



Superintendent's Report of Entry Findings

Acton-Boxborough Regional School District



Introduction

I arrived at the Luther Conant Elementary School early on September 4, 2018 in time to meet one of our incoming kindergarten classes as they entered school for the first time; these children will graduate from our schools in June 2031. The next thirteen years for this group of students and their families will pass in the blink of an eye. These thirteen years are also the time we have to provide each of these children, and each of the more than five thousand students who will attend our schools every day, a world-class education that will serve them well for the remainder of their lives.

As a leader new to the district, I engaged in an entry process that was designed to allow me to learn about our schools through the collective lenses of the students, families, faculty, staff and administrators, as well as the individuals and organizations who make up the broader Acton-Boxborough community. This process also helped me to understand the unique strengths and opportunities we have, as well as our challenges, and to give voice to stakeholders in shaping the future of our schools.

The process outlined in my Entry Plan included meetings with groups of students, families, and faculty at each school as well as opportunities to meet with community leaders in a variety of settings. I also reviewed relevant demographic and performance data and spent many hours visiting classrooms in each of our schools in order to deepen my understanding of the teaching and learning that takes place each day.

This *Report of Entry Findings* is intended to summarize what I have learned about our schools' many strengths, and to highlight the opportunities we have ahead of us. More importantly, the entry process and *Report of Entry Findings* serves to unearth important questions that will lead us to continually improve our schools for the betterment of the students who will spend their thirteen important years with us.

Highlights of the Entry Process

The entry process has been an incredible learning experience for me. In September, when I initially presented my entry plan, I was struck by the passion and support within the community for public education. The entry process reaffirmed and cemented this belief further with each stakeholder meeting I conducted. I was also immediately impressed by the high value that students and families place on their teachers. Participants in the various groups universally indicated how much they knew that teachers cared about the students. Teachers also reported that they felt supported by the district in their work, and this is evident in the longevity of the faculty.

The district has recognized its changing demographics over the last decade and has made a commitment to implementing culturally responsive practices. There has also been significant focus on ensuring equitable opportunities and access for all students.

Students, families, teachers and administrators are passionate about our schools. There is a historical tradition of individualism, autonomy and innovation that has driven the development of the schools and this is evident in the unique culture and traditions of each school. As a newly expanded PreK-12 regional district, important work has taken place over the last several years to appropriately blend the cultures of the Acton and Boxborough elementary schools with each other.

Opportunities for Continuous Improvement

This following section of the report is organized into key questions which represent the broad themes that I believe will be essential for us to address in the coming years. Rather than make recommendations, I have organized this section into broad questions to provoke additional thought, discussion and eventually action. I have also provided some background information to support my conclusions, and have posed more discrete questions for consideration which support the overarching theme for each section. These observations and questions will form the basis of future work of the leadership team as we refine and further expand the district's long term strategy.

