



Long-Range Strategic Plan

2015 – 2020 Action Steps

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Introduction

This document is the result of a series of meetings conducted with the School Board and the leadership team of Reading School District (the District) between October 2014 and June 2015.

During these meetings, the participants:

1. analyzed the state of the District's Pathways to Excellence initiative and the five areas of focus contained within it;
2. defined goals for each of those areas;
3. established metrics to measure the District's progress in its five areas of focus over time; and
4. defined the action steps the District will implement to achieve the goals and measurably improve its performance in each of its five areas of focus (between 2015 and 2020).

The results are as follows.

Safe Schools

Current State

The current state of *Safe Schools* within the District, as assessed by its leadership team, is:

From an infrastructure standpoint, our schools are structurally sound. That said, a number of our schools were not built with today's security issues in mind. The costs to modify all schools to be safe by current student and visitor standards would be between \$1.3 and \$1.5 million. This may prove to be an essential investment for the District to make over time since there is a proven, direct correlation between school safety and academic performance.

With this understanding of status of the District's infrastructure in mind, there are a number of behavioral issues that must be addressed in order to create safer schools. Our schools have to deal with the same behaviors and issues that threaten our safety in our city and urban society-at-large. The two major issues are gangs and bullying. These community issues are complicated by the location of several of our schools (13th Street) and the way in which we currently dismiss students (all at the same time). The District's current bell schedule results in 10,000 students being dismissed into the same general area at exactly the same time. Dismissal times are the most common times for behavioral issues to emerge. (This will change next school year with the introduction of a staggered dismissal schedule.) Other safety and security concerns are created by some of the interactions between students and staff and the lack of consistent discipline within our schools and throughout the District.

The District conducted a School Climate Survey in 2013. This survey showed that 72 percent of our employees report they feel safe in our schools, although this percentage varies significantly between schools. Employees at the high school levels feel less safe than at the lower grade levels, and only 36 percent of our teachers report the District has an effective discipline policy. This sense of safety does not extend to our students who often face safety issues outside of the school environment. Forty-five percent of our students report bullying problems and gang issues too common. The District is committed to re-conducting the School Climate Survey in late 2015.

Safe Schools Goal

The overriding goal of the *Safe Schools* area of focus within the District is:

All students and staff report a welcoming, respectful, and safe learning environment where everybody feels honored and connected.

Safe Schools Targets (Three-year)

The District will measure its progress toward this goal by tracking and reporting the following metrics:

- The reduction in school discipline referrals between 2015 and 2020
- The reduction in school discipline incidents between 2015 and 2020

- The reduction in serious school discipline incidents between 2015 and 2020
- Reading School District teachers and students are at or above the national average for feeling safe at school (currently 88 percent nationwide)

Safe Schools Action Steps

The action steps the District will implement between 2015 and 2020 to impact the *Safe Schools* area of focus are:

Action Steps for School Year 2015 – 2016

- Implement the OLWEUS bullying prevention pilot and determine how it will be used in the future.
- Conduct *Safe Schools* online training for all staff.
- Conduct a School Climate Survey on school safety.
- Update our Code of Conduct Handbook, to include staff roles and responsibilities, and communicate it to all District personnel.
- Redevelop and implement crisis intervention teams to respond to and support students who have serious behavior problems.
- Evaluate the School Police Officer (SPO) model within the District.
- Continue to build relationships with local law enforcement agencies to explore resources to maintain a safe school environment.
- Update our Memorandum of Understanding with local police.
- Implement professional development for cultural competency and develop strategies to improve school and classroom positive interactions to maximize instruction, student achievement, and stakeholders' engagement.

Action Steps for Later Years

- Implement school-wide PBIS at each school (at the school-level).
- Accurately define our school safety baseline data.
- Conduct professional development focused on consistent classroom management.
- Increase the gang awareness and prevention activities we conduct at early grade levels.
- Increase the consistency of our anti-bullying activities.
- Reconfigure our grades to create a safer school environment.
- Evaluate our unusable capacity for future use.
- Implement alternative education for disruptive youth.

Academics

Current State

The current state of *Academics* within the District, as assessed by its leadership team, is:

While we have experienced growth in many areas, based on Academic Achievement Tests, we have a long way to go in this area of focus.

