019 year. One community member commented, “Walpole does a good job putting teachers in a position to grow and learn as they gain experience.” The district is committed to supporting the staff’s pursuit of educational course work. As part of professional development and curriculum planning, staff also report a high level of collaboration as this was important for both staff and student growth.
- Both students and parents commented on the diverse courses that are offered at the high school with an eye on developing new courses and extracurricular activities to support 21st century skills. There is a comprehensive offering of Advanced Placement (AP) courses with 21 AP courses at WHS. Additionally, there are 17 sections of online course offerings that support both advanced classes and credit recovery. Both students and parents commented on the range of courses, such as personal finance, robotics, web design, journalism, television/film production, and a variety of fine arts offerings.
- Over the past few years, the district has been committed to rebuilding the music program. Positions included the hiring of a 1.0 middle school chorus teacher in order to have a full-time chorus teacher at each school, a .4 increase to the middle school orchestra position that allowed for individual lessons for the string instruments, and the addition of a part-time high school orchestra teacher which allowed the high school to enhance and diversify its elective music offerings. Finally, an after school music lesson program was developed, and the district supported both middle and high school after school ensembles.
- Teaching and learning continue to adapt as education constantly changes. A three year Capital request to maintain technology infrastructure and devices will provide students with the tools to support collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving as citizens in a global society. Digital Learning Coaches model and co-teach the effective integration of digital tools and resources within the 21st century

curriculum. Walpole High School participates in FUSE, a program aimed to increase student-centered learning and to provide additional opportunities for project-based, inquiry-driven, and authentic learning.

- The district has created several support structures to ensure that students have the knowledge, skills, and competencies in the changing educational landscape. For example, headed by the Elementary Literacy Coordinator, the newly developed Literacy Leadership Team articulated a vision for the K-5 curriculum. Elementary staff are developing and implementing reading and writing units over the next 3-5 years supporting the commitment to a balanced elementary literacy program. Math coaches at both elementary and middle levels are valued by the community and are engaged in developing consistency across the levels in both benchmarking and curriculum alignment.

### **Opportunities for Inquiry**

- The district has made progress in curriculum alignment to ensure consistency for all learners across all grade levels. There is, however, a need to expand opportunities for continued analysis of instructional practices, assessments utilized, and methods of tracking student development in order to continue the focus on curriculum consistency. It is essential to examine instructional pedagogy to ensure students learn in authentic ways and invest in capacity building with a focus on effective instructional practice linked to student achievement (Fullan, 2016). It is also important to explore structures for vertical alignment in curriculum and instruction. For example, although there are practices put in place to transition students between schools (5-6 and 8-9), there is a need to strengthen the opportunity to examine the instruction and assessment methods between these grade levels. In terms of consistency, findings also yielded a need to investigate time on learning in elementary subject areas across the district and homework practices at the elementary and middle school levels, as there is inconsistency in expectation and purpose.

- Parents expressed interest in finding opportunities for elementary students to play an instrument or explore a foreign language. They recognize the competing interests of curriculum mandates and commend work being done to improve literacy and math. However, they wonder if opportunities could be provided as an extra-curricular offering outside the school day.
- As the population has become increasingly diverse, maximize opportunities to provide greater equity in the district's literature. The VOCAL survey reported that 63% of grade 8 students, 40% of grade 5 students, and 47% of grade 4 students reported that their class materials include people and examples that reflect their race, cultural background and/or identity.
- Both parents and teachers spoke about their dissatisfaction with the elementary report cards. Many parents have expressed that they do not get a true picture of how their child is performing with the current report card system. The report card should be used as an important tool in furthering an understanding about student growth.
- All high achieving school districts are restlessly looking for ways to be effective. One unintended consequence is the proliferation of initiatives. Teachers often expressed, specifically at the elementary schools, initiative overload. There is an opportunity to examine the programs currently in place and identify professional development support structures in order to create sustainability and commitment. In relation to programming and initiatives, A Five Year Strategic Plan was recently developed for the District. A review of the Plan indicated that most goals and objectives were to be completed in one year. A focus on a smaller number of ambitious goals with a focus on improving teaching and learning for the district may result in continuous improvement and sustainability (Fullan, 2016).
- Many have expressed the need for improved building facilities, specifically at middle and high schools. With the district's acceptance into the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) "feasibility period" in December, we have an important and exciting opportunity to address the needs of our middle school buildings that will be our focus for the next several years. The town also supported funds to complete a Feasibility Study at

Walpole High School, which will examine potential solutions and ensure that WPS remains competitive in the educational landscape.

