

TASK

Using data available to the public located on the New Jersey Department of Education website, please identify strengths and weaknesses of Columbia High School. Explain and justify target area(s) of improvement, based upon this data.

How would you develop/enhance a growth mindset in Columbia High School staff resulting in improved student performance in the aforesaid target area of improvement year over year?

RESPONSE

Dear Stakeholders

I appreciate this opportunity to share my suggestions on improving the student outcomes at Columbia High School. Please know this cannot be a one-person job; rather I plan to meet with all stakeholders and create community-faculty-student committees to address the improvements we need to ensure Columbia High School is to return to its standing as the best and most progressive public school in New Jersey. My strengths as a collaborative consensus-builder and motivator will surely help in this goal, and so I plan to work with the veteran members of the South Orange-Maplewood community to make this happen.

The first step in this process is to examine the data. As an objective outsider, it makes sense to analyze this first before meeting with new colleagues. Furthermore, to come up with the best plan possible, I would need to triangulate the data I found on the NJDOE website with internal data including reports from PowerSchool and from NJ Smart. Without those reports, I was still able to examine the NJ School Performance reports from Columbia High School and as well as from both middle schools to notice whether there were trends that can be addressed at a district level or with a tighter transition coordination.

Data Analysis

Based on the 2018 - 2019 Columbia High School Performance Report, I have noticed the following strengths and areas of growth:

STRENGTHS
Students & Community - It is clear from the representative data that Columbia High School is a wonderfully diverse school that is proud of its achievements and offerings. During my interview process, I met three parents and I would agree with the Performance Report that "Parents play a vital role in the school community. They are involved in the Cougar Booster Club, the Achieve Foundation, the Columbia High School Music Parents' Association (CHSMPA), the Home and School Association (HSA), and other organizations to raise funds and organize events that enhance the curricular and extracurricular opportunities for all students." This will be an important factor in our plan for growth since the school will need

community support to improve.

Columbia Pride - The CHS website and social media feeds are brimming with positivity about the district and the school's achievements. Again, this is an important element in any move to foster student growth. Our students need to believe in CHS and those who are leading it. Without buy-in, students will allow disinterest to lead to failure. It would be vital to continue this "Columbia Pride" and build upon it by celebrating teacher and student achievements. I was quite impressed to learn that CHS "was awarded the 2018-19 New Jersey Interscholastic Athletic Association Super Essex Conference Sportsmanship Award" since it clearly indicates that the CHS community is recognized for their respectful treatment of others..

CHS Faculty & Administration Team - Based on those who I have met through this process, I am excited about the prospect of joining the CHS faculty and staff. Based on the NJ Performance Report, CHS has a mostly veteran staff, 73% who have more than four years in the district (with an overall average of 10 years on staff). Although having a veteran staff may intimidate some leaders, I find that having such a large group with a rich sense of institutional memory is necessary to make sure we don't move into a reform that was tried earlier and did not succeed. Time is of the essence in my view, and having those who have experienced former initiatives and who are ready to tackle reform will be needed. Furthermore, the CHS is a highly educated staff with 66% having a post-bachelor's degree (including 4% with a doctoral degree).

School Safety - Students will perform better if they feel "at home" at CHS. That is why we need to have a safe environment at CHS. An analysis of the year's SSDS is very good for a school of nearly 2000 students. A 2.47 incident rate is a testament to the school's current culture. Of course, we would all agree that one HIB is too many, and knowing that we had two cases regarding race and two regarding student disability is disconcerting, but I would like to see what the trends are over the past three years before jumping to any conclusions.

Student suspensions are also small when looked through the lens of per capita student population. However, students losing nearly 150 days of instruction when there is a chronic absenteeism issue is disappointing. I would hope CHS is looking at a more restorative approach to discipline. Furthermore, I would request to see a data breakdown of suspensions based on race, gender, and grade level since the NJ Performance Report only offers a mere macro description of suspensions. Without that information, I would say that school safety is a strength at CHS.

