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SUPERINTENDENT ENTRY PLAN
NORTHBRIDGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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SUPERINTENDENT ENTRY & LEARNING PLAN

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SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

FINAL REPORT
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The Entry & Learning Process

This Entry & Learning Plan process was designed to assist me in developing a comprehensive picture of the Northbridge Public Schools that included the students, staff, parents and community. My plan consisted of conducting interviews with various individuals and groups, collecting email responses from all constituents as well as reviewing a number of plans and documents, in an effort to develop a sense of the system and provide a basis for future goals, objectives and activities. This is a good school system with much strength and many areas of excellence. Please recognize that there is always room for improvement; each of us and our school system can grow, learn and strive for excellence.

General Goals & Specific Objectives of the Entry & Learning Plan Process

- ✚ Learn about the people, place and organization.
- ✚ Build on the successful foundation in place.
- ✚ Identify key issues in the past to understand the norms that affect how the school system functions now and in the future.
- ✚ Identify areas in need of improvement and systems that need to be in place.
- ✚ Prioritize these needs.
- ✚ Establish how these needs will be met.

Interviews

The following individuals were interviewed or information was collected as part of the Entry & Learning Plan process.

- ✚ Northbridge School Committee Members
- ✚ Interim Superintendent
- ✚ Business Manager
- ✚ Northbridge Principals & Assistants
- ✚ Special Education Director
- ✚ Athletic Director
- ✚ Curriculum Leaders
- ✚ Teachers and Staff
- ✚ Students
- ✚ Parents and Community Leaders
- ✚ Town Manager and Selectmen
- ✚ Finance Committee Members

Visitations and Open Forums

In addition, the entry plan process included visits to each school, attendance at staff meetings at each building, and attendance at PTA meetings and other community events.

Document Review

The following documents were reviewed as part of the Entry and Learning Process.

- ✚ Mission and Vision
- ✚ School Committee Goals
- ✚ Policy Manual
- ✚ District Strategic Plan
- ✚ District Technology Plan
- ✚ Capital Improvement Plan
- ✚ Financial, Personnel and Enrollment Data
- ✚ School Improvement Plans
- ✚ MCAS Results
- ✚ Organizational Charts and Job Descriptions
- ✚ Supervision and Evaluation Process and Evaluations
- ✚ Collective Bargaining Agreements
- ✚ Pending Litigation
- ✚ EQA Report
- ✚ Curriculum Materials
- ✚ Program Descriptions and Reviews
- ✚ District Based Student Assessments
- ✚ Teacher & Student Handbooks

Major Findings

The Entry & Learning Plan process has allowed me to interact with and collect data from a significant number of stakeholders. In addition, the document review provided me with a history of what is already in place. Major findings of this process include the following:

1. The Northbridge School Committee is a group of people with diverse interests, communication and management styles, and expectations. This group does an exceptional job of working together, and with the Superintendent and Leadership Team, in establishing goals and priorities for the school system.
2. The cohesive long-range vision for the school system had not been examined in a number of years. Until recently no action planning had taken place to define goals and to implement the steps necessary to realize the vision.
3. Northbridge is, in many ways, a system of schools, rather than a school system. While this provides for many advantages (i.e., innovation in programming, possibility of increased individual accountability, focus on the needs of students and staff), it also results in certain disadvantages (i.e., lack of consistency in program and curricular offerings, lack of equity among schools, lack of aligned expectations.)

4. The system policy manual is inconsistent with certain important practices within the system and was overdue for an extensive examination. The Policy Subcommittee is currently working with MASC and has developed a thorough and ongoing review process.
5. The school system's organization chart and job descriptions are significantly out of date and in need of revision.
6. There is some level of disconnect among members of this community regarding the financial needs of the school system and the impacts fiscal constraints have on school choice out of the district and student achievement such as MCAS, the graduation rate, and various aspects of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB).
7. Town officials expressed concern and distrust regarding the prior financial disclosures and state of affairs in the Northbridge Public Schools.
8. The quarterly Town and District finance meetings and the Budget Subcommittee meetings are a valuable tool in providing a framework for current and future budgets.
9. The Town and District should develop a partnership for the discussion of priorities between town and school officials, while avoiding the budget "warfare" that occurs in many communities.
10. The Town and District should work to develop a Political Action Committee to ensure the financial stability of all Town departments for FY 12. The facts and numbers should be communicated consistently and effectively to all community members in order to proactively plan for the needs of our students and schools and avoid the funding cliff. Great Schools = Great Towns.
11. Parents are concerned about the inconsistencies and perceived inequities among schools; school culture (i.e., social skills, behavioral expectations); attracting and retaining the best teachers; the availability and use of technology; the differentiation of instruction throughout the system; the vertical and horizontal alignment of curriculum in all content areas; mathematics instruction; writing instruction; the implementation of world languages at the middle level; and accelerated pathways for advanced learners at all levels.
12. It appears that a procedure and required documentation was not in place to resolve and document discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion, national origin, color, homelessness, sexual orientation, age or disability in its education programs, services, activities, or employment practices.

