

Office of the Superintendent of Schools
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

March 12, 2013

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Joshua P. Starr, Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Discussion of School Support and Improvement Framework

Executive Summary

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide an update on the School Support and Improvement Framework (SSIF) that originated in the Office of School Support and Improvement (OSSI) as a way to understand the strengths and needs of all 202 schools using multiple sources of data. Although OSSI is using this framework to set the expectations for the conditions for school success and document and analyze the strengths and needs of schools, SSIF also is a tool that assists in initiating collaboration between central offices to align and coordinate resources in order to provide focused, differentiated support to schools.

Background

In December 2011, a process was launched to explore how the central office could more effectively serve and support principals and schools. Our “reorientation” process included designing a central office theory of action, studying the research on central office transformation, developing guiding principles, and creating the new Office of School Support and Improvement and the new Office of Teaching, Learning, and Programs.

The Executive Leadership Team designed a theory of action that has guided the work of central office leaders this year: *If central office leaders and employees serve principals in order to ensure a laser-like focus on improving teaching and learning for every child every day, then principals will have the support they need to serve their staff, and student learning and achievement will improve.* This notion of cascading service and support is part of what Robert Greenleaf describes in *Leaders of Learning* (DuFour and Marzano, 2011, page 208) as “servant-first leadership.” Central office leaders serve principals; principals serve their staff; staff serves students; and students leave our system with the 21st century knowledge and skills to serve their communities. The essence of this theory of action blended with servant-first leadership suggests

the need to be more explicit about central office existing to serve schools rather than schools existing to serve central office.

A reorientation team of executive staff began studying research on central office transformation. Meredith Honig's research cited in the Wallace Report influenced early thinking and conversations about how to forge strong central office and principal partnerships. This research laid the foundation for utilizing coaching, creating networks, and coordinating support through liaison work across central offices.

An outcome of the reorientation process was the creation of the new Office of School Support and Improvement and the new Office of Teaching, Learning, and Programs. With the launch of a new office, the deputy superintendent of school support and improvement held entry conversations with school and office leaders throughout the system. One theme that emerged from the conversations was, "You have to know us well in order to serve us well." Leaders articulated the desire to receive support that honors the individual differences and unique needs of schools. OSSI leaders have worked strategically during the last 18 months to better align their work to meet the goals of the reorientation process.

Knowing schools well means, in part, understanding the "story" of a school and the context around which it operates. To fully understand the story of a school's improvement, one must consider multiple indicators in order to determine a school's strengths and needs. Traditionally, a school has been deemed effective or ineffective based almost solely on student achievement on standardized tests. Student outcome data are important, but a great school is more than the results of one test. In fact, it is essential that we review other indicators that create the conditions for student success, including adult actions.

SSIF is based on four categories of data to know schools well (see attachment). Within each category are examples of data that will illustrate a school's improvement journey:

- student outcome—strategic targets such as suspensions, eligibility, graduation rate, school performance index, annual measurable objectives;
- perceptual—stakeholder input such as the Gallup survey on student and staff engagement;
- implementation—data such as assessment tool results on the extent to which Curriculum 2.0 (C2.0) and professional learning communities are being implemented schoolwide; and
- leadership—leadership practices such as eliminating barriers to all students achieving at high levels, leading the school improvement planning process, building high functioning teams, and modeling the essence of a learning leader.

Although the indicators are familiar measures that may be accessed relatively easily, organizing the measures all together in order to see a more holistic view of a school is a new practice.

SSIF also helps to answer the following questions:

- What are the strengths and needs of individual schools?
- What are the patterns of strengths and needs of schools across the system?
- What indicators provide a more complete picture of a school's story?
- How should central office leaders focus their service and support?

School leaders are increasingly using SSIF to better understand themselves as leaders and better understand their schools as complex entities. Early on, a group of principals articulated that the categories of data outlined in SSIF connected with the school improvement planning process, particularly in how schools develop their school improvement plans to address student needs, build staff knowledge and skills to meet student needs, and put structures and processes in place to support these goals.