The constant turnover at the District Superintendent level has triggered a frequent change in our academic approach. Because we lack consistent academic leadership, the support system to enable administrators and faculty to focus on curriculum, and consistency and continuity throughout the District, our educational experience varies significantly, school to school. The lack of a common, written core curriculum has created inconsistency across both schools and learner groups.

The District needs instruction leadership to focus on academics, relevant and effective professional development, and building a strong academic culture for a sustained period of time. If done properly, an emphasis on strong academic demands will positively impact many other issues and learning behaviors within our schools.

To address these inadequacies, the District has selected a K through 8 curriculum, and school leadership and faculty are excited to begin implementing it. Due to its expense, the District will introduce this curriculum district-wide, for reading, math, science, and social studies, over the next three years. The state has a solid curriculum for use in grades nine through twelve, but the District needs to focus on building an instructional framework to make it successful. To ensure the success of all students, the District is coordinating its ESL and special education activities to align with its new curriculum.

Academics Goal

The overriding goal of the *Academics* area of focus within the District is:

To implement a common curriculum, based on high standards and evidence-based pedagogy, across the District that closes the achievement gap throughout our schools and student populations while adequately preparing students for college and career opportunities.

Academics Targets

The District will measure its progress toward this goal by tracking and reporting the following metrics:

- Percent attendance/participation (the target is 95 percent)
- Percent of graduation or promotion grade
- Percent of third grade students reading at grade level
- Percent of high school students taking AP or advanced courses
- Percent of students scoring three or higher on AP courses
- Percent of students scoring proficient or advanced on state assessments

- Percent of closing of the student achievement gap (over six years)
- Percent of closing the achievement gap for historically underperforming students (over six years)

Academics Action Steps

The action steps the District will implement between 2015 and 2020 to impact the *Academics* area of focus are:

Action Steps for School Year 2015 – 2016

- Implement our new K through 8 curriculum.
- Provide the professional support our faculty needs to fully deploy our written curriculum in grades K-7.
- Educate our principals to understand how to integrate our ELL population into our academic culture and climate.
- Develop a “firm” schedule for rolling out our new curriculum. (Start with Middle School.)
- Implement the Multi-tiered Support System (MTSS).
- Identify programs for nontraditional students.
- Implement culturally responsible teaching.
- Increase career awareness and planning.

Action Steps for Later Years

- Build the instructional framework to support the state’s nine through twelve curriculum.
- Assess and address our philosophy and guidelines on scheduling to better enable the deployment of our curriculum across all students.
- Create scheduling teams to develop/align our scheduling process/activities in each school.
- Educate our principals in the scheduling process.
- Modify our scheduling system to facilitate the delivery of our curriculum to special education.
- Align our ESL programs with our new curriculum.
- Develop a structure to align our special education learning activities with our new curriculum.
- Implement the professional development to enable teachers to align ESL and special education activities with our new curriculum.
- Develop and implement a technology plan.
- Evaluate and implement, as feasible, a restructured gifted program.
- Improve our transitional programming for students who are struggling, both academically and behaviorally.
- Implement an early warning system for behavioral and academic problems.
- Increase our parent engagement linked to academic performance.

Communication/Engagement

Communication/Engagement Current State

The current state of *Communication/Engagement* within the District, as assessed by its leadership team, is:

We are in a building state. The District had no communication plan or structured work before March 2014. We have 20 websites for the District serviced through Schoolwires, one for every individual school and one for the District at-large. These websites look like they belong to the same school district. We are on six social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and YouTube, as well as a District blog. In the more traditional media space, we have a bilingual radio show, a monthly television show on BCTV, an annual report and podcast, and video cast productions.

For resources to support our *Communication/Engagement* activities, we have budgeted \$30,000 for non-salary expenses, and we are making a concerted effort to get our partners to support our efforts. We are actively working to find the most effective delivery model and the best schedule/frequency for our newsletter publication. Previously, our printing was done by the Career and Technology Center and it took over two to three weeks to publish and distribute our printed publication. By this time, most of the news is substantially old. We are currently exploring the most effective content, frequency, format, and distribution method for communicating with our parents, alumni, partners, stakeholders, and the community-at-large.