Respectfully Submitted,

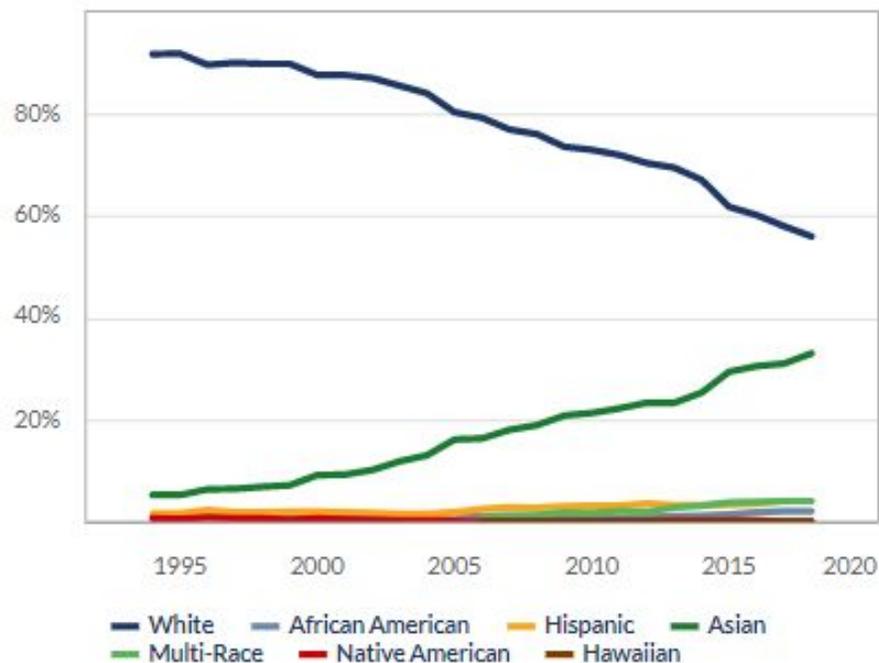
Peter Light,
Superintendent of Schools

Overarching Questions and Themes

- I. *How can we manage tension that has arisen from increasingly diverse cultural perspectives about education and the purpose of schools, and leverage this diversity into increased opportunities for students?*
- II. *How can we continue to expand our Strategic Plan in order to increase focus on the teaching and learning process, and more fully articulate our vision for student learning?*
- III. *How can we manage tension between greater district-wide strategic coherence and the rich traditions of individualism and autonomy that have developed in the various schools?*
- IV. *How can we foster an increased culture of inclusivity and best leverage resources in order to support an increasingly diverse student population (with regard to learning profiles, race and socioeconomic status) in a more inclusive environment?*
- V. *How can we be more proactive in meeting the needs of a fast growing population of students with increasingly complex and acute social and emotional needs?*
- VI. *How can our Leadership Teams most effectively employ the characteristics of High-Performing Teams to support the work of the schools and district?*

I. How can the district manage tension that has arisen from increasingly diverse cultural perspectives about education and the purpose of schools, and leverage this diversity into increased opportunities for students?

STUDENT DIVERSITY OVER TIME



source: <https://www.cleargov.com/massachusetts/school/acton-boxborough/2017/students>

Over the last two decades, our schools have seen a dramatic shift in demographics with respect to the cultures we serve. Throughout the entry process, stakeholder groups identified a growing tension around the appropriate balance between wellness and achievement. Specifically, some families expressed concern that the emphasis on student wellness may detract from the district’s traditions of academic excellence. While the stakeholders who expressed these concerns were not unique to a single race or ethnicity, this concern was raised consistently by members of the community. In particular, many members of the Asian community who participated in stakeholder meetings expressed a concern that the schools would not continue to embrace a focus on academic achievement

as efforts to promote student wellness are increased. This tension between valuing achievement and balancing both wellness and equity has also manifested itself as district and school initiatives have been implemented, most notably with concerns around the revised homework policy and the high school schedule. In both of these examples, stakeholders expressed concern about how changes to district programs might negatively impact the district's achievement. In some cases, stakeholders worried that the current direction of the district would not maintain its commitment to excellence.

Stakeholder groups that represented staff and administration developed the district's current mission, vision and values in 2016, and have been deeply committed to the work in promoting the three Core Values of Wellness, Equity and Engagement since they were adopted by the school committee. In discussing the development of the current set of values, the administration indicated that the current Core Values were designed to continue the pursuit of excellence, but focused on redefining "excellence" more broadly. This was in reaction to what was perceived as a hyper-focus on standardized test scores as a measure of excellence, as well as the faculty and administration's increasing awareness of rising student levels of stress and anxiety.

While all stakeholders agreed with efforts to reduce stress among students, there were divisions that appeared to be cultural which were expressed during some stakeholder meetings with regard to how the district might best accomplish this goal while preserving its strong academic and extracurricular programs.

- *How can teaching and learning practices as well as our educational programs continue to evolve in ways that recognize and manage tension between the values and priorities of diverse cultures within the community?*

- *What strategies might we implement to establish greater connections with students and families that represent all of the various cultures and backgrounds in the community and ensure that these groups' voices feel heard?*

The Acton elementary schools have long had an "Open Enrollment" policy which allows parents to choose a preferred elementary school for their child to attend. Since full

regionalization, this practice has continued and parents have this same opportunity, but with a “home town guarantee” that allows their children first priority to attend a school within their town of residence. Over the last several years, there has been an increasing trend toward schools whose racial and ethnic makeup vary significantly from that of the overall district’s racial diversity. This has manifested itself most demonstrably in two schools becoming over-represented by students identified as “White” and two schools over-represented by students identified as “Asian.” There are similar differences among some of the smaller selected demographic populations. However, these two racial groups, because of their relative size and representation among students in the district, are the most notable. During the entry process, stakeholder groups shared support for the open enrollment model, but some stakeholders also expressed concerns about school enrollments that are disproportionate to the demographics of the community. In moving forward, it will be important for the district to more deeply understand patterns of school choice across races in order to ensure that the education programs in each of the elementary schools are responsive to students of all racial identities.