School Culture - In addition to safety, students succeed academically when they feel part of the school culture. That is why it is important for a high school to offer a robust slate of extracurricular activities. It is such a strength for the school that there are more than fifty club activities offered including "Astronomy, Chess, Cougar Nation (student sports boosters), Guitar, Piano Guild, Magic, Math, P.O.W.E.R. (womens' rights and equality issues), SPECTRUM (LGBT issues and activism), the West Point Bridge Design Club, Programming Club, Student Tour Guides, Golf, Future Medical Students of America, Ultimate Frisbee and full Class and Student Councils." After all, students feel most comfortable when their voices are heard and these clubs give them an opportunity to express their interests and talents.

The Arts - Student participation in the arts is an incredible strength for CHS, with nearly 70% of students enrolled in a music or visual arts course. That is an incredible statistic, which is actually one of the best in the NJ Monthly Top Schools list from 2018. When touring the campus a few months ago, I was impressed with the Black Box Theater that is connected to CHS and the fact that there is an annual Shakespearean festival!

Course Offerings - The CHS Program of Studies is replete with imaginative and current courses for students to take. I was especially impressed with the breath of languages that are offered at Columbia: Spanish, French, Italian, and Chinese. I also found it interesting that French is the most commonly subscribed-to language. The Social Sciences offerings were robust, especially in the AP classes. Not many high schools, for example, offer AP Comparative Government. *I was especially impressed with the lack of multiple levels in the math classes. This is something I was successful in fighting in my last district in which there were two levels of “college preparatory” and then an Honors level.* It is also impressive that CHS has partnered with Apex to augment courses you may not have in-house.

Career Pathways - It is excellent that so many students (21%) participate in a CTE option. As a school we will need to match our students with the opportunities they seek, and career education is one such pathway. (I would only like to see if there is more information on what type of programs these students are taking since if CHS is losing students to magnets or to a program we can replicate in-house, we may want to explore that option.)

PSAT & SAT/ACT - PSAT participation is strong with over 95% students taking it, thereby helping the SAT numbers. This is due to your October program for all sophomores and juniors to take a free PSAT, and it seems to be a success. I would only consider offering a sample ACT test on the weekend so students could see if they would be interested in that option.

The student SAT scores are solid with 589 in Reading and a 565 in Math. To improve in the NJ Monthly Top Schools ranking, there should be a push to move Student Benchmark Percentage from 81% to 90% in Reading and from 65% to at least 75% in math. I would lead a group of teachers in this mission by looking at online platforms like Khan Academy in math (which is free) and Albert.IO for English. I share other suggestions regarding math instruction overall in the “Areas for Growth” section.

AP Offerings & Outcomes - I have always been a strong proponent of lowering barriers to entry for AP classes. The biggest hurdle I face is the hardworking teachers who are concerned on how larger numbers will affect their passing rates. *That is why it is vital to have a trusting relationship with your AP teachers and to hold open conversations on how numbers may fall at first, but with the proper training and resources, our students will reach those expectations. That is what a growth-mindset is all about, and it is important to stress this as part of your building’s vision.* Therefore, teachers should be given every opportunity to attend week-long summer workshops in AP training and we may want to lower the teaching load when a teacher takes on a new AP responsibility.

Based on the available data, it is clear that CHS offers an incredible amount of AP offerings (22 in the course book but 29 based on tests students took in 2019.) That is incredible and it

should be applauded. I would expand the offerings, especially in economics which could allow students to take an AP class for their financial literacy graduation requirement.

Having 56% of students enrolled in one or more AP classes, plus 51.3% taking one or more AP exam, and 45% of students with a score of a 3 on at least one score is impressive. The one score that the NJ Monthly Ranking rates which CHS does not do well deals with percentages of students in the course who take the test. This is when I would meet with the teachers and have them encourage students to take the test for the class they are enrolled in. Teachers are the most trusted factor in whether students take the exam and so that is where we should expend our energy.

Finally, and this is minor, the new Guidance Director may want to make sure that the courses in PowerSchool match the title of the AP classes. The fact that you do not means that when NJDOE uploads the data (and then reports them to Newsweek and NJ Monthly) there will be 0s in course enrollment in AP Spanish and AP World, when CHS should have over 100 students there! (See page 19 of NJ SPR.)

