

Summary of Internal Assessment

Melrose began this strategic planning process by engaging in an internal assessment to gauge the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities available to the school district that can be addressed through the planning process in support of improving student achievement. The district's strategic planning consultant, working with the school system, conducted the internal assessment using a number of data sources. These included student data regarding enrollment and attendance, achievement, and school system accountability reported to and through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Individual School Improvement Plans, reports to and from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) and the New England League of Middle Schools (NELMS), district budgets, previous Strategic Plans (2003-2008 and 2005-2010) and other district documents related to the internal operations of the school system were also reviewed and considered. Document and record reviews were followed up by related interviews with numerous administrators.

This assessment process identified improvement themes and critical issues on which to focus the strategic planning process and address future District improvement. This assessment summary is organized around the improvement themes and critical issues identified and is linked to the focus areas of the previous Strategic Plan*. (* see italicized note under each theme)

Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

Curricula, Instruction, and Student Learning

District analysis completed for the spring 2008 administration of MCAS demonstrates a thorough and ongoing effort to use data contained in the results towards improvement of curriculum and instruction. Teachers need to continue to be engaged in and fully understand this analysis and its implications while being supported in determining how to apply the knowledge that is gained.

It is noteworthy that student English/Language Arts scores on spring MCAS administrations annually (2006-2008) demonstrate a healthy percentage of students (from 60-70+%) scoring in the Proficient or Advanced categories in all grades tested; well above state averages. Mathematics and Science scores reflect a somewhat different picture, with 50 - 60% of students scoring in the Proficient or Advanced categories in Grades 4-8; only slightly above, or at times at, state averages. This appears to be changing in grade 8 mathematics and science and in grade 5 mathematics as the district changes practices and places greater emphasis on these areas of curriculum and instruction, such as the recent implementation of the Harcourt math program at the elementary level. However, ongoing focused analysis and attention will be required to assess changes in curriculum and instruction, determine additional changes needed and provide support to teachers in order to effectively implement such changes.

The district is to be commended for achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) criteria in the aggregate for all grade spans in English/Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics (Math) for the past two years. However, for the past year, special education and low income subgroups in grade span 3-5 did not make AYP in ELA and Math and the

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special education subgroup in grade span 6-8 did not make AYP in ELA and Math for the past two years. A comprehensive plan, addressing all contributing factors must be clearly communicated and understood by all involved with these subgroups in order to adequately address this AYP issue.

Elementary School Improvement Plans reflect a focus on district-wide assessment and end of year benchmarks at each grade level. A focused and coordinated approach to addressing data driven instruction and decision making will best serve all elementary schools towards improving student achievement.

The middle school has made a substantial commitment, through team structural changes and provision of student support, to address mathematics achievement for all students using a more concentrated and coordinated approach. A systematic approach to collecting data to assess results of this approach is needed in order to measure the success of these changes.

The high school is approaching the end of an accreditation cycle and is undertaking a self-assessment as part of the NEASC process. A revised mission for the high school, and revised academic, social and civic expectations, have resulted in school wide rubrics for the purpose of measuring student progress in these areas. The next phase of work in relationship to accreditation will be connecting specific course content and assessments to the academic, social and civic expectations and associated rubrics. An organized approach to collecting data to assess results of such an approach will need to be established.

The district has supported teachers over the past few years in understanding and using a range of instructional strategies and instructional models through professional development. However, it is not clear that the use of such strategies or instructional models is uniformly connected to classroom practice across the district.

Student Support

Student Support Services

Currently the overall student to teacher ratio within the Melrose district as a whole is slightly higher than the state average. This appears to be particularly at the middle and high school levels where a number of class sizes approach or exceed 30. Early childhood class sizes have also been creeping upward in the past couple of years. Higher class sizes make it more difficult to address individual student support issues at any level of schooling.

A much needed increase in counseling/school psychologist staffing has occurred over the past couple of years to more comprehensively address special education and some counseling concerns. However, current staffing for school counselor or school adjustment counselor positions at the elementary and middle school is not always adequate in capacity for schools to address student needs or for the delivery structure needed. These positions can be viewed as preventative in nature, as they assist students and teachers in addressing school related behavioral and school adjustment matters in a proactive way.

The middle school student to administrator ratio is the highest in the school district. This has particular impact on the ability of administrators to proactively address behavior and school climate issues of significance to students in the middle school years.

Special Education staffing has increased over the past couple of years in order to address student needs and support the inclusion initiative underway in the district. This is critical to

building district capacity to meet student needs in the least restrictive environment and should continue to be promoted and supported. Paraprofessional staffing has shown greater increase than special education teacher staffing. Criteria should be established to regularly assess the need for such staffing, the benefits to students of paraprofessional support versus increased professional staff and the most effective structure for service delivery.