→ *What is driving the discrepancies in open enrollment with respect to race and how can the schools and district effectively respond to this in order to ensure racial equity within the open enrollment program?*

During the entry process, various groups, including students, articulated that the increasing diversity of the community has led to some increases in what was perceived as bias-based behaviors. For example, some students articulated that they hear jokes about academic or athletic skills of students from different cultures. Additionally, during the entry process, some stakeholders articulated concerns about the growing national, state and local trends toward bias incidents and, in the most serious instances, hate. These groups also indicated that our schools play an important role in educating students against bias. The district has taken numerous steps to reduce bias and respond to incidents including, but not limited to, the development of a middle school social studies curriculum focused on bias, purchasing additional classroom library materials in the elementary schools to support this work, and reviewing the high school English curriculum to expand the representation of various cultures in the literature students read. Additionally, the district has made Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (S.E.E.D.) training a priority for staff. Despite some of

these efforts, stakeholders continued to be concerned that the schools promote anti-bias education.

- *Do the district's stated Core Values, Vision and Mission fully embrace, reflect and capitalize upon the value of the diversity in the educational community?*

- *How can we continue to prioritize anti-bias education for members of our educational community and promote a continued focus on developing respect for human differences as a key outcome for students?*

Our schools boast one of the most unique demographic profiles of any district in Massachusetts. This demographic profile, which includes the third largest Asian population of students in the state as a percentage of enrollment, and the overall diversity of the community, provide a largely untapped opportunity to position the schools as leaders in developing our students as global citizens. This opportunity for our district to become a leader in global citizenship is growing more important as the world continues to see a shift in traditional political and economic power centers from Western Europe to Asia.

The Acton-Boxborough Regional High School adopted the Seal of Biliteracy to allow students who demonstrate fluency in more than one language to be recognized for this accomplishment. Additionally, there have been numerous trips over the last decade designed to provide students with opportunities to travel abroad, and in the summer of 2018 the Acton Little League hosted a baseball team from China. While there have been these and similar intermittent opportunities to increase students' capacity as global citizens, they have not been coordinated as part of a broader strategic effort to leverage the diversity of the community as a center of global citizenship. There may be opportunities to create global partnerships that provide students with ways to learn from and collaborate with peers across the globe. In addition, faculty and administrators may find opportunities to expand our vision for education and immerse themselves in diverse cultures in order to better understand the students and families we serve.

- *How could the district leverage its diversity as an asset to support the development of international strategic partnerships which increase focus on global citizenship as a student outcome and provide faculty with opportunities to more deeply immerse themselves in and understand cultures that are represented within the A-B community?*

II. How can the district continue to expand its Strategic Plan in order to increase its focus on the teaching and learning process and more fully articulate its vision for student success?

The Long Range Strategic Plan articulates three broad, overarching goals. Two of these are to “Understand and respond to our students’ social-emotional needs,” and that “Our students will have equitable opportunities and access.” These two goals clearly reflect the values of Wellness and Equity. The third goal of the district for the past three years has been related to much needed capital improvements to its facilities. While there has been significant work in growing educational programs, there are no clear goals in the strategic plan that reflect the community’s value for teaching and learning, the district’s stated Core Value of Engagement, or which drive the continued growth of teaching and learning across all schools and classrooms.

→ *How might the district further expand upon its strategy as articulated in the Long Range Strategic Plan to better reflect the inherent value in the community for teaching and learning?*

AB has long been recognized as a high performing district, and many members of the community have come to see this as a reflection of the district’s performance on traditional standardized measures such as MCAS, SAT and AP scores. Through work with Challenge Success, there has been a concerted effort to expand the definition of success beyond reliance upon these measures; however, there has been no universally agreed upon vision across all stakeholder groups of what an expanded notion of success should look like for all students. Because there has been no universally adopted vision of a successful graduate, some stakeholders perceived that the district lacked a consistent set of measures by which to measure student learning. Stakeholder groups that ranged from families to school committee members have questioned how the district defines an expanded vision of student success and expressed that this lack of coherence led them to question “if not standardized test scores, then what?”

