

SUPERINTENDENT REPORT ON ENTRY PROCESS

Jennifer Cheatham, Ed.D.

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Dear families, community and staff,

When I started in Madison on April 1, I began with a structured 90-day entry plan to guide my daily activities. I wanted to build a shared understanding of our district's strengths and challenges—learning as much as possible, in the shortest amount of time possible, as accurately as possible – so that we can identify a way forward that ensures every school is a thriving school that prepares every student for college and career.

At this juncture, I want to report on what I learned during the “listening and learning” phase of this plan. While I will continue to listen and learn as your superintendent, this report marks our transition into an aggressive planning stage so that we can start the next school year strong.

I am happy to report that over the last two months, I have visited each of our 48 schools, as well as several of our alternative programs, after-school programs, community early childhood care and education centers, and our alternative high school. Each visit has been a substantial one that included a meeting with teachers and staff, classroom observations and meeting with the principal and members of their leadership team. In middle and high schools, I've also been able to talk with students about their experiences. Visits within each high school attendance area culminated in four community meetings.



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During the same time, I've also met with parents, elected officials, community leaders, university partners, religious leaders, business leaders and union leaders. Our conversations have been open, honest and productive, and I've learned an incredible amount about our district.

I know that there is a lot of work ahead of us, but every day as I learn more about our schools, I become clearer on where we need to go and more confident that we're going to get there.

Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to talk with me and help me learn about our district through this process. The work ahead will take urgency, determination and tenacity, but my experience over the past two months has made me confident that we can get there because I know that all of the ingredients for success are here in Madison.

I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Cheatham

Overall Themes

Strengths

Quality of teachers, principals, and central office staff: By and large, we have quality teachers, principals, support staff and central office staff who are committed to working hard on behalf of the children of Madison. With clarity of focus, support, and accountability, these dedicated educators will be able to serve our students incredibly well.

Commitment to action: Across the community and within schools, there is not only support for public education, but there is also an honest recognition of our challenges and an urgency to address them. While alarming gaps in student achievement exist, our community has communicated a willingness to change and a commitment to action.

Positive behavior: District-wide efforts to implement an approach to positive student behavior are clearly paying off. Student behavior is very good across the vast majority of schools and classrooms. Most students are safe and supported, which sets the stage for raising the bar for all students academically.

Promising practices: The district has some promising programs in place to challenge students academically, like our AVID/TOPS program at the middle and high school levels, the one-to-one iPad programs in several of our elementary schools, and our Dual Language Immersion programs. The district also does an incredibly successful job of inclusion and support of students with special needs. Generally, I've observed some of the most joyful and challenging learning environments I've ever seen.

Well-rounded education: Finally, the district offers a high level of access to the arts, sports, world language and other enriching activities that provide students with a well-rounded learning experience. This is a strength on which we can build.

“Positive Behavior Support has made a dramatic improvement in teaching and the behavior expected. We’ve seen big changes in kids knowing what is expected and in us having consistent, schoolwide expectations”

- Staff member

“AVID is totally paying off. Kids, staff, everyone is excited about what it has brought to the school.” - Staff member



Overall Themes (continued)

Challenges

Focus: Principals, teachers and students have been experiencing an ever-changing and expanding set of priorities that make it difficult for them to focus on the day-to-day work of knowing every child well and planning instruction accordingly. If we are going to be successful, we need to be focused on a clear set of priorities aimed at measurable goals, and we need to sustain this focus over time.

“One of the strengths of MMSD is that we will try anything. The problem is that we opt out just as easily as we opt in. We don’t wait to see what things can really do.”

- Staff member

Coherence: In order for students to be successful, they need to experience an education that leads them from Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade, systematically and seamlessly preparing them for graduation and postsecondary education. We’ve struggled to provide our teachers with the right tools, resources and support to ensure that coherence for every child.

Personalized Learning: We need to work harder than ever to keep students engaged through a relevant and personalized education at the middle and high school levels. We’ve struggled to ensure that all students have an educational experience that gives them a glimpse of the bright futures. Personalized learning also requires increased access to and integrated use of technology.

Priority Areas

To capture as many voices as accurately as possible, my entry plan included a uniquely comprehensive analysis process. Notes from more than 100 meetings, along with other handouts, emails, and resources, were analyzed and coded for themes by Research & Program Evaluation staff. This data has been used to provide weekly updates to district leadership, content for this report and information to fuel the internal planning process that follows these visits.