13. The building level leadership in this system is outstanding. However, Principals have not historically had an opportunity to discuss “best practices” occurring at their schools or work collaboratively as a Leadership Team.
14. The Curriculum and Program Review process has been absent for several years. They are viewed as extremely important initiatives by all stakeholders. It is critically important that the process of examining each program and curriculum area is carefully administered, and that the recommendations put forward from each group be carefully considered and, where appropriate, adopted and budgeted. The educators need to move from text book based curriculum to standards based curriculum, instruction and assessment.
15. The professional development program has been under funded and lacked meaningful and relevant offerings. However, the tuition and conference reimbursement programs offer equitable opportunities for all staff.
16. Professional development in data driven instruction, differentiated instruction, inclusion/co-teaching and 21st Century Learning are eminent needs.
17. There is a clear need for an improved professional development program for educational support personnel, as well as other groups (e.g., custodians, clerical personnel, instructional assistants) within the system.
18. The present supervision and evaluation model is adequate at this time.
19. The student reporting system needs revision and should be standards based. The elementary teachers would like to see a trimester reporting system.
20. Teachers are concerned about school culture (i.e., respect for the profession), class size, the array of different learning needs in their classes, the availability and use of technology, and contractual issues (e.g., attracting and retaining the best teachers, salary, benefits and working conditions). In addition, teachers articulated a need for meeting time among grade level practitioners from each elementary building and collaboration/co-planning time at the middle and high schools.
21. Although there are many positive practices occurring throughout the system that deal with “social competency,” Northbridge has not articulated a cohesive Prek-12 vision of what we believe in and, more importantly, practice in this important area.
22. There is a strong perception that the school system has fallen behind surrounding communities with respect to academic programs.

23. Our high school juniors and seniors feel that Northbridge High School is a special place to learn because of: the welcoming environment, school spirit, students get along with each other, sports, friendly teachers and administrators that are always willing to lend a helping hand, the school has a united vision and mission, the curriculum is rigorous and relevant offering both AP and Virtual High School online classes.
24. It is a pervasive sentiment that Northbridge is not competitive with Blackstone Valley Technical High School. Additionally, Blackstone Valley has not admitted many students into the vocational programs that many of our students sorely need. There is a need to improve vocational pathways at our comprehensive high school in order to meet the needs of students that want to develop a trade.
25. There is some level of concern that there has not been a high quality mentoring and induction program for teachers new to Northbridge.
26. The business functions within the Northbridge system are managed extremely well. However, certain operational aspects of the system are not viewed as being as strong as they should be. The District and Town need to develop a system that can encumber salaries and provide monthly fiscal reports.
27. There is a need for a part time human resource specialist. Human resource management, including credential management, benefits administration, leave administration, attendance administration, personnel records administration and a myriad of miscellaneous responsibility areas need dedicated time in order to improve organizational efficiency and effectiveness and to limit liability in personnel areas.
28. Special education programs in the system appear to meet the needs of most students. There is a growing population of students with behavioral needs and students across the Autism spectrum. While the special education staff is dedicated and conscientious, the inconsistent leadership has adversely affected the department.
29. Northbridge has as an active special education parent advisory group, although limited in number.
30. The roles, responsibilities and duties of the Team Chairs have not historically been aligned to the job description. There has not been a coordinated effort and vision within the team.
31. The program for English Language Learners is being developed based on the recommendations of the Coordinated Program Review.
32. The Title I program has lacked consistent vision and leadership. Each building developed a unique program to meet the needs of students. The program has not

been successful as an after school offering. Title I should be part of student services delivered during the school day. The parent advisory council has been meeting monthly; there is no evidence that occurred in the past.