→ *How can the district work with stakeholders to come to consensus on what an expanded notion of success might look like and how this can be measured over time?*

As a key part of my entry process I observed classrooms on a monthly basis at each school with building Principals, met with curriculum coordinators and district leaders, and reviewed a variety of data regarding educator observation and evaluation. There was significant evidence that faculty are highly knowledgeable, care deeply about the students they teach, and maintain high expectations for them. There was also evidence that there are some inconsistencies with regard to how teachers implement programs and practices such as balanced literacy, including phonics instruction and readers' and writers' workshops, and Responsive Classroom programs across schools and levels. At the secondary level, some students in focus groups commented on inconsistencies among instructional practices of teachers. These inconsistencies may be partly related to varied professional learning opportunities in which teachers have participated. Additionally, there are opportunities to increase the consistency by which teachers and administrators are supported by the educator evaluation framework.

→ *In moving forward, how can the district leverage professional learning and educator supervision and evaluation in order to increase instructional coherence and outcomes for all students?*

III. How can the District manage tension between district-wide strategic coherence and the rich traditions of individualism and autonomy that have developed in the various schools?

Our schools have leveraged site-based leadership and decision-making as a historical strategy to providing students with a personalized and responsive learning environment. This has resulted in several schools within the district developing specialized foci such as arts integration, looping, project-based learning, exhibitionary learning, and outdoor education. This approach has been enjoyed by many students and families and the opportunity to personalize the school environment has led to the adoption of an “open enrollment” program that allows families in both Acton and Boxborough to select the elementary school that they believe best meets their child’s needs. This has also led to increasingly site-based management over time and schools each adopted separate curricular programs and materials in the areas of literacy, mathematics and social emotional learning. School improvement planning has been focused at the building level through the respective school councils. A review of school improvement plans indicated varying degrees of coherence with district goals and some stakeholders offered feedback which questioned the strategic alignment of school plans with those of the district. During the entry process, many families, faculty, students and administrators expressed tremendous support for the positive impact the culture of individualism and autonomy has had on students. Some stakeholders within each group also questioned how these practices may lead to inequities in students’ outcomes and indicated that they believe the schools to be similar in many ways. Additionally, over the last several years, the district has recognized some of the inequities that arose from this culture and has taken steps to ensure more equitable access to opportunities across the schools. This process has led to natural tension within the district as resources have been reallocated across schools and there has been an increasing focus on ensuring equitable student access to programs. Some stakeholders also expressed concerns about diminishing the culture of individualism and autonomy as there has been increased focus around equity.

→ *What strategies might the district utilize to increase strategic coherence that result in equitable opportunities and access for students while celebrating opportunities for individualism and autonomy at the classroom and school level?*

→ *How can we most effectively manage the tension that is arising from an increasing focus on strategic coherence in a long standing culture of individualism and autonomy?*

Literacy and mathematics curriculum and instruction across the elementary schools is varied and analysis of the MCAS data reveals some inequitable outcomes for some students in these key areas. Additionally, because there are no centralized programs for literacy and mathematics across the elementary schools, there is no centralized benchmark data collection and analysis system in place to ensure equitable outcomes for all students across schools. Based on interviews with stakeholders including teachers, specialists, and administrators, data collection and analysis is done at the classroom and school level, but there are inconsistencies in the processes by which the data is utilized to inform instruction.

→ *What strategies might the district utilize to ensure that all students have equitable outcomes in literacy and mathematics instruction?*

→ *What might the District do to ensure that there are effective data collection and analysis systems in place to support teachers in using assessment data to inform instruction?*

Many of the classrooms across the district have embraced digital learning strategies that leverage technology to enhance the curriculum and teach these essential digital literacy skills. This is an area of relative strategic coherence across the elementary schools as all students in K-2 have access to iPad carts within classrooms, and all students in grades 3-6 have access to chromebook carts within classrooms. Additionally, the Junior high school has proposed to implement a 1:1 program for its students by re-allocating existing chromebooks within classrooms and purchasing the remaining number of needed chromebooks for the 2019-20 school year. At the high school, some departments have

purchased chromebook carts for students to access during class, but this has not been universally adopted across departments or all classrooms within departments. As a result, the district lacks a plan to ensure a coherent K-12 plan for technology access and integration for students.

→ *In moving forward, how can the district ensure that there is a coherent plan to integrate technology into instruction vertically across all K-12 classrooms as well as provide students opportunities to learn and practice key 21st century digital skills as they progress through all grades toward graduation?*

IV. How can the District foster an increased culture of inclusivity and best leverage its resources in order to support an increasingly diverse student population (with regard to learning profiles, race, and socio-economic status) in a more inclusive environment?

