

Uxbridge Public Schools

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January 2013

To: Uxbridge School Committee
From: Kevin M. Carney, Superintendent of Schools
Re: Entry Plan Report

Introduction

My early months as Superintendent have been both rewarding and challenging as I was able to observe and participate in the final phases of the district reconfiguration, the opening of the new high school campus, the implementation of the new Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System, and the implementation of the Common Core Curriculum. Each of these initiatives brings systemic change to a school district and the Uxbridge staff and administrators should be applauded for their organization, persistence, and professionalism to make this year's transition a success.

Learning about the conditions of the schools has involved over 60 classroom observations throughout the district, as well as meetings with staff, students, parents, and community leaders. The analysis of multiple documents that illustrated student achievement data, demographics, program offerings, staff performance, and resource allocation has also been an integral part of the Entry Plan assessment. I conducted over 50 interviews of educators, local and state elected officials, school affiliation groups, and town department leaders. I hosted five community forums for parents and citizens to share their thoughts about the school system. These forums were held in the morning, evening, and weekends to provide our citizens maximum access to share their thoughts with me. Several meetings with school administrators have occurred since September and their analysis of the common themes with me has provided a clearer understanding of our key issues. The team is committed to addressing them through the School Improvement Plan process.

The School Committee has been a valuable resource in helping me get acclimated to Uxbridge and providing me with guidance to work successfully with all stakeholders in the community. It is clear to me that our School Committee is committed to servicing students and educators and advocating for their instructional needs. It is my hope that the information in this report will provide a roadmap for continuous improvement for the Uxbridge Public Schools.

The Uxbridge Public Schools believe in equal employment and educational opportunities for its employees and students and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, creed, national origin or sex in compliance with Title VI and Title IX or disability, in compliance with section 504/ADA or sexual orientation in compliance with G.L. c 151 and 157c.

The Entry Plan

The purpose of the Entry Plan is to gather information from a wide range of educators and citizens to learn about the history of the school community as well as to learn about the district's strengths and where improvements might better serve the students of Uxbridge. Learning about the community's values, key events that influenced or shaped the district, and the teaching and learning practices that have influenced curriculum planning have established a structure for planning that we hope will lead to action, and more importantly, improved results for teachers and students.

Interviews and forums were only part of the learning process. For the past six months, educators and support staff have assisted me in the analysis of student achievement data, staff evaluations, enrollment data, scheduling structures, resource allocation, and policies and procedures. I have especially enjoyed our shared time in observing classroom instruction and student work.

Findings and Impressions

There is a clear interest and excitement for the future development and improvement of the Uxbridge Public Schools and how the district will function within the greater community of Uxbridge. The most identified common theme that came from interview questions to educators and citizens was what the district must do to preserve strengths that currently exist.

What I repeatedly learned is that educators are valued members of the community and a sense of genuine care and respect for children exists in the culture of all four schools. This culture exemplifies the value for personal relationships in an effort to keep the feeling of a small community as the district grows. Students, parents, educators, and citizens have expressed a desire to be connected to their schools; and as a new chapter begins with the long awaited opening of the new high school, people are interested in finding new ways to be more involved in the schools.

Several townspeople and school employees have expressed that the new high school served as a community "hurdle" for many years and as a result, a division in values (or "split" as people refer to it) severed the town. However, the opening of the new school has allowed many educators and citizens to move past the hurdle and people are now energized for a new beginning.

The staff of the Uxbridge Public Schools are among those who are the most excited to move forward. The political challenges that existed for more than a dozen years were distracting at times and took energy from an instructional focus. However, there are several educators who believe that the resolution of previous political struggles will lead to a more unified approach in establishing district-wide student learning goals and objectives.

Teachers, counselors, support staff, and administrators are dedicated professionals who work to provide our students with a holistic education program and overall positive

school experience. “Kids come first” and “we are a community of caring” are expressions that are commonly heard and shared throughout the district and there are several evidences that I observed that indicate that these values are embedded into the culture of the district. My first observations came over the summer when I met several teachers who were unpacking boxes and preparing their classrooms for the first day of school. So many teachers came back to the district during their vacation to make sure that classrooms were set up for their new students to feel comfortable and welcomed. Administrators and their support staff also delayed vacations to ensure that the reconfiguration of the schools was complete and ready for their educators and students to return.

Our educators work to make our learning environment a home-like environment and these efforts are noticeable in how they blend character education into everyday learning in all aspects of their schools. I have been extremely impressed by the role modeling of adults that I see everywhere - even in the cafeteria during student lunch blocks. It is not uncommon to see and hear educators review the importance of respect, responsibility, and care for one another and their school. These acts by adults are genuine and they value the importance of these important discussions with children as often as possible.