### **Theme 3: District Culture**

#### **Strengths**

- Overall, stakeholders speak positively about their experiences at Walpole Public Schools. A strong sense of pride exists, as community members stated that the “schools are inclusive and part of the community.” One parent commented about the district’s positive outreach and that “the school doors are open.”
- Parents report that there are opportunities to become involved in their child’s schools through volunteer work and various school events. Increased communication through teacher and principal curriculum highlights enables parents to get a better sense of what is occurring in their child’s classrooms. Parent Advisory Councils, Booster Clubs, School Councils, and Friends of Music are strong advocates for district programs. Last year, an English Learner PAC was created to discuss educational opportunities for English Learners, network with other families, and build collaborative partnerships.
- The schools enjoy a strong, collaborative relationship with the Select Board, Finance Committee, Capital Committee, Town Administrator, and School Committee. The town continues to support the district’s budget and Capital Improvement Plans. During my conversations, there was a collective agreement about the importance of collaboration and communication in order to maintain a high performing school district.
- The School Committee and the Leadership Team work collaboratively to make decisions that are in the best interests of students. Additionally, a strong relationship exists between the School Committee, Administrative Leadership, and the Walpole Teachers Association. Frequent communication allows for conflict resolution in a productive, proactive, and respectful manner. The collaborative culture of all bargaining units supports the mission of the district.
- Strong partnerships exist with community organizations. In addition to parent groups, organizations include Walpole Cable, Council on Aging, and Walpole Drug and Alcohol

Coalition. Walpole recently partnered with Spark Kindness, whose mission is “to build kind, empowered and inclusive communities where no child or family feels alone, bullied, unsupported or unconnected and creates a culture that empowers youth.” There are also strong partnerships between Walpole Public Schools, the Walpole Police Department, and the Walpole Fire Department. The School Resource Officers provide support to all of the schools and collaboration exists with the police department in regards to youth engagement and school safety.

### **Opportunities for Inquiry**

- The Leadership of the district is comprised of a 13 member team referred to as Leadership Council. The Council consists of 8 principals, Director of Digital Learning, Director of Pupil Services, School Business Administrator, Assistant Superintendent, and Superintendent. Although the Leadership Council was stable in the past, retirements in the past two years have resulted in 9 new leadership positions, who come to Walpole from both in and out of the district. This creates opportunities for the Team to bring multiple perspectives, fresh ideas, and vibrant energy as they collectively work to build relationships and share the responsibility to improve teaching and learning.
- Although strong partnerships exist with some community organizations, there is an opportunity to explore ways to partner with Walpole businesses and groups that are not as closely connected to the schools.
- Although there is evidence of communicating about our curriculum and district events, there is a need to explore opportunities to better communicate the district’s values and culture. For example, each school has its own set of articulated values, the district as a school system does not have articulated core values. There is a real opportunity in the near future to better articulate and communicate the district’s values to connect with all stakeholders.
- Our community and our schools are experiencing an increase in diversity. Throughout the years, staff have participated in courses such as *Understanding Identities* and have collaborated with Kathy Lopes, Former Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at METCO. There has been middle school leadership participation at the ADL World of

Difference Conference and high school clubs, such as *LGBTQ and Equity/Diversity*. It is important that both students and families continue to feel welcome in our schools. There is an opportunity to explore professional development in cultural awareness and culturally responsive teaching. Leaders must also provide teachers with methods for shaping instruction that values, appreciates, affirms, and builds on diversity. Additionally, the district should expand methods towards hiring more diverse teaching staff that reflects our student population.

### **Next Steps**

Over the spring and summer, the findings from this report will be used to create a *Strategy for District Improvement*. This *Strategy for District Improvement* is comprised of specific objectives and prioritize initiatives that drive improvement in student learning and growth. This collaborative, thorough, and thoughtful process will involve our Leadership Team and also be developed in conjunction with the district Strategic Plan.

I continue to be impressed with the high level of collaboration and interdependence of the Walpole students, staff, families, administrators, and community members. Everyone has a role to play in developing a committed common vision of equity, access, and success for all students. Together, we must continue to encourage a culture of a collaborative learning community that focuses on continuous improvement and optimizes each student's potential. I look forward to the exciting and important work ahead.

## References.

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