Communication/Engagement Goal

The overriding goal of the *Communication/Engagement* area of focus within the District is:

We deliver effective and timely communication and information to all District stakeholders and we effectively tell our story of success. Our community now knows how much the District contributes to it.

Communication/Engagement Targets

The District will measure its progress toward this goal by tracking and reporting the following metrics:

- Social media metrics
- Website metrics
- Percent of open rates on our emails
- Communication Survey results
- Net Promoter Score for:
 - Parents
 - Teachers
 - Students

Communication/Engagement Action Steps

The action steps the District will implement between 2015 and 2020 to impact the *Communication/Engagement* area of focus are:

Action Steps for School Year 2015 – 2016

- Produce a community/parent newsletter.
- Hire/contract with a website support person.
- Build out our website.
- Develop a shared drive (that could become an Intranet) that becomes the singular communication vehicle for Reading School District.
- Develop an alert system.
- Produce an annual communication plan detailing our routine and change-focused communication activities.

Action Steps for Later Years

- Build/create an information app.
- Develop a semi-monthly email piece with brief/quick info bites.
- Publish a personal profile of short points on key district staff members.
- Centralize our digital District communications in our Communications Department.
- Create protocols for all teacher/administration communication within and outside our schools.
- Explore a college intern program.
- Integrate more students and student stories into our communication pieces.
- Explore ways to engage parents in our communication activities.
- Communicate actionable items that parents can do to support their children about our consulting work.

Finance/Operational Effectiveness

Finance/Operational Effectiveness Current State

The current state of *Finance/Operational Effectiveness* within the District, as assessed by its leadership team, is:

On a departmental basis, we are improving. Twelve months ago, the District was in a state of significant disarray. At that time, the department was severely reactive, good at defense, but we were unable to report the financial state of the District. Work was not just done late, it was done incorrectly. There were significant (nine) findings in the 2013 audit and many of them went back as far as the 2009 – 2010 school year. The board did not receive financial reports for months. As important, the inaccurate and late reports impacted the funds we received from the state.

Today, we have capable people assigned to each of our key functions, and we are current in them. We have good relationships with our auditors, and there was only one finding in the 2014 audit. We have procedures in place to produce a school year 2014 – 2015 audit by October 31, 2015.

Additionally, we have evaluated our business processes and identified opportunities for increased efficiencies.

Financially, the District has an operating budget of \$226 million. Seventy-two percent comes from the Commonwealth, nineteen percent is local government funding, and the balance comes from a range of other sources. Basic Education State Funding has remained flat for the past two years and the city's tax base is shrinking.

Despite these funding constraints, the District has been able to grow the fund balance from \$10 million to \$25 million. While this year we have budgeted for a loss of \$1 million, we operated at an \$11 million in surplus in 2013 – 2014. On the expense side, \$90 million goes to salaries and \$60 million goes to benefits. The majority of our payroll is for teachers. \$22 million of the budget goes to pay tuition for students, \$10 million of this amount is paid to charter and cyber schools. Debt service is \$25 million per year. Our meal reimbursement rate allows us to generate a true surplus from that program, while feeding every student at no cost to them.

We have six bargaining units and two Act 93 groups, representing our 1,800 employees, 1,100 of whom are teachers. As we approach contract renewals, we must find a creative way to address the rising cost of health insurance. If we don't find a solution, we will fall into a significant deficit in school-year 2017. While we are still on the Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDE) watch list, the triggers that would have led to the appointment of a Chief Recovery Officer never happened. A significant and continuing deficit could be seen as a cause for such action on the part of the PDE.

Finance/Operational Effectiveness Goals

The overriding goals of the *Finance/Operational Effectiveness* area of focus within the District are:

We fund and support a quality education and fair employment practices, while ensuring the long-term sustainability of the District. We produce a balanced budget with accurate and timely reporting to our varied agencies. We provide leadership, in our areas of expertise, to other departments.