33. There are many talented people working as team leaders and department heads. However, the specific roles and responsibilities and time spent outside of the school day compared to the stipend received vary.
34. One of the significant areas of strength in this school system is the early childhood program. However, this program faces major challenges of available space, and the ability to maintain appropriate ratios of special education and typical students.
35. Although the district was reorganized grades prek-4 there are significant space issues at Balmer School. One Title I teacher delivers services in the hallway.
36. The district did not previously send out letters of intent to the School Building Authority for Balmer, Northbridge Elementary School and the Northbridge Middle School, but now has done so.
37. Northbridge employs a significant number of outstanding educational leaders and professional teachers. During classroom visits, I have witnessed truly outstanding teaching and learning, as well as a focus on students and their needs.
38. Major transition issues had not been adequately addressed. New programs are in place to ensure smooth transitions between buildings. The High School Link Program, the grades 4-5 transition program, and the parent open houses have been extremely well received.
39. The system must improve the quality of communication to parents and the community, including Ed Connect, websites and backpack communication for notices and newsletters etc.
40. Our schools should develop plans for community use such as the high school field house, and the computer labs. A new senior citizen luncheon at the high school has received rave reviews.
41. The Balmer and Northbridge Elementary Schools benefit from active PTAs. There is some concern that parents are not welcomed and involved in the middle school. The Northbridge community is grateful for the support of the Northbridge Education Foundation. The money raised by the PTA's and NEF make a significant difference for our students and teachers.

42. The Balmer and Northbridge Elementary Schools benefit from very active after school programs. Many grade prek-4 working parents are looking for affordable morning care. Parents expressed a need for before and after school programming for middle level students.
43. The emergency plan and protocols are outdated. There should be significant collaboration between public safety agencies and first responders.

Recommendations

It is very clear that Northbridge is a public school system that is recovering from the fiscal devastation of the past and is currently a district on the move. There is great community pride in the new high school and the sports programs. However, it is also true that we can do better in providing outstanding educational services and opportunities to all of our students. Based on my interviews, observations, readings and experiences during my first eight (8) months serving as Northbridge Superintendent, I would recommend the following actions. It is worthy to note that there have been many new initiatives since the opening of the 2009-2010 school year.

1. The system should implement short and long term goals with measurable objectives. This has been ongoing through the Goals Subcommittee of the School Committee; the Northbridge School Committee and the District and School Improvement Plans. ~ Ongoing
2. The system should review and revise the current organization chart, job descriptions and policy manual, and ensure that the administration and School Committee regularly review these documents. ~ Ongoing
3. The system should continue to provide opportunities for the Leadership Team to meet consistently and to discuss "best practices" and other programs that have been implemented in their schools. In addition, the central administration must provide a framework within which Principals can operate, make decisions, implement programs, and develop strategies so that the system can continue to provide for the equitable distribution of resources and support building initiatives. ~ Ongoing
4. *** The system must devise formative and summative assessments beyond standardized measures. All data must be regularly and systematically analyzed, used to drive student instruction and communicated to the community. In addition, the system should develop progress benchmarks that measure the closing of the achievement gap for low income and special education students.**

5. The system should implement a regular, data-driven performance assessment process, including surveys of parents, students and teachers regarding education and the school system. This data should be collected at least every three years and should be utilized as an important part of the system's decision-making model. In addition, the system should develop a formal process for conducting ongoing surveys of Northbridge High School graduates.
6. The district should develop an Alumni Association. A Friends of Music Association and a Friends of Lasell group to financially support current initiatives such as turfing Lasell Field and improving our music program have already been developed.
7. The system should include a zero based budget process. There should be a long range plan to fund the cost of contracts and anticipated initiatives (e.g., program and curriculum review, specialized programs, libraries, technology, and world language). ~ Ongoing
8. There is a need for a part time human resource specialist and clerical staff at the school and central office.
9. *** The system must over time examine every program that is included within the umbrella of the "school system" for a determination as to how the effort fits within the system goals and, in certain cases, make modifications to and/or discontinue efforts that are redundant or outdated.**
10. The system should examine administrative functions for a determination as to how the position fits within the system goals and, in certain cases, make modifications to and/or discontinue efforts that are redundant or outdated. ~ Ongoing
11. The District should revise procedures and required documentation for incidents of discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion, national origin, color, homelessness, sexual orientation, age or disability in its education programs, services, activities, or employment practices. A central office administrator should serve as the District Equity Coordinator. ~ Ongoing
12. *** The system must identify strategies for increasing time on learning and teacher collaboration time, either through collective bargaining, creative scheduling, or some combination of both. Professional Learning Communities must become a way of doing business across the system. Time constraints prevent their full development. ~ Ongoing**
13. *** The system must improve the quality of communication to parents, including an upgrade of current information offered through the system and building websites. ~ Ongoing**

