

Chesterfield County Public Schools
Executive Summary
January 2017

Overview:

Chesterfield County Public Schools is deemed a high-performing school division with a long history of success.

The division's schools are recognized nationally: There are six National Blue Ribbon Schools, six National Title I Distinguished schools and five National School Change Award winners. Staff members are routinely honored for their work and expertise. The school division boasts 12 of the last 15 Region I Teachers of the Year, features a large number of National Board Certified Teachers and has school-based and Central Office administrators recognized as leaders in their respective fields.

Student achievement levels continue to fare favorably when compared to other Virginia school divisions. Chesterfield County's student pass rates meet or exceed state averages 75 percent of the time. In addition to Chesterfield County's 4-point differential in reading when compared to state averages, the school division's student pass rates in mathematics are 3 percentage points higher and in science are 1 percentage point higher. In addition, 93 percent of the division's 61 comprehensive schools are fully accredited.

A nationally recognized strategic plan, the Design for Excellence 2020, has served the school division well since 2007. Blended learning, project-based learning and service learning and a focus on college and career readiness have created a well-rounded academic experience. Students have access to anytime, anywhere learning and integrate 21st-century skills and content socially and academically by using reasoning and problem-solving skills to promote higher-level thinking. They are gaining knowledge to understand and solve real-world situations. However, this work must continue to evolve given how quickly the world changes.

Superintendent James F. Lane started as Chesterfield County Public Schools' new leader on July 1, 2016. During his first six months, Dr. Lane visited nearly every school and facility in the county, engaged with hundreds of stakeholders and participated in many meetings to learn more about the school division. Through the support of a local philanthropic organization, Dr. Lane commissioned PDK International to help create a transition plan. PDK leaders were granted access to students, staff members, parents, business officials and community leaders to learn more about the school division's successes and areas where there is room for opportunity.

The purpose of the Superintendent's transition team and report is to understand culture and context, build relationships and establish credibility, assess and analyze emerging trends to adapt leadership strategies and engage stakeholders in meaningful partnerships that will support the work ahead. Transition team members identified these areas as points on which to focus in order to meet the needs of all students and become the premiere school division in the United States:

- Enhancing teaching and learning through student engagement
- Redefining equity by creating a level playing field for all students

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- Restructuring leadership of school division and realigning resources through reorganization of duties
- Empowering and supporting staff members through training, compensation and recognition
- Creating effective, efficient operations through strategic change
- Expanding efforts to build a positive culture and climate

The strengths, opportunities and recommendations outlined in this report represent a chance for Chesterfield County Public Schools to take the next step toward academic excellence. These steps would include incorporating the transition report into operational practice, defining and implementing enhancements to the school division's current strategic innovation plan, reorganizing services to meet school division needs and optimize leaders' capabilities, developing an academic and operational road map that can be supported by a balanced budget, and creating a climate where people (students, staff and families alike) love coming to school.

In addition to the recommendations, the transition team and facilitators discussed conditions necessary for success:

- Creating an impetus for change
- Developing a public understanding of goals with measurable standards
- Establishing an understanding for staff members about what skills will be needed in the future
- Determining multiple accountability measures that take into account what supports a successful learning environment
- Managing expectations for the proper rate of change
- Aligning division expectations with state and federal expectations, with efforts to push past minimum expectations
- Planning for how to overcome roadblocks

There is no doubt that Dr. Lane has inherited a strong, successful school division. The reputation and outcomes have created an environment where people take pride in their work and their schools. While this is a strength, it can also create unintended barriers to transformation. Chesterfield County Public Schools has ample opportunities to build on the great work it is known for while simultaneously developing strategies to address the challenges it faces. Dr. Lane has been welcomed as a visionary, energetic and accessible leader capable of guiding the school division to the next level.

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Areas of Focus:

Project Engagement: Effective 21st Century Teaching and Learning

Overall, the school division has a strong foundation of teaching and learning. This is evidenced by a strategic plan that guides the daily work of the district, as well as by its long history of student achievement and above average overall performance. The widespread agreement that these are strengths to learn and build from was matched by an equally widespread belief that the division must face many of the challenges that hinder its ability to move from good to great in the realm of teaching and learning.

Strengths

- Strong history of academic achievement
- Solid strategic plan that has helped advance education
- Outstanding staff members who are seen as the strength of the system by stakeholders
- Increased access to technology, network support and online resources

Opportunities

- Restore a love of learning by fostering an engaging instructional environment and creating relevant learning experiences
- Reduce focus on state-mandated tests and create accountability system with more comprehensive metrics of student growth and success
- Continue expansion of technology integration to all levels of learning

Recommendations

- Redefine the purpose of learning to include life-readiness skills in addition to college- and career-readiness skills
- Enhance opportunities for deeper thinking, project-based learning and real life/world applications
- Create additional measures of success for students, teachers and schools to reduce over-reliance on one state-mandated test
- Remodel professional learning to meet adult needs in service of student learning and needs
- Establish a career ladder and competitive models for teacher growth and compensation

Project Equity: Creating a Level Playing Field for Success

The term equity was most often brought up in discussions about topics such as resource allocation, opportunity, access, diversity and access to special programs. Several members of the transition team used the term “tale of two counties” when describing the inequities they see. PDK’s working definition

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of equity for this report is the practice of giving every student, according to strengths and needs, exactly what they need so they are able to learn, experience success and thrive. By this definition, equity does not mean equality; and, those who operate with an equity lens recognize that some students, because of circumstances both within and out of their control, will need more than others to experience a leveled playing field and success.