The listening and learning phase has led us to five major areas to focus our work going forward. Over the next month, we’ll dive deeper into each of these areas to define the work, the action we need to take and how we’ll measure our progress. The following pages outline our priorities, what we learned to guide us to these priorities and where we’ll focus our planning in the coming month.

We will provide every student with well-rounded, culturally responsive, and coherent instruction that leads to college and career readiness.

It is critical that we provide every student with an education from Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade that systematically and seamlessly prepares them for graduation and postsecondary education. A well-rounded, culturally responsive and coherent approach to instruction will ensure that all our students have obtained the knowledge and skills necessary for both college and the workplace. The Common Core State Standards, which raise the bar academically, will help us hold our students and ourselves to high expectations.

What we learned:

Over the last year, the district has begun to make progress on a coherent approach to instruction. For example, the district selected new core instructional materials in literacy and a common curriculum for social-emotional learning at the elementary level. The district has also provided new assessments and literacy intervention materials to identify and support students who are struggling with reading. District-wide culturally responsive training also took place this year. These efforts have been applauded by most teachers and principals as a positive step in the right direction.

However, school-based educators do not yet have all the tools they need to be successful. One of the



biggest concerns among most staff is feeling unprepared for the coming implementation of the Common Core State Standards. The standards will raise the bar for achievement so that we can ensure that the students we graduate are truly prepared to be successful in today's economy. They ensure a focus on critical thinking and problem solving. However, because teachers have not had enough time to learn about the standards in depth, most are unsure how to put them into practice in the classroom.

In addition, while the district has begun to implement interventions for struggling students, it needs to identify support for high achievers as well.

"I know research shows memorization and regurgitation doesn't stay with kids. I want my kids to be able to think and problem solve, not just find information." - Parent

"We're flying the plane and building it at the same time." - Staff member

We will engage students in charting personalized pathways to college and career readiness.

It is essential that students are engaged in a relevant learning experience and that they, with the support of their families, are able to navigate the middle and high school experience so that they have multiple options upon graduation.

What we learned:

The district has implemented some programs in middle and high schools that are showing great promise, including teaming structures that allow teachers to know students well, AVID/TOPS classes and tutoring to support students in successfully completing more rigorous coursework at high school, and the Link Crew that provides support for incoming 9th graders.

However, there is not yet a consistent approach to personalizing the learning experience, and engagement and relevance are major challenges we observed at the high school level. In all conversations, people spoke to the need for high expectations

"I wanted to take control of my education and stop just memorizing facts. I've learned things here I'll use later in life."

- Student

for all students, culminating in graduation and college and career readiness. High school students spoke to the need for all courses to be rigorous, as well as expanding access and encouragement for honors and advanced courses to a more diverse group of students.

Students are pleased with the variety of opportunities within MMSD, but were concerned that they did not receive sufficient support from counselors and teachers to develop their own pathway to graduation. Many called for more support at the school level, as well as guidance on issues like financial literacy, the college application process and career selection.

We also spoke with community leaders, including business community and university partners, who are willing to work with the district and lend their expertise to making relevant and engaging pathways a reality in our high schools.



We will engage families and community members as partners.

Families and community members must be viewed as essential partners in our success. When we align our efforts and everyone has a charge—educators, parents, and community members alike – children will benefit.

What we learned:

Madison schools enjoy the support of an incredibly engaged community. Many community and parent groups seek to support schools through programming and educational efforts. The district's newly developed guidelines for partnerships provide a clear and transparent process for developing these partnerships.

While there are a multitude of partner organizations in Madison, their work is not yet clearly aligned to a set of powerful priorities. For example, there has been great work on mental health through a community task force. There has also been positive discussion around out of school time, and there is great opportunity to align forces with the city, county and community organizations to ensure high-quality programming.



“We need to explore and be honest about how the district is setting the table for parents to be involved. It’s one thing to say we want involvement and another to actually allow it.” - Parent

Many parents discussed the need to provide better communication and systems that enable them to be engaged and advocate for their children. Staff recognize the importance of empowering all parents to be involved in their child's education, but many parents still identified barriers to communication with their schools and teachers.

Parents also need a better understanding of expectations for their child. As academic expectations increase, parents need clear, concise understanding of what is expected and how they can help their children in achieving those goals.