Areas of Growth

Chronic Absenteeism - In 2019 CHS did not meet the state's goals for the school, especially with our African American, Latino, Economically-disadvantaged, English-Language Learners and students with disabilities. That fact that 21% of students missed over 15 school days is quite disconcerting. My first step would be to see if this is a new trend at CHS and whether this is an improvement or backslide from before. Then our committee would be able to study best-practices from other districts and explore which would work best with us at CHS. We would also need to investigate why the numbers spike in senior year (23%) when our 9th grade numbers (9%) are even lower than the state average.

Graduation Rate - It is perplexing that CHS -- a premiere district in NJ -- would have only a 90.8% graduation rate which is the same as the NJ average. This would be my top priority since we are literally failing students. I would first breakdown the data from PowerSchool to see why these students are dropping out: absences, grades, discipline issues, problems at home, etc. Then we would have to plot out these students who have dropped out and trace what their tell-tale signs were. This way we can create a predictive algorithm for our current students.

I would assume that the most important thing to start is a system of interventions to prevent this from happening. For example, I am a strong believer of Richard DuFord's Take Action program, in which he asserts a school must have a strong system of interventions for students. We cannot allow a report card to be the first signal to a child or a parent that a student is struggling. Instead, building a mentorship system or having students join a club or sport Freshmen year can be the first steps in such a program. I would also explore an alternate school within a school as we have built in MLHS which has been extremely positive

for our most reluctant learners.

NJSLA Scores - Although SAT scores are promising, the NJSLA scores in math are not, indicating that perhaps students are not taking the test as seriously as they do the SAT or that our curriculum does not match the way the questions are being asked in the NJSLA. At first blush seeing a 28% passing rate in Algebra is terrible, but we must remember that our district rate is much higher since hundreds of students take Algebra 1 in middle school. However, the high school scores are especially disappointing when one breaks down the data racially since 49% of our White students pass high school Algebra while only 15% of our Latino and only 17% of our African American students do. Our males also outperform our females students by a wider margin than what is seen in the state average as well. This is when we need to work with our teachers by using specific data. At MLHS, I instituted the use of LinkIt because it made teachers follow the data rather than their perceptions of the students. This could help with the implicit bias that we all have. Furthermore, I would humbly request this be a district initiative since the trend is evident at both Maplewood and South Orange Middle Schools.

The Geometry score of 37% passing is also not as good as expected for a district like South Orange-Maplewood and the racial breakdown is also dismal (45% passing for Whites, 20 % for Latinos and 27% for African American students). Since our Algebra 2 score is quite impressive (69%), we may want to poll other districts and see what percentages of middle school students are taking geometry in 8th grade. Although I believe in differentiation and I created the 8th-grade geometry program in the Mountain Lakes middle school, we always had only 10% of our students in that cohort (as opposed to South Orange-Maplewood's 20% average). Also, the fact that only 18% of South Orange's 8th-grade population is in 8th-grade math suggests that perhaps a majority of those students are special education students and therefore we are creating an environment that is not equitable. If there was proper placement in middle school, the students in high school would be more successful.

That being said, I was instrumental in collapsing the several tracks of math instruction at MLHS. I had to get teacher buy-in that our "Core" students could succeed and with new programs like Linkit and math labs in each period of the day, we have started down a better pathway. The same can happen at CHS.

If given more time, I would love to discuss with you additional ideas like writing conferences for English teachers to improve ELA NJSLA scores. I could also speak about our alternative high school called PxL. I have also been a leader in our district's wellness initiatives and I can discuss similar programs we can bring to CHS. However, I think it would be best if we work together and create CHS programs for our specific needs.

Again, I am thankful that I have been given the opportunity to examine the data behind CHS. It is clear that this is a strong institution with incredible parents, students, and staff. I would love to be able to help teachers understand that our students -- if given the opportunity -- can achieve great things. Based on my reading of Carol Dwek, I have done so at MLHS and I would love the opportunity to do so at Columbia High School.