14. The system should examine current operations for areas of potential partnership with town officials such as technology and building and grounds.
15. The emergency plan is outdated. There should be significant collaboration between public safety agencies and first responders. ~ Ongoing ~ The Emergency Protocols have been revised, disseminated and all staff have been trained.
16. *** The system should implement effective professional development programming for all personnel, focused on the needs of the system, the individuals and student data. ~ Ongoing**
17. The system should remain committed to the current model of elementary education, while exploring options for providing grades 5-8 students with more middle level programming and opportunities.
18. *** The system must look for grant and private revenue to move forward in many areas such as curriculum, professional development, student assessment, special programs, and capital projects. As RTTT and other funds become available the district should be mindful of the potential funding cliff. In-depth discussion should take place prior to grant submissions to ensure that there will be smooth transition away from the grant at the conclusion of funding.**
19. The areas of fees are unpopular for parents in the community. To maintain fiscal responsibility, the system must look at fees in the areas of: transportation, food services, preschool, athletics and clubs.
20. The system should revisit the agreement regarding supervision and evaluation of teachers; consideration should be given to reducing the numbers of teachers that Principals are "evaluating" at any one time.
21. The system should revisit the job descriptions and roles and responsibilities of team leaders and middle & high school department heads
22. The system should develop a more cohesive vision for 21st Century Learning.
23. *** The Middle School must develop a proposal for consideration and implementation of a world language, technology and engineering programs for FY 11. This proposal must consider not only the model and expenses for implementation, but the ramifications of certain choices (e.g., languages) on the Middle and High School level programs. A focus of the proposal should be on additional time on learning in mathematics and ELA.**
24. The system must develop more formal summer and after-school opportunities, including providing students with MCAS remediation and assistance.

25. The system must review and revise the mentoring and induction program. ~ Ongoing
26. The system must improve how MCAS data, as well as the interpretation of student scores, is communicated to parents in order to better assist families in understanding what the testing means and how the school district can assist students in better meeting the competency determination. ~ Ongoing
27. The Middle School should explore options for organizing a PTA. ~ Ongoing
28. *** The system must continue to examine our special education programs so that student needs can be met within the Northbridge Public Schools schools, whenever possible.**
29. The system must better articulate what is meant by the development of social competency as part of what happens at school every day and to demonstrate how we “teach,” “model,” and reinforce these behaviors within our schools each day. ~ Ongoing

Conclusion

I am thrilled to serve as the Northbridge Superintendent of Schools. Furthermore, I am pleased to provide you with this Entry & Learning Plan report. I am grateful to all who met with me and or provided written response to the Entry & Learning Plan questions. A special thank you to the High School juniors and seniors for their written responses - your perspectives were invaluable.

I look forward to working with the Selectman, Finance Committee, School Committee, Leadership Team, teachers and staff to move the district forward. We will continue to celebrate the wonderful things that are part of the proud traditions of the Northbridge Public Schools. We have our challenges, chief among them inadequate funding for our schools. I hope that you agree with my assessment. Together we will make a difference. We can overcome our fiscal challenges; the schools alone cannot provide the solutions.

"...the train of childhood passes through the station only once in life; if you miss that train you will not be able to recuperate."

Dr. Joseph Biederman, Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, Boston

* Denotes Priority

It is the policy of the Northbridge Public Schools not to discriminate on the basis of race, gender, religion, national origin, color, homelessness, sexual orientation, age or disability in its education programs, services, activities, or employment practices.