Teachers, instructional support staff, and counselors at all levels work hard to make our students successful. At the elementary levels, there is clear evidence that educators value the importance of collaboration to provide students with common experiences and this includes use of common vocabulary in their instruction.

The McCloskey Middle School staff makes a concerted effort to function as interdisciplinary teams to blend curriculum into practical learning experiences. Progress is being made to provide more project-based activities to include important skills such as reading, writing, problem solving, student collaboration, and the presenting of information within the structure of a lesson. The Uxbridge High School staff has worked to build creative elective course offerings to engage student learning interests. The Physics and Technology course, specifically, has resulted in significant growth in student achievement on the Science MCAS.

Building and central office administrators are committed to working together to establish systems that improve teaching practices and student learning, to structure professional development, and to establish personnel procedures that will limit administrative functions in order to allow educators to focus on teaching and learning. Leaders are establishing improvement plans that are consistent throughout the district and the evidence for this is observed in the common workshops that take place during staff meetings, professional development days, and School Council Meetings. Our administrators are committed to unifying our goals and objectives and moving from a system of individual schools to a unified school system.

Many students throughout the district participate in community outreach programs, student leadership, internships, art and music programs, and athletic programs. The level of excitement that students exude to be involved brings positive energy that I hope that we can expand. One example is the visibility and spirit of the high school band and “Spartones” throughout the community. These musicians serve as positive representatives for Spartan Pride. Another example is the work that student leaders do from the

elementary levels through high school to coordinate efforts to help people in need. Student outreach to our community has been well documented in school and local newspapers.

Parent involvement includes opportunities to serve on the School Committee, Parent-Teacher Organization, Uxbridge Education Foundation, Parent Advisory Council, School Site Councils, The Coalition for a Community of Caring, Athletic Boosters Club, the “20-20” Group, Parents for a Safe Graduation, and Friends of Music. While some of these boards and affiliates are elected positions, there are also several volunteer opportunities for parents to get involved.

A collective concern for all stakeholders who contributed to this report is a fear that apathy will “settle in” now that the high school building project is complete. Several issues remain for educators and supporters of the schools and they prioritize these challenges in the following order:

1. Teaching and Learning Challenges
 - Literacy
 - Meeting All Student Learning Needs
 - Assessments
 - Technology Integration
2. Fiscal Issues
3. Public Relations and Partnerships

It is my hope that the summary of these challenges will foster further discussion, analysis, and strategic action.

Teaching and Learning Challenges

Building the Literacy Foundation

Literacy skill development is the collective and primary focus at the elementary levels. Reading and writing are the foundation skills that educators have structured their schools around and flexible time has been built into the daily schedule to scaffold skills for individual students. Our young students in Uxbridge enter our schools with a range of experiences and exposures to learning and it is critical that we establish programming to address their wide range of needs.

Most of our students who are achieving consistent academic success possess strong literacy skills. Some of these students are able to exceed standards because teachers are better able to challenge their thinking by providing tasks that ask students to synthesize information and problem-solve. Our students who exhibit learning struggles usually have gaps in their reading and writing skills and this impacts their readiness to participate in higher order thinking activities. With that said, there is also evidence that we can

strengthen literacy skills for students who possess learning gaps and provide them with challenging tasks and critical thinking opportunities.

Meeting the Learning Needs for All Students

There is data that shows that many of our students are excelling in Uxbridge, but there is also compelling data that shows that many of our students are struggling learners. In November, the high school received national recognition for continuous growth in Advanced Placement course enrollment and continuous growth in the number of students who pass the AP exams. While the district is recognized for growth in AP performance, we do not see the same performance on MCAS. Specifically, students in Special Education and Low Income subgroups throughout the district are showing very low growth. MCAS is currently the only assessment tool used across the district to analyze student achievement in Mathematics, Science, and English Language Arts. Additional district determined measures in all disciplines would provide us a more complete picture of student development.

Using Assessment Tools to Analyze Student Progress and Change Instruction

The elementary schools use the DRA (Developmental Reading Assessment) and the DORA (Diagnostic Online Reading Assessment) to collect data on student fluency skills. Grade 5 teachers also use the IReady online assessment for mathematics. This information is analyzed collaboratively to provide student supports. The Whitin and Taft Schools have successfully built in “Response to Intervention (RTI)” blocks into the weekly schedule to provide individualized instruction for students in Mathematics and English Language Arts.

Internal common assessments for each content area in grades K-12 have not been utilized in past years, but the creation of these tools is an action step for the 2012-13 school year. The expansion of common assessment tools, along with structured collaboration time for educators to analyze student achievement data, examine student work, and restructure units of study need to be incorporated into our schools to provide us with information about who is learning and who is not. The collection and analysis of this data will lead to improved action plans for what we do for students who are not learning. Learning extensions are provided for students who are excelling, but they exist in pockets throughout the district. In some cases, learning extensions take the shape of “regroupings”, as in the RTI block mentioned above. In other grades, the regrouping has led to student placement into leveled tracks. These extensions need to be consistent across the grade levels and we need to ensure that we are not simply providing additional work for children who require academic challenges, but work that challenges their thinking.

