

A302 MEMO ON MADISON METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT (MMSD)

MADISON'S CONTEXT:

About ten years ago, Gov. Scott Walker signed Act 10 into law⁽¹⁾ which led to widespread protests and upheaval that garnered national attention. That same year the Wisconsin Council for Children and Families' Race to Equity Report was published. Cheatham became superintendent of MMSD in 2013. Leadership change in the region was definitely in the air⁽²⁾ and MMSD was facing "a perfect storm of challenges"⁽³⁾. The longest serving head for the teachers union, Mr. John Matthews, was in place and only retired in 2015⁽⁴⁾. In 2014, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction published its report on achievement gaps⁽⁵⁾. That same year Deirdre Hargrove Krieghoff was hired as Executive Director of Human Resources, later promoted to Chief of Human Resources in 2017.

MMSD has about 27K students and 4.3K staff. Reviewing the two available district report cards from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction: between 2012-13 and 2018-19 the district made some progress though not all indicators improved⁽⁶⁾. The achievement gap remains, as measured by the Forward Exam (2018-19) wherein 63% white 4th graders scored advanced or proficient compared to 13.8% black students⁽⁷⁾. Statewide the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report showed that Wisconsin had the highest gap. A lot can be explained by the increasing poverty rate which affect young African American families in Madison⁽⁸⁾. During the past decade jobs increased in the highest paying sectors such as technology but declined in low paying sectors⁽⁹⁾.

DISTRICT'S GOALS AND VISION:

"..all our fates are linked...every single child must thrive...graduate ready for college, career and community." MMSD second vision was created through a consensus process. The Strategic Framework articulated goals which emphasized graduation, onus on the schools to create places of learning where students and families thrived, and lastly a focus on African American students excellence.

These goals built on the initial strategy (2013) which was student centric and emphasized graduation, and access to a challenging, well-rounded and positive educational experience. In order to bring this about, the strategy focused on achieving excellent teaching through coherent instruction, personalized pathways, family engagement and community partnerships, and cultivating staff talent. It was an astute move for an incoming district leader at a time of upheaval. Crafted within four months of arrival its change message was not radically new, hence more palatable and could be embraced by all. The levers of change were also easily understood. While disciplined operations, continuous improvement, professional development around racial equity may have been change requiring 'asks' of staff, the 'give' from central office was generous in more support, less mandating and micromanagement.

The first five years allowed the district to make incremental change, establish new priorities (racial equity) and create trust based relationships. The second set of strategy goals (five years later) were more nuanced. It utilized the following levers:

1. Empower school communities (principal, staff, students, families)
2. Invest in people – from hiring to separation and focusing on anti-racist, culturally responsive and inclusive teaching
3. Streamline priorities: removing systemic barriers.
4. Plan for the future: long term partnerships to address long term structural barriers over generations.
5. Embrace innovation and problem solving mindset.

All these goals work in tandem and can almost be considered to be subsets of the first goal. Change is best led locally, to gain traction beyond any initiative dreamed up in the central office. It has to be responsive to local conditions, sustained by community based champions and welcomed. This also allowed for the culturally responsive and differentiated instruction needed for every student to thrive. Relationships built in this process would smoothen adoption of uncomfortable changes in the future. The school building was the locus for this work.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF STRATEGY:

Some of the key success factors for the initial strategy were

1. Strong signals from incoming leaders for building partnerships and creating change done with the district and not to it.
2. Staff expecting change (see context above)
3. Operationally it was a continuation of work that had happened in the district prior (2012-13 review of Human Resources, builds familiarity with incoming change, see below).
4. Hiring of a dynamic and detail oriented manager of color (authenticity of voice).
5. The 'ask' was balanced by the 'give'. Change was balanced by support.

In a period of uncertainty due to the removal of bargaining power from unions, the district leadership signaled the desire for strong partnerships with staff and community. The Superintendent met with Mr. Mathews and all school leaders during her initial onboarding and kept communication channels open helping the district adapt to her and vice versa.

The recommendations identified in the 2012-13 review of Human Resources, prior to new Superintendent's arrival, were implemented over the first five years with the overhaul of the department's processes and the hiring of Ms. Krieghoff. Under her leadership HR began to align itself more explicitly with district vision and goals. It began to connect 'the work of human capital to student achievement'⁽¹⁰⁾ and became proactive vs. a reactive department. She began the equity focused work top down, from principal screening to teacher screening. Then she introduced staff-centered

compensation and health insurance changes. In the fifth year data analytics culminated the changes once the foundational elements were in place.

The 2018 new strategy put people at the core (students, families, staff). Empowering school leadership was the next natural step after the district had settled down. This was done through: distributed decision making; increased professional development; assistance from central office in curriculum; investment in innovation capacity; removal of systemic barriers (hopefully this also meant redundant paperwork); school based cycles of action and reflection (which probably meant less onerous supervision by central office). HR pivoted and unabashedly claimed their first goal to be hiring the best diverse talent. They also reassured existing staff by including individualized school support aided by technology and processes, and maximum retention of all employees as goals. Cohort hiring, clear communication of life cycle of an employee and 2020 goals put a stake in the ground.

Districtwide centering Black student excellence tied into the idea that every and all students needed to thrive. It meant that MMSD HR had to reduce implicit bias and do antiracist work. This is complicated and obstacle prone. Therefore the strategy identified steps at the individual level (Mindfulness) to group (affinity groups and promotional paths aligned to equity) to district (cadre of Equity Fellows who assist and provide facilitation support for the equity work; curriculum and unified ideology of pedagogy). Over the years these efforts resulted in some percentage gains in diversity in the staff however the absolute numbers do not mirror the diversity in the student population. The most critical weakness is that it did not bring enough change fast enough and could not influence the economic realities of MMSD parent community.

RECOMMENDATIONS-WONDERINGS:

Given the political situation, could a coalition of political and community leaders have campaigned for more funds for the poorer sections of Madison? Could there have been policies which transferred some of the tech wealth to the school district? Could public private partnerships have been created to absorb youth in work-study programs? Raising the incomes and bringing job security to the parent community would have made school strategies successful. School systems cannot be the instrument of change for the student's Exosystem (Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory). Though it is a safety net. Perhaps accelerating the hiring of teachers of color is the answer. However, following a more draconian evaluate-fire measures in the school district to create vacancies would not have ended well. The HR department was constrained by political realities. In conclusion, MMSD was primed for change in 2013, with union negotiation power lessening and new leadership dedicated to closing the achievement gap as desired by the community. However, eight years later many of the gains may have been neutralized due to increasing poverty and the slow pace of change. The question that remains unanswered is : A Black kindergartner of 2013 will be what in 2025?

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