As OSSI leaders have begun operationalizing SSIF, it has become apparent that leadership is foundational. Not surprisingly, this notion aligns with OSSI's vision: "Elevating Leadership—Magnifying Learning." Because of this foundational construct, SSIF was revised to visually show leadership laying the foundation for strengthening the impact of the other three categories; perceptual data from key stakeholders, implementation data, and student outcome data.

The directors of school support and improvement are taking the lead on documenting the stories of all 202 schools. They are meeting with principals and other school leaders, as well as collaborating with the directors of instruction and achievement, to paint the picture of schools' strengths and needs across all four categories of data in order for schools to receive focused and coordinated support. This documentation is not intended to be static, but rather constantly evolving as schools move forward in their improvement journey. We are a learning organization; the Board of Education's explicit selection of "learning" as a core value is manifested in this case study method where schools are continually growing and improving from their current state. OSSI also is partnering with the Office of the Chief Technology Officer to create an interactive dashboard to be used as a resource for storing and accessing data that will enrich how schools are holistically understood and uniquely supported. Additionally, this resource will increase transparency about schools' indicators of success.

As a key practice to strengthen relationships with principals, practice coaching skills, and understand leaders' improvement strategies more deeply, community superintendents have taken the lead to organize three formal rounds of coaching conversations with all 201 school principals and the acting coordinator at Community Montessori Charter School. OSSI leaders have been studying coaching practices as a part of their professional development (Lipton and Wellman learning-focused conversations; Costa and Garmston cognitive coaching; Lindsey, Lindsey, and Martinez culturally proficient coaching). School leaders are in the best position to articulate their thinking about the strengths and needs of their schools and authenticate the data. Some of the coaching conversations have been one-on-one and some have been conducted in concert with other OSSI directors. The focus of the conversations has been how leaders are leading their school improvement planning processes, particularly in the area of identifying an instructional

focus. Additionally, these conversations have focused on how leadership teams may coordinate efforts to effectively implement C2.0 and use professional learning communities as vehicles to meet school improvement goals. Feedback from principals at all levels, collected through anonymous surveys, discussions at principal Professional Learning Communities meetings, and through informal conversations, has been extremely positive. Principals have articulated how much they appreciate this new approach and how valued they feel through this process, particularly about being able to think out loud about their work and feel confident about taking next steps toward improvement efforts.

As these coaching conversations and supervisory visits have illuminated where schools are making great progress and where schools are experiencing challenges, leaders in OSSI have considered how best to align resources and coordinate support inside and outside OSSI. In previous years, central office leaders organized service and support based on whether schools met Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) measures. With the end of AYP, OSSI leaders are using SSIF to determine how to most effectively and efficiently provide focused, differentiated support. Sometimes this support is found within OSSI and sometimes the response requires collaboration of many offices.

Next Steps

As OSSI moves forward, one key next step will revolve around identifying high-impact leadership practices. The deputy superintendent of school support and improvement will continue collecting data from stakeholders in order to create a common understanding of the leadership practices that make a difference for staff and students and help move schools toward their improvement goals. OSSI will partner with the Executive Leadership Team to develop clarity around how central offices continue to strengthen service and support and identify key data points that guide the next steps in coordinating meaningful service and support.

Conclusion

Trent Kaufman and colleagues wrote in *Collaborative School Improvement: Eight Practices for District-School Partnerships to Transform Teaching and Learning*, "...partnerships have the power to amplify individual capacity." OSSI is committed to a strong partnership with schools and a strong partnership with other central offices. SSIF builds a bridge of understanding with schools and facilitates collaboration and coordination between offices in order to equitably provide support that schools need to achieve their school improvement efforts.

At the Board table to participate in our discussion today are Dr. Beth Schiavino-Narvaez, deputy superintendent, Office of School Support and Improvement; Dr. Darryl L. Williams, community superintendent, Office of School Support and Improvement; Mr. James P. Koutsos, principal, Clarksburg High School; Mr. Robert Sinclair, Jr., principal, Redland Middle School; and Mrs. Elizabeth L. Thomas, director of school support and improvement, Office of School Support and Improvement.

References

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School Support and Improvement Framework

Rationale: In order to effectively serve principals and support schools, we need to know them well. The purpose of this framework is to enable us to use multiple measures to assess schools' strengths and needs so that we can then provide differentiated support.