Finance/Operational Effectiveness Targets

The District will measure its progress toward these goals by tracking and reporting the following metrics:

- Number of/percent of reports submitted to regulatory agencies on time
- Number of/percent of the departments effectively managing their budgets
- Number of findings/comments identified by our auditors
- Number of deficiencies and material weaknesses reported by our auditors
- District performance to budget

Finance/Operational Effectiveness Action Steps

The action steps the District will implement between 2015 and 2020 to impact the *Finance/Operational Effectiveness* area of focus are:

Action Steps for School Year 2015 – 2016

- Implement improvements from our business process assessment.
- Determine how Finance can optimize *eFinance 5.0* and implement those changes.
- Educate our employees in the finances of the District. Provide our fellow district managers with the tools and training to effectively manage their budgets.
- Explore creative opportunities to secure alternative funding.
- Explore an educational foundation exclusively focused on the District.
- Identify opportunities to ensure we are able to maintain our fund balance.
- Explore debt restructuring and refinancing.
- Monitor the state budget process and determine how it will impact our budget and how we will respond to it.
- Develop and monitor a rolling five-year forecast.
- Identify and address expanding health care costs and operational effectiveness in conjunction with our bargaining activities.
- Review and update our School Board Policies and Regulations.
- Define and implement our hiring practices (with a focus on cultural competency). Fully implement our toolkit to recruit, develop, and retain culturally competent staff.
- Develop a *Staff Handbook*.
- Evaluate the efficiency of our transportation system.
- Develop an assessment to ensure resources (human and financial) are distributed equitably.
- Improve our “customer service” throughout the District.
- Improve our technology training for our staff.

Action Steps for Later Years

- Break our committee of the whole meeting into themes.

Partnerships

Partnerships Current State

The current state of *Partnerships* within the District, as assessed by its leadership team, is:

The District focuses on three types of partnerships: students, parents, and the community-at-large. On the student front, we have student governments in many of our schools. Through these forums, we solicit student input and communicate upcoming changes and programs. Additionally, thousands of our students are engaged on our 26 different sports teams, 40 different clubs, and 10 music groups.

While the law requires us to develop partnerships with our parents and we have 19 Parent Outreach Assistants (one in each school), our School Climate Survey reports that our parental partnerships are our weakest area. Eighty-eight percent of teachers report this area as a weakness. We believe this weakness is a “two-way street.” Many teachers don’t know how to engage parents, and many of our parents come from cultures where parents don’t engage with a school system. We are currently piloting a Class Dojo in a limited number of schools. This system has the potential to materially increase the information we communicate to parents and the degree to which we engage them in the education of their students.

We have partnerships with 60 plus outside organizations, but we lack a database to track and evaluate them and we don’t know how effective they are. These partnerships include city-based nonprofits, churches, governmental agencies, and for-profit companies. Many of these partnerships provide support to our students through after-school programs, others help through individual learning assistance. They bring genuine value to the District, but we can’t define or quantify their impact.

Partnerships Goal

The overriding goal of the *Partnerships* area of focus within the District is:

We collaborate with key stakeholder-partners to advance/promote academic excellence for all students enrolled in Reading School District’s nineteen schools.

Partnerships Targets

The District will measure its progress toward this goal by tracking and reporting the following metrics:

- Dollars of value contributed/delivered from partners (that we can calculate)
- Dollars of local, non-tax revenue from partners
- Outcomes delivered from partners
- Parental Engagement Score from our School Climate Survey
- Number of parents involved in school activities
- Number of volunteers entering our system
- Number of students engaged in school activities
- Improvement toward established goals for academic achievement by 2020

Partnerships Action Steps

The action steps the District will implement between 2015 and 2020 to impact the *Partnerships* area of focus are:

Action Steps for School Year 2015 – 2016

- Implement Central Administration Support for each POA and their School Equity Team to fulfill the federal, state, and local requirements with regards to parent/family engagement and communications.
- Build strong relationships with families by creating a welcoming environment, addressing families' cultural differences, involving families in major decisions, and making sure parent engagement activities are connected to what students are learning.
- Continue to engage community partners to promote student college and career readiness, student participation in after-school programs, and family utilization of available social/human services.

Action Steps for Later Years

- Explore membership and a contract with the National Network of Partnership Schools through Johns Hopkins University.
- Increase career-prep partnership activities.
- Increase our engagement with student leaders.