NORTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



SUPERINTENDENT'S ENTRY PLAN FINDINGS

OVERVIEW

On September 13, 2023 I shared my entry plan with the Norton Public School Committee. The purpose of this entry plan was to outline the comprehensive process I would use to gather information about the Norton Public School District as I began my new role as Superintendent of Schools. Although I have spent the last twenty years as an educator in Norton, first as a classroom teacher and then in administration, it was important to enter into this role looking at our district through a new lens. The comprehensive entry process gave me the opportunity to listen and learn from our broader school community, as well as allow for our Norton staff and families to get to know me in a different capacity. Through this process, I was able to explore the school experience through the eyes of our students and better understand the current state of our system to identify areas of strength and potential for growth in the years ahead.

The timeline for this entry plan is as follows:

- Phase 1: Listen and Learn (July 2023 - December 2023)
- Phase 2: Data Analysis and Reflection (January - March 2024)
- Phase 3: Next Steps and Action Planning (April - June 2024)

Throughout each phase of the entry process, I used three critical areas in which to focus on the existing mission and vision of Norton Public Schools.

1. **Our Students' Experience:** How do we provide all students with a quality education that fosters personal development and intellectual growth?
2. **Engagement of the School Community:** How do we partner with families and the Norton community to provide our students with engaging learning experiences that help them to succeed as productive global citizens?
3. **Organizational Capacity of NPS:** What are the perceived strengths and opportunities for growth within Norton Public Schools related to student learning, allocation of resources and efficiencies, leadership and student success?

The following entry plan findings report will provide Norton Public Schools with overarching themes in the above categories. Qualitative and quantitative data used to determine these findings are linked throughout the document in order to provide context to the community. These findings will provide a foundation for our District strategy on which we will begin work during the 2024-2025 school year.

SUMMARY OF ENTRY PLAN FINDINGS

During phase 1 of the entry plan, information was collected from a large number of sources in order to paint a holistic picture of the current status of Norton Public Schools. Through interviews, focus groups and surveys, I had the opportunity to engage with a wide variety of stakeholders around the student experience as well as how we engage families and the larger community. Additionally, a large portion of my time was spent in school based residencies and classroom observations at all grade levels. District artifacts, survey data from students, staff, and families and DESE data and reports were also examined to get a comprehensive understanding of Norton Public Schools. Through a multi-faceted analysis that identified themes across data types and looked for gaps in the data, the following strengths, challenges and opportunities have been identified.

District Strengths

- Overall feeling of community and caring between students, families, educators and and other NPS staff
- Dedication and longevity of staff that truly care about students
- Commitment to the whole child, seeing students as more than just a test score
- Shareholders care about and value public education
- Professional development that aligns with district initiatives and educator needs

District Challenges

- Budget deficits that impact all school and town staffing and disrupts plans for delivery of educational program and plans for improvements
- Inconsistent (frequency and quality) practices around communication to families at the school and district level
- Persistent gaps in academic performance among student subgroups
- Continued need for more training and resources to support the belonging and inclusion of our community's diverse cultures, perspectives and backgrounds
- Inconsistent beliefs around capacity for individual learning that result in the lack of uniform high expectations and rigor for all students
- A need to clarify roles and responsibilities within our school community to support and ensure effective accountability to foster progress on district goals for improvement
- The use and availability of high quality instructional materials is not consistent across all subject areas and grade levels

Throughout the initial phase of listen and learn, opportunities for continued improvement were identified as emerging themes in surveys, interviews and community forums.

District Opportunities

- Strong understanding of Social Emotional Learning which can leverage the work of high academic expectations as part of supporting student grit, perseverance, and accountability
- Current revision of district-wide Integrated Multi-Tiered Systems of Support procedures and resources
- District participation in the Hiqh Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) network provides consistent guidance on the importance of research based instructional materials, a comprehensive curriculum review process and avenues for consensus building

CURRENT AND ON-GOING INITIATIVES

During my first year in this new role, the administrative team has reviewed initiatives that had been implemented previously and identified those that are important to continue or to make adjustments for sustained improvement. Additionally, some preliminary steps were taken to address some of the opportunities that were identified.

Integrated Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Beginning in the summer of 2022, the district administrative team began work with the Integrated Mass Fidelity Rubric (IMFR) through the IMTSS Research Network and the University of Missouri. The initial work

required our team to look at our structures and processes of providing students with just in time interventions for both academic and social emotional/behavioral wellness.

