

Transforming a School District

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Leadership is the cornerstone of any successful superintendency, but genuine leadership is not about racing ahead and hoping that others are following. Whether leading the military, a business, or a school district, I have learned that it is better to lead by inspiring and not commanding. I cannot help but think of Bruce Buchanan's words in his book *Turnover at the Top* when he said, "Today's urban school superintendent is expected to be a dynamic leader – someone who is part education expert, part CEO, and part tent revival preacher." In every organization I have been a part of, I know that everyone wants and needs to understand the big picture in order to be engaged and supportive. The first step is to make everyone



– the Board of Education, students, staff, parents and the community – believe that real change is possible and to unite around a common vision and mission. Sustainable leadership requires engaging all stakeholders. The next step is encouraging and building capacity for leadership that extends from the superintendent and board to every teacher and classroom as well as to parents and the community. The process our district followed is offered as one model for transformational change.

Creating the Vision for Equity and Opportunity for All Students [1]

When I became superintendent in 2006, the board and I embarked on a 90-day "listening tour" to find out what our constituencies wanted and expected from Aurora Public Schools (APS). Using this information, the district created a five-year strategic plan, known as VISTA 2010, which was focused on accelerating student achievement and closing achievement gaps. To make real and lasting change, strategies and plans have to be transformational. Small adjustments and incremental changes aren't enough. Data confirms that kids who start out below proficiency too often stay there. The three reasons most students drop out of school is as simple as A B C: attendance, behavior or credit deficiency. We decided that the best response to close the achievement gap and keep kids in school was to follow the three R's: rigor, relevancy and relationships. To raise student achievement and close the achievement gap among ethnic groups and economically diverse students, districts cannot afford to wait for schools to make changes on their own – they have to create a clear vision and strong plan to enable and support every school within the system to be successful. We had to find solutions to overcome poverty, transiency, language barriers and disinterest. We needed higher expectations and higher accountability for all.

Our no-excuses, no-blame vision is that every graduate should have the choice to attend college – without remediation. We kept our plan simple by dividing the goals/objectives into four areas: People, Achievement, Community and Environment (PACE). VISTA 2010 created a roadmap for success, but it allows others to fill in from the bottom rather than be directed from the top. I often refer to this style as "federalist" because anyone can bring forward ideas and develop strategies for implementing the goals. This creates ownership and adds value to the plan.

To guard against a plan being just a grand design with no follow-through, it is important that every objective be measurable. Through regular monthly reviews, the plan can remain a living document that is adjusted and improved over the course of the five years. The key goals within the strategic

plan are interconnected and organized to break down the bureaucratic silos that exist in large school districts. There are coherent milestones that demand accountability. The emphasis is on results and identifies the district's obligation to develop an organization where all students can learn and succeed.

Great Teachers and Leaders in Every School

The district aligned curriculum, instruction, assessment and professional development. Pacing guides allow teachers to break material into individual segments with specific learning goals to ensure consistent instruction district-wide. The guides have instructional targets at every grade level to meet the challenges of high mobility rates of students. Administrators and teachers are becoming experts at understanding and using data to carefully monitor student progress, identify potential problem areas and implement student targeted intervention strategies. Horizontally integrated teams look at all the data – not just their own classes. By creating “data walls” displaying results for every classroom, teacher and subject at every school, there is transparent accountability where everyone knows, understands and accepts mutual responsibility for results. Quarterly standards-based exams provide interim data rather than waiting for annual state exams to determine a student's progress. A standards-based system, kindergarten through 12th grade, ensures students are promoted on performance – what they know and are able to do – instead of seat time.

Extending the Vision to Develop College- and Career-Ready Students

VISTA 2010 was based on outreach to students, staff, parents and community to identify expectations for student success. It was necessary to build an internal foundational transformation. The next phase was VISTA 2015, which moves the district to a higher level of engagement. During the next listening tour, instead of asking partners how they can help the district meet its needs, VISTA 2015 addresses what our community needs in order to respond and work together to prepare students for entry into colleges, universities, careers and overall success in life.

As a result, a Community Workforce Planning Team (CWPT) was formed. It is a public/private alliance involving more than 30 community groups and organizations representing higher education, industry/career sectors, economic development, workforce development and the school district. This pioneering alliance is a collaboration that aligns academic and economic development to benefit APS students as well as the community at-large. All partners can see a return on their investments of time, expertise and resources. What is unique is that it is a community-led effort supporting the development and implementation of meaningful choices to increase postsecondary options and workforce readiness of APS graduates.