Over the last decade, we have seen a significant shift in student demographics among selected populations. Some key demographic highlights include:

- A steady decline over the last decade in the percentage of students identified as “white” from 76% (2008) to 56% (2018) with a corresponding increase in students identified as Asian (18.9% to 30.5%) during the same period;
- Increases in the percentages of students identified as African American (1.0% to 1.8%), and Hispanic (2.7% to 3.5%)
- The percentage of students qualifying for Free or Reduced Price Lunch has increased by 400% over last decade from 2.5% (2008) of students to more than 10% (2018).
- The percentage of students identified as English Learners (EL) has increased by almost 500% over the last decade from 1.1% (2008) to 4.8% (2018).
- Since 2013, when the state began reporting an aggregate population of high needs students, the district has seen a steady increase in this student population from 20.2% (2013) to 24.9% (2018)
- Additionally, over the last several years, the district has made a concerted effort to provide special education programming for students with increasingly complex needs in order to allow them to remain in district.

The district has recognized that there are equity gaps among these various selected populations of students. As the student population has shifted, services for students of selected populations (EL, Special Education, Economically Disadvantaged) have increased, and as the district has sought to reduce equity gaps, the Student Services Department has played an increasingly important role in its work with families, educators and school-based administrators. Based on analysis of various performance indicators, the impact of programs across the district is inequitable to the selected populations of students. For example, students in these subgroups are disproportionately overrepresented in the

lowest quartile of students on state testing. While equity is a Core Value of the district, it has been defined as “ensuring access” but not having “equitable outcomes” for students.

→ *Should the district consider expanding its definition of equity from ensuring access and opportunity, to ensuring equitable outcomes for students?*

The evolving needs of students has also required general education classroom teachers to adopt an increasingly diverse repertoire of skills, and for the district to think about the most appropriate delivery model for the various services students require to achieve equitable outcomes. Stakeholders including families, teachers and administrators all recognized a significant shift in the needs of students, but not all stakeholders were in clear agreement as to the most effective model to support students.

During classroom observations and meetings with various stakeholders, it was noted that there is a significant number of students receiving support services and direct instruction outside of the regular classroom environment. This equates to opportunities lost for these students to receive instruction from the content teacher and to participate in peer groups within the classroom environment. It was unclear from stakeholder feedback if there is a universal shared belief that this pull-out model is the most effective service delivery model for students who require these supports.

→ *How might the district establish and communicate a clear vision and necessary supports for inclusive practice, and ensure that beliefs around inclusive practice permeate both regular and special education settings?*

→ *How might the district evaluate whether the current service delivery model is the most appropriate for providing services and ensuring equitable access to content instruction from highly-qualified, licensed teachers?*

Various stakeholders including students, families, faculty and administrators identified a belief that there are inconsistencies that exist in grading practices among secondary teachers. There was also feedback from stakeholders, which was confirmed through

classroom observation, that some of the practices and expectations between and among the various course levels and sections at the high school were inconsistent.

→ *How might the district increase the consistency of grading and assessment practices, particularly at the secondary level, while simultaneously ensuring high expectations in all course levels and sections?*

V. How can the District become more proactive in meeting the needs of a fast-growing population of students who have increasingly complex and acute social and emotional needs?

Over the last five years, district leaders and staff became increasingly concerned with the level of stress among students, and the negative impact this stress had on both their learning and overall quality of life. This led to the launch of Challenge Success as a strategy to focus more deeply on the social and emotional wellbeing of our students. Through the work with Challenge Success, the district implemented several key initiatives to respond to student needs. The most notable efforts in this area included the development of a new homework policy and a move to later start times.

It was also immediately evident upon my entry into the district that a number of student deaths by suicide which occurred over the last two years have taken a tremendous emotional toll on the students, families, faculty, staff and administration of the district. Administrators and counselors report an increasing number of students with acute mental health illness as early as elementary school, and teachers have reported the negative impact that student emotional wellbeing is having on their ability to engage in learning.

The district has implemented a number of screening and intervention programs, provided parent trainings, introduced programs at the secondary level in order to reduce stress, changed start times, revised its homework policy, and developed a variety of community partnerships to support students. Despite these efforts teachers, counselors and administrators report increasing needs with regard to student mental health and a lack of sufficient support to work with students in crisis. Families widely reported ongoing concern for students' mental health.