The 2022-2023 school year focused on improving existing structures and implementing data-based decision making for students at all levels in order to provide consistent and appropriate interventions. During the current school year, our focus has been to expand the use of data driven decision making for students through enhanced staff capacity, additional data resources and supports, as well as bring a clear and structured process to IMTSS across the district. The intention of these goals has been to ensure students at all levels are getting the support they need to be successful. The district has also created consistent expectations for tracking and using data to make decisions about student learning, creating a system that will follow the student from year to year. At every grade level, professional learning communities engage in conversations about student learning and success. Building based Instructional Support Teams look at grade level data and consult on specific student cases that require a collaborative approach. This has reinvigorated a focus on academic achievement for all students and how instructional interventions can help students to reach their goals.

In order to support this work, all district and building administrators have participated in the Data Wise course offered by the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Professional Education. Learning together how to manage the ever-increasing stream of data we have available as well as having a consistent background and understanding of how to use this data to improve learning and teaching has benefited our facilitation of the work in each building.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

For many years, NPS has had a strong focus on SEL and how to support the whole child in our schools. Our team is proud of the work that has been done to implement effective SEL practices into our schools in classrooms. During the current school year, we have continued to implement Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in our schools, PreK-12. Additionally, our partnership with the Lesley Institute for Trauma Sensitivity through Lesley University provides us with continuous training. Each year, educators are given the opportunity to participate in one of their graduate courses that focus on the importance of trauma informed instruction and interventions in our classrooms. The L.G. Nourse Elementary School was offered the opportunity to partner with the Lesley Institute for Trauma through a grant process for more intensive services to support students with a trauma background. This partnership through the grant includes free access to the Institute's graduate courses, workshops for our paraprofessionals, and executive coaching assistance. Executive coaching includes data analysis, social networking analysis and other consulting services that connect to our work with I-MTSS and SEL.

Chronic Absenteeism

Since school closures due to the Covid pandemic, Norton Public Schools has seen a significant increase in the number of students that are considered "chronically absent". Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of the school year, for a student that is enrolled all year, this is 18 days or more. Prior to the 2019-2020, we had 9.6% of our student population considered chronically absent. Since then, this number nearly doubled with 18.7% of our students identified as chronically absent during the 2022-2023 school year. This is most common among our students with limited English proficiency, students that are high needs, and those families that are considered low income, with incidents of chronic absenteeism rising to nearly 30%.

In partnership with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Norton Public Schools has begun to focus on chronic absenteeism with the financial help of a $10,000 grant. This work began during the spring of 2024, with a small group of Norton educators and administrators coming together to develop a consistent protocol for monitoring attendance and supporting families. This will include vertical articulation between grade levels, trauma- and culturally-responsive practices, identification of roles and responsibilities for all student team members (e.g classroom teacher, counselors, administration, etc.), strategies to investigate and respond to attendance barriers and most importantly family engagement and education on the importance of consistent school attendance. As this work is completed, additional information will be provided to the School Committee and our families.

OUR STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE

How do we provide all students with a quality education that fosters personal development and intellectual growth?

The student experience is the most essential component of determining areas of strength and opportunities as we make plans for the future of Norton Public Schools. During the listening and learning phase of my entry plan, I had the opportunity to meet with students individually and in small groups, observe teaching and learning in classrooms at all grade levels, as well as attend club meetings and sporting events. In addition, nearly 600 students in grades 6-12 participated in a brief survey regarding their perspective on their school experiences.

- 87% percent of middle school students and 85% percent of high school students reported that they feel a sense of belonging in their school.
- 90% of middle school students and 86% of high school students reported that they feel respected for who they are at school.
- 79% of middle school students and 84% of high school students reported that they have an adult in school that they trust and could go to if they have a problem.

Norton High School students also shared how teachers connect with them both in and outside of the classroom and things that they appreciate as students.

- See me as a person and not just a student
- Help prepare me for the future, and not just with content
- They are a great listener
- You can tell they care about you and supports you as a student
- They don't give me the answers, but help push me in the right direction
- They are passionate about their subject
- They break down the content to help me understand
- They notice when you're having a tough time
- They hold you accountable and challenge you academically
- They know who you are and they are excited to see you

As part of the listening and learning phase, an overarching theme of student achievement emerged based on qualitative and quantitative data collections. These findings have been included as part of the student experience category as they are closely correlated.

Student Achievement

- Norton Public Schools prides itself on focusing on the whole child, looking at academics, social emotional and behavioral wellness, and college/career readiness as markers of success. This approach has created an environment where all students are looked at from multiple perspectives and individual goals are determined for students in academics.

- Strong internal data system that monitors student progress towards grade level standards and individual student goals. Universal screening tools are used consistently in Kindergarten- Grade 10 for all students. Student data platform supports holistic data review and ease of use for secondary teachers. Platform combines classroom grades, attendance, student discipline, as well as local and state assessment data.