Technology Integration

As the use of technology becomes a functional living skill for children and adults, Uxbridge has acknowledged the need to utilize technology as an instructional tool in our classrooms. The 1:1 iPad initiative at Uxbridge High School and the investment into mobile iPad carts for kindergarten students is evidence that the district believes that technology integration is important for all learners at all grade levels. What will impede the district's ability to efficiently incorporate technology into all classrooms district-wide is the inefficient infrastructure that exists at three of the four school buildings. Our intranet (communications network) is unable to handle the technology tools that we currently have and, as a result, this is leading to inefficiencies in instruction when students and educators are unable to "log on" to the system. Furthermore, a lab-based model for technology integration exists at three of the four schools. This means that teachers and students can only use these tools together when the labs are available. Currently, teachers need to reserve lab time.

In 2011, the district invested in the Atlas Rubicon Curriculum Mapping software that allows educators to increase alignment and ensure that standards are being addressed. Use of this tool will allow educators to easily identify gaps in curriculum and modify for corrections. Atlas can also assist in the inventory of appropriate instructional materials and help us determine curriculum needs.

Given that several staff meetings and professional development days were focused on trainings for the new Educator Evaluation System over the past year, the district needed to reprioritize time when full staffs are together to comply with and implement state regulations. A priority for future staff meeting and professional development time needs to include the updating and mapping of curriculum that is standards-based and aligned to the Common Core. Instructional materials in several subject areas, but most notably Mathematics and English Language Arts, have not been updated in several years and are not aligned to the Common Core as a result.

Teachers are expressing a strong desire to collaborate across grade levels. In other words, educators who teach similar content areas, but in different grades, seek more time to work together to strengthen scope and sequence and share lesson and assessment strategies. The district should place a focus on providing these opportunities whenever possible through staff meetings and professional development days.

A connected challenge to the growth and development of our teachers involves the lack of instructional leadership that is provided due to limited resources. Six administrators are expected to supervise and evaluate nearly 200 teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrative support staff at the building levels. Uxbridge High School has a 32 to 1 staff: supervisor ratio. The McCloskey Middle School has a 31 to 1 ratio. The Whitin

Elementary School has a 57 to 1 ratio. The Taft Early Learning Center has a 76 to 1 ratio. The expansion of instructional leadership in the form of department heads and curriculum leaders need to be explored to provide frequent supervision responsibilities that is needed and required.

Priority Questions:

- What are the most strategic supports that we can provide both our staff and students to ensure that all students are making academic progress and demonstrating growth?
- How can we balance the competing curricular initiatives and requirements within a very limited budget? What curricular focus would produce the most benefits for students?
- What opportunities exist to bring educators together to regularly examine, evaluate, and reflect on student work and expected learning outcomes?
- How can we supervise and coach our educators effectively under the current leadership structure?
- With our current budget and infrastructure constraints in mind, how can we best utilize technology to support and enhance instruction for all students?

Fiscal Issues

The community is supportive of the Uxbridge Public Schools in the sense that citizens respect the work that educators do with students. There is a high level of interest to attend student activities and celebrate student accomplishments. Financial support of the schools, however, has been a challenge for many citizens for several years and the impact of limited resources and learning has led to many students leaving the district to attend schools in other communities. School Choice Out has been costly to the town and other departments (Police, Fire, Dept. of Public Works, Senior Center, Library) because local revenue has been reduced. All of the Entry Plan interview participants cited the budget as the key issue that the district must face and the town priority that impact the schools. The overarching question that will hover over each improvement area that is outlined in this report is: How do we protect the program strengths of our school system in a time of shrinking resources? The continuous budget shortfalls are forcing the Uxbridge Public Schools to narrow its focus to provide programming that meets obligations and education requirements. Continuous academic sacrifices will place Uxbridge at a competitive disadvantage with other area school districts. Building and strengthening relationships with the community to reinvest in its local school district is critical for the financial stability of the schools.

The state's underfunding of Health Care and Special Education has forced the Uxbridge Public Schools to pay for these mandatory costs by using money that is earmarked for

technology upgrades. The district has been unable to upgrade the technology infrastructure (as previously mentioned in the Student Learning part of this report) due to this shortfall. As the district has already committed to technology as an integral part of our instructional improvement plan, a concerted effort should be to preserve these resources for the intended designation.