Strengths

- Growing diversity of students, families and cultures
- People recognize equity as the next level of work; Understanding that issues of inequity must be addressed, even if they are not school- or school division-based, courtesy of previous training that brought cultural competence to forefront
- Knowledge by many families of resources that are available to support them
- Cultural competence is elevated in the Design for Excellence Plan

Opportunities

- Create community conversations to discuss the impact of poverty and what true equity looks like in practice
- Close student opportunity and achievement gaps by identifying diverse, rigorous pathways that lead to readiness/success
- Reallocate resources to address school disparities
- Promote wraparound services and supports
- Address the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among teacher workforce

Recommendations

- Create an equity committee that fosters a deliberate equity-focused approach to school system's work
- Develop and deliver professional development with a focus on cultural responsiveness, equity and diversity
- Enhance family engagement efforts to promote wraparound services available in the community
- Increase efforts to recruit, develop and retain a talented and diverse workforce
- Establish policy, regulatory and financial frameworks for ongoing equity work

Project Enable Leadership: Creating, Enacting and Guiding a Culture of Change

While the strengths and success of the school division are a powerful foundation to build on, there are numerous leadership and governance considerations that must be taken into account in order for the school division to transform. Shared governance was the request of many stakeholder groups, as all were interested in being involved in the decision-making process. Yet, the architecture of such

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involvement must be clearly delineated so that everyone knows and understands their roles. One of the greatest challenges facing Dr. Lane is the need to build the capacity of experienced leaders to do new work in a different way. Regardless of the strong expressed desire for leaders to transform the school division, saying so and doing so can be a challenge.

Strengths

- Accessibility of superintendent and belief that superintendent's skill sets match division and community's needs
- Interest and involvement of the School Board, which brings variety of experiences and skill sets to the table
- Competency and professionalism of school division leaders

Opportunities

- Review and enhance current leadership development program
- Review data, policies and structure to develop school-based, decision-making approach
- Create culture of transparency where messages are consistent
- Maintain consistency with policy regarding issues management; start at school level and work up the chain of command

Recommendations

- Reorganize departments and restructure positions to better align responsibilities and work
- Align school division goals with state and federal plans – Profile of a Graduate and Every Student Succeeds Act
- Codify approach to shared governance

Project Empowerment: Creating an Environment Where Staff Members Love to Work

It became clear throughout the process that there is a general recognition that people are the school system's biggest asset, and that any improvement is predicated on having high-quality teachers, leaders and staff who feel valued and appreciated. Transition team members and interviewees described the dedication and commitment that most teachers, support staff members and leaders demonstrate every day by their long hours of work and their belief and practice of going above and beyond, in spite of the lack of financial incentives.

Strengths

- Award-winning, nationally recognized teachers, support team members and building-based and Central Office leaders
- High quality of work performed by staff at all levels

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- Belief that the new superintendent has a high level of interest, accessibility and visibility

Opportunities

- Continue to reduce formal layers of authority and enhance transparency and communication
- Enhance financial compensation for quality of work done and to retain highly qualified staff
- Provide greater financial incentives to work in hard-to-school locations
- Develop comprehensive talent management system based on multiple metrics

Project Efficiency: Building a Culture of Effective Operations

All stakeholders acknowledged that improvements must be made to the operations area, and many noted progress has been made in this area during the last year. The willingness of Central Office to embrace new ways of doing business is a critical component of operations transformation, as is the board's desire to make progress. The main questions surround (1.) a willingness to make the investments that need to be made in operations/infrastructure, which will realize savings and efficiencies later and (2.) managing expectations of all stakeholders, including elected officials.

Strengths

- Understanding that operations must be managed more directly
- Eagerness of Central Office staff to take bold steps to reshape operations
- Budget process has received numerous recognitions

Opportunities

- Conduct budget review to ensure resources are as student-centric as reasonably possible
- Address health concerns that arise from current school starting times
- Continue balancing expenditures to support older buildings in addition to managing student growth through new facilities
- Adopt new software systems that will allow for less paper and increased efficiencies
- Confront concerns about investing in work to save later and associated potential changes to staff responsibilities

Recommendations

- Monitor progress of in-progress changes to operations areas
- Review school starting times to address recommendations from medical community, within reasonable financial limits
- Consider further consolidation of appropriate areas with county operations
- Establish a cross-functional team from instruction, technology and budget, with representation from teachers and students, to establish a clear vision for the infusion of technology into the instructional vision

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Project Experience: Creating a Culture of Success for All Students

The transition team defined culture as the beliefs, values, customs and ways of being and doing that are held by the organization, covertly and explicitly. Culture emerged as a theme as we considered how the school division is organized, how people are in relationship with one another, how the system responds to tensions and differences between its espoused values/goals and what happens in reality/practice, and what gets celebrated or is held sacred.

Strengths

- Biggest asset is the people working for the school division
- Honoring and building on the success of the past
- Emerging culture of innovation and risk-taking and willingness to explore new approaches

Opportunities

- Instill a culture of high expectations that is consistent from building to building and support infusion of workplace readiness skills as being as important as college readiness skills
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- Continue to build deep relationships with students
- Broaden representation of stakeholders in the decision-making process and improve communication and transparency
- Expand and enhance community partnerships to support Chesterfield County Public Schools' efforts

Recommendations

- Conduct system-wide review of culture and climate; and, build and implement culture and climate initiatives
- Create stronger partnerships between school and central office staff members, as well as the school division and community
- Continue to look for new communication platforms to reach diversifying audience
- Elevate the importance of family and community engagement