Areas for Growth

- Focus on high academic expectations for all students and how to provide the appropriate scaffolds for all students to access grade level materials. Looking at the most recent MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) results from the Spring of 2023, in most grade levels and content areas Norton students performed at the same level or below the state average. In grades 3-8, only 40% of students were categorized as “Meeting or Exceeding Expectations” in the area of English Language Arts and only 35% of students were considered “Meeting or Exceeding Expectations” in the area of Mathematics.
- Historical MCAS data shows a decrease in “Meeting or Exceeding Expectations” for students in nearly all tested grade levels and subject areas since schools were closed in the Spring of 2020. While MCAS is only one measure of student success, the District’s accountability ranking is tied to this data which can impact local control over curriculum and funding should this decline continue.
- Improve student achievement in student subgroups, such as special education and students with low income backgrounds. When looking at historical data for students in these subgroups, both groups underperform their peers in the areas of English language arts and math.

ENGAGEMENT OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

How do we partner with families and the Norton community to provide our students with engaging learning experiences that help them to succeed as productive global citizens?

In the listening and learning phase, qualitative and quantitative data collected showed a focus on major communication and the need for enhanced clarity and engagement across all shareholders.

Communication

- The survey of Norton families showed that 35% of respondents would like to see communication improved across the district. Parents/families appreciate communication from the schools and district, but would like to see the following:
    - More targeted and brief communication specific to student learning and upcoming events
    - Consistent expectations in communications from classroom teachers so parents have an idea of what is happening in the classroom and expectations for academic success
    - Alignment of school and district events so that families don't need to choose
    - Additional support and communication specific to school transitions and expectations
- In conversations with town officials and community members, there is a perceived disconnect between the schools and other town departments. The Us vs. Them mentality is evident across staff and the community.

Engage and Include All Families

Norton families report a sense of community within the schools, specifically at the elementary level. Survey data shows that 71% of families that responded agree or strongly agree that their child feels a sense of belonging in their school. Families further shared that the school administrators, teachers, and staff create a safe environment for the students and that most students are happy to attend school.

Areas for Growth

- Norton families report that they would like to see more opportunities to engage with school and district administrators through family presentations, question & answer sessions, or weekend events. Of those that responded, 37% of families note their own schedules as a barrier to further engagement with the schools.
- In comments from both student parent surveys, there is feedback that Norton Public Schools can be doing more to ensure that students and families of all backgrounds and family structures feel welcome in our schools at school events. Thirty-three percent of families that responded do not agree that their child's school values the diversity of children's backgrounds.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY OF NPS

What are the perceived strengths and opportunities for growth within Norton Public Schools related to student learning, allocation of resources and efficiencies, leadership and student success?

The following themes emerged in the listening and learning phase based on qualitative and quantitative data collected.

Teaching and Learning

- NPS has systems in place for collaborative dialogue, data based decision making and common planning through grade level professional learning communities in grades PreK-8. School structures provide time and space for teachers to work alongside each other for shared accountability for student learning.
- The District's multi-year participation in the High Quality Instructional Materials network from DESE. This partnership has provided guidance on the importance of research based instructional materials, as well as a comprehensive curriculum review process and avenues for consensus building. The district

has seen success in this process in PreK-8 mathematics as well as Kindergarten- Grade 8 English language arts.
- Support staff such as curriculum coaches and technology integration specialists provide sustained and relevant professional learning for staff through modeling of lessons, co-planning, and constructive feedback for immediate implementation in the classroom. These positions guide grade level improvement through data review and guided PLCs.

Areas for Growth
- Align academic expectations amongst classrooms at each grade level and vertically as well. Parent surveys and classroom observations found some cases in which there was a decline in rigor from one grade level to the next or students attaining mastery of skills with very little effort.
- Expand personalized learning opportunities to encompass both intervention and enrichment for students.
- Continue to review curriculum resources and materials across grade levels and content areas to encompass high quality instructional materials so that all students have the opportunity to engage in grade-appropriate assignments and strong instruction that lets students do most of the thinking in the lesson (TNTP *The Opportunity Myth, 2018)*.

Finance and Operations

As a result of consistent feedback from the community regarding transparency in the budget process, adjustments were made this year to increase community engagement and participation through the year. Meetings with the town manager and town accountant began over the summer and continued on a regular basis throughout the course of the year with the goal of ongoing conversation about the needs of the District. Norton families were provided with monthly budget updates as part of the Superintendent's newsletter, which were accompanied by visuals that were designed to make the information accessible to all shareholders. In anticipation of the budget hearing, more detailed explanations and procedures were included in the budget book to help inform the community. Information was also shared broadly with Norton families, staff, and town departments.