Instructional Support Teams are functioning in each school. These teams seek to proactively identify students in need of alternative instructional models that can be implemented first in the classroom and if needed, through additional supports, termed Tier II supports. The district does not have many options related to Tier II supports other than Title I in one school and limited availability of a reading specialist in some elementary schools. With a recent reduction in Title I funds for Melrose and lack of Title I availability in every school, there is a need to address the issue of options for Tier II supports across the district.

School System Culture and Climate

Some elementary School Improvement Plans speak to implementing a district-wide or school-wide program to address peer to peer social issues and behavioral expectations and reference is made to use of the Second Step Program. Evidence of the implementation of such a program across the elementary level is not consistent. With all elementary schools feeding into the same middle school, it would be beneficial to the system as a whole to have commonly understood behavioral expectations, protocols and procedures.

Similarly, there is a need to address and provide a consistent message about student to student respect and bullying at all levels, including middle and high schools. Results of the recently administered Youth Risk Behavior Survey should be helpful in identifying the focus for this.

Human Resources and Professional Development

Recruit, Train, and Develop Quality Educational Staff to Provide Excellence in Teaching

The district has supported teachers over the past few years in understanding and using a range of instructional strategies and instructional models through professional development. It would be advantageous to the district to ensure district wide understanding of common instructional models, such as differentiated instruction and co-teaching, in order to more uniformly effect classroom practice across the district and reinforce use of these best practices.

The district is in the process of completing a review of teacher supervision and evaluation processes and tools for possible revisions. Any update/revision should ensure that there is linkage within process or evaluation tools to evidence of the implementation of knowledge and skills gained through the district's professional development program, as well as to the goals of the strategic plan.

There is an ongoing need to emphasize how the district goes about recruiting candidates for high demand positions in fields such as mathematics and science.

Facilities and Technology

Facilities and Plant

A major accomplishment in the area of facilities was the completion and opening of the Melrose Veterans Memorial Middle School in 2007. This facility provides a modern and state of the art environment for middle school education in Melrose. This spurred the implementation of technological upgrades across the district, with particular focus on the high school, as outlined in the district's Technology Plan. Those upgrades have proceeded over the past two years.

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It will be important to ensure that technological support for the district does not lag behind the increase in technology availability. Individual sites do not have technology integration specialists to support teachers in the process of integrating technology into the curriculum and ensuring that technology benchmark standards are met by teachers and students. Technology support was revitalized through the technology department's reorganization and hiring and retaining personnel with the skill sets to provide hardware and infrastructure support. Upkeep and support of the new technology and maximizing its use should be a priority of the district in order to ensure the greatest benefit from the investment that has been made.

External and internal demands continue to increase for the creation and maintenance of multiple databases and use of data to inform district administrative and instructional decisions. Data management for the district should be addressed in planning for the district.

A Facilities Capital Improvement Plan, developed in relationship to the previous Strategic Plan, is updated annually. Facilities maintenance should continue in all buildings in order to address cost savings and safety issues.

Communications, Partnership and Planning

School Community Relations

A number of communication systems are in place across the district that provide substantial communication with parents and community members. Many of these are unconnected to one another and do not always provide a reliable voice for the school district. A comprehensive plan and approach to communications to ensure coordination among various groups and individuals would provide the district with a more consistent and unified system.

Melrose has a number of strong community partnerships, the Bridge: School and Community Partnership being one of the most noteworthy. This organization provides volunteers to the schools significantly adding to their resources in numerous areas. Melrose Chamber of Commerce, MAAV, the Melrose Human Rights Commission, Rotary International, North Suburban Family Network and others partner with the school on a number of initiatives. Continued enhancement of opportunities for partnership with community agencies and organizations such as these should continue be sought out as vehicles to augment school curriculum and programs, to build capacity of resources available to teachers and students and to provide a stronger understanding of what is going on in Melrose's schools.

Governance, Organizational Leadership and Funding

Leadership and Governance

While many administrators within the Melrose district are recent arrivals to the district, the leadership team has accomplished a number of substantial achievements within the past few years. However, coordination and consistency across the district in the implementation of various initiatives is not always apparent. This is especially clear among the elementary schools, but also evident from elementary to middle and middle to high school. District leadership needs to play a strong role in ensuring that school to school understanding of expectations and procedures related to initiatives are common and are monitored for consistency.

Melrose ranks ninth out of eleven districts that are similar in district structure, wealth¹ and enrollment in a comparison of FY08 per pupil expenditures and is below the state average in per pupil expenditure. Compared with four neighboring districts², Melrose ranks fifth in both FY07 and FY08 per pupil expenditures. There is a clear need for increased funding for Melrose schools.

A number of organizations associated with Melrose schools, such as PTOs, Melrose Sharing and Caring, and Launch work to seek alternative funding possibilities for the schools and conduct fundraising activities. The school district does not have an Educational Foundation or similar organization that could conduct such activities on a larger, more comprehensive basis. Such an organization could be of help to the district now and in the future.

¹ based on equalized property valuation per capita and median income per household (see Mass. DESE web site – <http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/schfin/statistics/ppx08>)

² Reading, Stoneham, Wakefield and Winchester