Timely communication, combined with accessible and understandable report cards and assessment results, will help parents and teachers work together to help children succeed.

“It’s about relationship building, that you are handing your child over to someone who ‘gets’ them.” - Parent

We must cultivate a work environment that attracts, develops and retains top-level talent.

We need talented educators who represent the diversity of our student population at every level of the system. We must ensure that all students are taught by excellent teachers and staff members who are thriving professionally — and this is not possible without excellent principals leading each of our schools.

What we learned:

The district is working to improve support systems for teachers and principals through the development of school leadership teams and school-based coaches. Our system of school-based coaches, in particular, appears to be valued by many teachers and principals. Additionally, a mentoring program helps provide support for new teachers.

Although the district has quality and committed staff overall, we need to focus on developing our staff as professionals at every level of the organization. For example, educational assistants in particular felt like they were lacking professional development tailored to their work. From teachers, to central office staff, to support staff in schools, all employees need opportunities to grow and thrive as professionals.

Low morale is a particular concern among teachers and educational assistants, which makes it more difficult to recruit and retain talented people. Teachers and educational assistants want opportunities to build their capacity through high-quality professional development and sufficient collaborative planning time. They want more clarity related to core instruction with aligned tools and resources while also having the flexibility to make decisions based on the needs of individual students. They also want a clear voice in district decision-making when it affects the classroom. In all, they want a work environment that supports them in doing their best work.

Similarly, principals expressed the need for role clarity and support as instructional leaders. Many principals want to spend more time in classrooms, coaching teachers and working with teacher teams to help guide instructional planning and spend less time attending to managerial duties.

“We need to empower principals to be instructional leaders, to support teachers and kids.” - Staff member

Finally, students, parents, and community members voiced frustration at the lack of cultural and racial diversity in the current school and central office staff. Many people of color spoke to the need for strong role models within the school and district and concern about hiring, promotion, and retention practices that may prevent candidates of color from entering and staying in the workforce.

“When you come to a school, you just want someone who looks like you, can relate to you, understands you” - Student



We will ensure accountability at every level.

A high-functioning organization must provide role clarity at every level of the system, support for employees to perform their roles well, and accountability for both implementation of proven practices and outcomes.

“People want to know how data connects to the real world.” - Parent

What we learned:

The district has begun providing improved and increased data to schools to help monitor progress and ensure accountability, including continuously updated information through the Data Dashboard.

However, while there is data available from various assessments, staff felt unprepared to effectively use data to make decisions about instruction. In school visits and conversations with staff, we observed and heard about a lack of regular data use. We need systems and support in place to ensure that staff are continuously reviewing data and using it to make decisions at every level of the system.

Staff in many schools felt central office staff were not connected or accountable to their day-to-day work. Accountability at every level of the system will be important as new state-mandated initiatives like the teacher and principal evaluation systems and the state’s new Common Core-aligned assessment system are phased in. Clearer expectations and systems to support and monitor staff in achieving those expectations are needed.



To ensure accountability at all levels, staff need more opportunities to learn about data use, including both data on student achievement and engagement, and data on teacher practices.

“The system is there, but now we need to transition into it being part of the culture that we engage with data and do something with it on an ongoing basis.” - Staff member

Timeline and Next Steps

Our Next Steps

We are now beginning an aggressive planning phase so that we can start the next school year strong. Rather than go through a long strategic planning process, we are going to move swiftly to decisive action.



June

During June, I'll bring together a group of staff, teachers and principals to hone in on how we can accomplish work in our priority areas. I'll continue to meet and talk with parents and community members throughout this process.

Our transition team of national and local education experts will continue its work through June, meeting with staff, parents and gathering and analyzing data. They will present a report to the Board of Education on June 24.

July

We'll complete final planning in July on both our framework and budget.

At the Board's regular meeting in July, I will present our framework, with clear action steps for next year, along with my updated budget recommendations.

August

With our new framework in place and school staff returning, we'll begin our work for the school year with clarity and focus.

Stay involved through the process

We need your support and feedback to ensure that every school is a thriving school that prepares every student for college and career. To stay involved, visit www.mmsd.org/superintendent.

- There, you can:
- Read the entry plan report and updates
 - Sign up to receive email updates
 - Submit your feedback on the entry plan report
 - Pledge to support Madison Schools