Throughout the course of the year, I provided presentations to the Norton Republican Committee and the Norton Lions Club at their request to share information about the great things happening in our schools and the budget process

Areas of Growth
- Enhanced communication with the broader community of Norton regarding the budget process and needs of the school district. Community members that do not have daily connections to the schools need to have accurate information provided to them in a form that is easy to understand and easily accessible.
- Return to frequent utilization of social media platforms to share information in a timely manner that is accurate and provides clarity to community members.

Human Resources

With staffing changes in the central office this year, we have been given the opportunity to review current human resource procedures and practices to determine where we may be more efficient.

Areas of Growth

- Update staff records to a digital platform to maintain digital files that are easily accessible and searchable. Districts are required to retain staff records in perpetuity, which is a challenge for space and ease of use.
- Realignment of central office responsibilities for the hiring and onboarding of new staff. This has previously been done through the Superintendent's office, but there is the capacity for this to be more of a shared responsibility with HR.
- Review and update of job descriptions

Special Education

Our special education department is widely known for their incredible programs and student services. As part of the work this year, the team has continued working on entrance and exit criteria for specialized programs, along with program descriptions and specific curriculum and interventions for students within specialized programs.

- Norton is fortunate to have an extremely active Special Education Advisory Council (SEPAC) which supports families and hosts a number of events for students and families throughout the year. The SEPAC works closely with the Director of Pupil Personnel Services and the Coordinator of Special Education to provide feedback and engage with families.
- The department spent a significant amount of time this year preparing for the Tiered Focus Monitoring review with DESE which took place the first week in April. The final meeting with DESE representatives and the NPS admin team included positive feedback about our programs and procedures. The final report will allow us the opportunity to make adjustments to our practice as needed.

Areas for Growth

- The Director of Pupil Personnel Services and the Coordinator of Special Education are tasked with a number of areas for oversight and responsibility, which are extremely varied and not necessarily aligned in a logical manner. The Superintendent is working closely with them to realign administrative responsibilities to play to individual strengths and to make logical sense in an effort to work smarter, not harder.
- Reporting on student incidents such as restraints needs more clarity and consistent implementation across schools and programs. The department has developed a specific protocol that principals, teachers, and paraprofessionals are putting into place in our classrooms.

Technology

Norton has a successful 1:1 program for all teachers, paraprofessionals and students that has been in place prior to school closures in 2020. As a result, our staff is very comfortable with technology and students are able to access learning materials that are up to date and interactive.

- The department of Instructional Technology is well appointed and the team is a constant presence in our schools and classrooms. Technicians are responsive to staff and student technical issues and respond quickly to make sure that the district has access to appropriate technology. The instructional

technology specialists work collaboratively with teachers at all grade levels to integrate technology in a meaningful way.

- All classrooms in PreK-8 have digital Promethean boards in their classrooms for engaging lessons and digital resources.
- The department has led the transition to a new student information system *Power School,* which was part of the FY24 budget and will be rolled out in all schools next year. This has been an extremely cumbersome process as we migrate from *School Brains.*

Areas for Growth

- Teacher and administrator laptops are approaching end of life and will need to be replaced in the next year or two to maintain our level of productivity. The current budget projections do not allow for replacement as originally planned.
- As part of the parent survey, some families reported too much screen time and online learning in their child's classroom. The technology department and the office of teaching & learning need to do an audit of instructional practice to see if there is a balance at all grade levels.

NEXT STEPS FOR DISTRICT STRATEGY

Throughout my entry process, I enjoyed getting to know families, students, and staff in my new capacity as Superintendent. I was overwhelmed by all the positive experiences and stories that people shared with me and the respect and gratitude that was shared for Norton Public Schools. Even when sharing areas of growth or challenging experiences that they may have had, all conversations and feedback was shared with a sense of hope for the future and a belief that our educators are making a difference.

We are facing new challenges as a community when it comes to education. Education as a whole has changed and student needs are no longer primarily academic. As we consider the unique needs of every student and family, Norton must look at those traditions that are relevant to education now and how we must at the same time adapt to our current students and families to grow with them. With changes in responsibilities we are also facing a significant roadblock when it comes to the appropriate financing of our schools. As a community, it is imperative that we keep lines of communication open, assume positive intentions, and take the time to listen and learn from each other, as we each have different outlooks and perspectives. While this is a difficult task, I know that there is one thing we all have in common- we all want the best for our children. For them to feel safe and accepted in school, for them to feel a sense of pride and accomplishment, and for them to have opportunities for success after leaving Norton Public Schools.

As a community, we will begin a collaborative and inclusive process to establish a district strategy that embodies who Norton is as a school community and places emphasis on high expectations for all students. This strategy will put student learning back at the center of our work, while not leaving all of our work on social emotional learning and wellness in the past, but rather truly aligned. I look forward to engaging in this work with you and am hopeful for the future of Norton Public Schools.