The CWPT developed a Community Workforce Plan that is the cornerstone for developing academic and career pathways across the school district to align academic and economic development. The CWPT considered input from focus groups conducted in spring 2010 as well as the expertise and experience of its members to develop the plan. The goals areas set by the CWPT are:

- *Developing and monitoring pathway specific advisory committees charged with ensuring high, consistent standards for implementation, maintenance and evaluation for all pathways.*
- *Identifying and helping students connect early to relevant curriculum, career and training opportunities and resources in each academic and career pathway.*
- *Connecting students to advantages to help them compete locally, nationally and globally in high-demand, high-skill and high-paying careers.*
- *Building strong partnerships among all groups within the CWPT alliance to benefit students, local industries/career sectors and the community at-large.*

- *Providing the community access to a locally developed and qualified workforce that is aligned with employer expectations.*
- *Responding to changing industry needs to sustain current and emerging workforce demands.*

In alignment with the CWPT, a goal in the APS strategic plan (VISTA 2015) is to have at least one academic and career pathway in every school by 2015. Beginning in 2011, every sixth-grade APS student will have an Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) to guide them in setting career and academic goals.

Creating 21st Century Learning that Promotes Innovation and Continuous Improvement

To prepare students for the 21st century, school districts must begin education in preschool and extend beyond high school. The finish line is no longer graduation. Academic and career pathways increase postsecondary options and workforce readiness of graduates to support meaningful choices about their future education and careers. Student achievement increases because students are motivated through practical, relevant learning in their areas of career interest. Students develop academic, technical and workforce readiness skills that prepare them for high-demand, high-skill and high-paying jobs. In addition to preparing students for college and the workforce, academic and career pathways offer students the opportunity to earn industry certificates, college credit, and even associate's degrees while they are still in high school.

The school district is changing the 20th century industrial model to a 21st century system of critical thinking that provides energy and excitement for learning organized around postsecondary and workforce readiness. Our students become "academic journeyman" connected to the real world and better prepared for the future they choose by understanding the application of knowledge and not just its acquisition.

Raising the Bar and Rewarding Excellence

As part of 21st century learning, APS has created Vista PEAK, a P-20 campus that serves students from pre-school through post-secondary. It is the district's first P-20 model with four academic and career pathways to develop students' academic, technical and employability skills. The 100-acre site provides a seamless continuum of public education with dedicated space for preschool, a state-of-the-art K-8, a high school and college on campus where students can enroll in college courses to earn dual credit to prepare them to pursue a wide variety of educational choices.

Throughout the district we are exploring ways to develop new schools and organize existing schools to better support expanded educational opportunities and choice. The one-size-fits-all approach to learning must be replaced by opportunities that better match schools with diverse student learning needs and interests.

Measuring Success One Student at a Time

When we began we had some of the lowest state test scores in the Denver metropolitan area. Of our 43 schools, three out of every four were rated low or unsatisfactory on annual state report cards. Our students were well below the state levels for proficiency. We were faced with poor student achievement, poor attendance and high dropout rates. The system was failing too many students and they were in a downward spiral for failure and dropping out. Our own community had lost faith in the district.

As a result of a number of initiatives, within the first three years, APS beat the state achievement levels for growth on state tests in grades 3 through 10 in reading, writing, math and science – the first time in APS history. The district had the second highest growth rate in the entire state out of 178 districts and growth has steadily increased. All of this despite the fact that more than two-thirds of our students speak English as a second language.

Recent state tests showed a three percent gain for Aurora Public Schools third graders over the previous year. Efforts in closing achievement gaps are paying off with a five percent increase in proficient and advanced scores for black students and a four percent increase for English language learners. Last year the district's median growth overall outpaced the state's median growth percentage in reading, writing and math. Improvement has been steady and consistent. Changing the direction of a large school district is like changing the course of a jumbo jet in-flight – the change is imperceptible at first but movement is made in steady increments.

Synergy for Success

Complex problems require complex solutions. Success is rarely the result of a single action. Success comes from multiple initiatives that allow students, parents and staff to find the right path for them. Ownership equals motivation and that is why it is critical to develop, encourage and support new definitions of what school is and can be. An organization can be structured to advance and succeed, but it takes more than good intentions, vision, open and honest conversations and enlightened attitudes. While these are essential elements, it also demands good structural design work that ties the parts together. The design must be responsive to the students and community the district serves. There is no cookie-cutter solution. Leadership that is distributive and inclusive can create a synergy for success. In the end, each district must find its own way but can benefit and learn from the experience of others.

[1] Outline for this paper partially adapted from the main sections in the DOE *Blueprint for Reform*, March 2010