Entitlement grants to the district have been reduced by 97% since FY11. Some staff positions, including teaching positions, have been funded through these grants. Recently, the district has decided not to seek competitive grants to offset our foundation budget – but it is crucial that the district explore these opportunities. Solidifying our mission, vision, and district goals should be a priority to enhance opportunities to earn competitive grants and create business partnerships.

Three of the four school buildings are aging and require significant upkeep. This poses a challenge with only three maintenance workers. Two projects include roof replacements and air ventilation systems. Both projects are extremely costly and will require the assistance of the Capital Planning Committee to make these projects a priority.

Priority Questions:

- Now that the new high school is built, how will we prioritize limited resources to the improvement of teaching and learning? How will these efforts lead to improved student retention?
- If the district continues to experience shrinking resources, how will we maintain a broad array of elective courses at the high school level?
- If the district has determined that technology is a central component to our instructional improvement efforts, where can we reduce spending in other areas to support this initiative?
- How can we make learning needs the priority investment without ignoring the maintenance needs of our school buildings?
- How will our mission and vision define our identity and purpose as a school district to enhance opportunities to create new revenue?

Public Relations and Partnerships

The district makes a consistent effort to involve the community into the life of schools and students and educators work to acknowledge citizen contributions. There is a noticeable effort to organize events and activities that recognize our veterans and senior citizens. School-to-community communications have targeted efforts to connect with citizens in the community.

With the reconfiguration of grade levels and the opening of a new high school, there is a desire from parents and citizens to learn about the important skills that are being taught in

the classroom. The community has made a significant investment into the iPad initiative and people want to know how this tool is being used to enhance learning. Citizens view their children as their greatest asset and investment and there is a strong desire to stay connected to student success stories well beyond high school. There is a strong interest to connect with alumni to learn about college and career experiences.

Currently, there are limited partnerships between the schools and community organizations and businesses – but there is a desire to expand partnerships. There is an understanding that limited partnerships are due to a lack of community awareness as it relates to the district’s goals, strengths, and needs. Communication needs to expand through a variety of methods so that our stakeholders have a better sense of the district’s mission and vision, goals and objectives, important skills that we teach students, achievements, and the district’s challenges.

Priority Questions:

- How can we connect the experiences of parents and community members to our district needs?
- How can we maximize our communication efforts and optimally utilize our resources to keep our stakeholders informed of both our goals and needs? What further school-to-community efforts can be made to work with citizens to increase interest in investing in the schools and their community?
- How can we use the success stories of our alumni to show citizens the return of their investment?

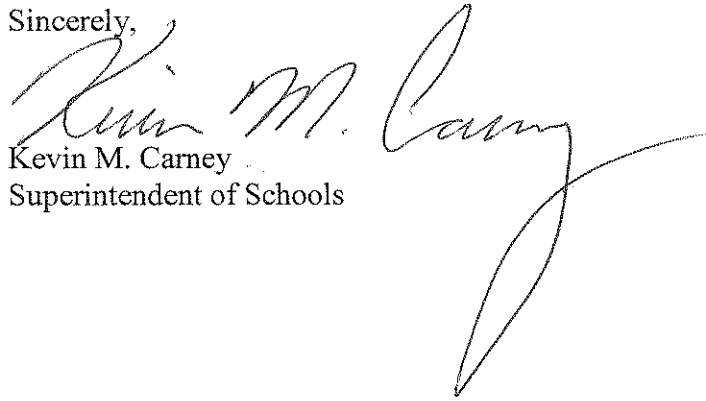
Prioritizing Our Needs

The Uxbridge Public Schools is fortunate to have skilled and experienced educators, talented students, and a committed volunteer base to successfully adjust to the changing dynamics of an expanded school district and a new set of expectations that have been established by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the demands of a Global Economy. The seniority of the teaching staff and their proven resiliency over the years will provide us with the stability that we need to address the challenges that are mentioned in this report. As it was repeated time and again through the Entry Plan interviews, our teachers are the strength of the district.

In order to maximize the strengths of our educators and ensure the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning, we will need to develop a concentrated focus of our collective efforts based on a prioritized list of needs. The success of the district will be directly related to our ability to: (1) provide rich and robust learning opportunities for all students, (2) use data effectively in order to improve student achievement, (3) strengthen leadership at all levels (classroom, building based, and at the district level) to support teaching, strengthen curriculum, and creatively make the most of our limited resources.

Between February and June, I will be working with the School Committee and the administration team to draft two or three strategic initiatives aimed at strengthening learning throughout the district. I want to thank the School Committee as well as our students, parents, educators, officials, and community members who have provided me with their time to learn about the customs and traditions of Uxbridge and share their hopes for a high achieving school system. I am energized to serve this community and work with you to make the Uxbridge Public Schools a proud staple for our community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kevin M. Carney". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail that extends downwards and to the right.

Kevin M. Carney
Superintendent of Schools