Elementary schools have increasingly adopted The Responsive Classroom as a process to support student social and emotional learning. Classroom observations and discussions with teachers and administrators indicate that there is an opportunity to increase the consistency with which this program is implemented. Additionally, some classrooms and schools have adopted social and emotional curricula beyond the Responsive Classroom approach, but these vary by school, and in some cases by classroom.

While many elementary classrooms across the district use some or many Responsive Classroom methods, and there have been various strategies and supports used in the secondary schools, there was no evidence of an agreed upon set of skills that students should develop or strategies to assess how students are making progress toward these skills and systematically support those students who need additional skill development. This lack of consistency may lead to inconsistent development of social and emotional skills among students and, in particular, our most vulnerable students.

Stakeholder meetings with teachers, counselors and administrators all identified that there was insufficient support for students' mental health. However, an initial analysis of staffing levels in this area shows that the schools across the district meet or exceed recommended staffing levels set by the various professional organizations. As staff and school-based administrators see the increasing needs of students, there is a tension with regard to appropriate staffing levels in counselling and psychology and the role these professionals play in supporting students on a daily basis.

Social and emotional skill development has become regarded as critically important to supporting optimal student learning, and businesses are now identifying emotional intelligence as a key skill valued in the workforce. Similarly, research is clear that toxic levels of stress can profoundly impede learning. All stakeholder groups reported a sense of urgency with regard to ensuring students' wellness, and it is important that we take a proactive and cohesive approach to helping students develop these critical social and emotional skills.

- *What are the social and emotional skills that all students should develop and how can these skills be integrated systematically within a developmental framework throughout all grade levels?*
- *How could the district ensure that all students develop necessary social emotional skills and more deeply and proactively understand which students need additional early intervention supports in these areas?*
- *How can the district implement a system of social and emotional supports that provides continuity and coherence for students as they progress through the grades and between schools?*

→ *What steps might the district take to resolve the tension with regard to staffing and support for social emotional learning?*

VI. How can the District's Leadership Teams most effectively employ the characteristics of High-Performing Teams to support the work of the schools and district?

For the last several years, the leadership team that includes district and school administrators has grappled with issues of wellness, equity among schools, and the tension between strategic coherence and individualism and autonomy of schools. Additionally, the district has had turnover in leadership during this same time period (four Superintendents in six years). During meetings with senior leaders (district leaders and Principals), stakeholders have identified long-standing tension between the roles of school and district administrators and the impact this tension has on the team's work. In order for the district to move the work highlighted in this report forward, successful functioning of the leadership team will be critical.

→ *How can the leadership team continue to develop the characteristics of high performing teams which include developing mutual trust, recognizing trust as both thinking and feeling, and continuing to develop strategies to ensure that meetings and the work of the District focus on having important and impactful conversations that deeply impact student learning?*

The school committee is a critical leadership team and the relationship between the school committee and Superintendent is important to providing strategic leadership to the schools. The committee is also a leadership team that, due to its nature as an elected body, typically experiences changes in membership each year. Additionally, because of its large size with regard to membership, there are often several new members welcomed onto the committee in any given year.

→ *How can the Superintendent and School Committee continue to develop themselves as an important leadership team within the district, and ensure that:*

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- ◆ *The district's Core Values, Vision and Mission reflect the values of the community and its vision for education;*
 - ◆ *There is a focused strategy in place that reflects the Core Values, Vision and Mission that can withstand changes in leadership;*
 - ◆ *Improvement efforts and initiatives are coherent and relevant to the district strategy, while minimizing threats to this focus;*
 - ◆ *There is a positive and predictable system of accountability for the district and its schools for making progress toward its goals as well as a method to communicate this progress effectively with stakeholders in the community;*
 - ◆ *The various members of the school committee are able to effectively voice individual perspectives in an atmosphere of mutual trust, while simultaneously working from consensus and recognizing the large make-up of the committee?*

Next Steps

While AB continues to be recognized as a high performing district at the state and national levels, all stakeholders identified opportunities for improvement. In the coming months, I will work with the leadership team and school committee to delve further into the questions posed in this report. I anticipate that some of the questions posed will lead to an expansion and refinement of the district's long term strategy, while other ideas may be tabled for a period of time, or dismissed upon further investigation. This work will span the spring and summer months and will be reflected in the district's expanded strategy and goals which will be presented to the school committee next fall.

