

Manchester School District

Report on Progress

2016-2018

Report on Progress

Every day, Manchester’s public school students learn and grow. Every day, our schools are filled with thousands of individual accomplishments. Every day, our students are one day closer to taking their places in Manchester’s future.

Manchester’s public schools are an exciting place to be right now. Visit any classroom and you will feel it.

This report describes recent Manchester School District initiatives designed to improve the education we provide our students. These initiatives all ultimately support what happens in our classrooms between our students and their teachers, and support other learning strategies outside the classroom.

We could not have made the progress reported here without the active involvement of the community—parents, businesses, civic leaders and citizens—the commitment of the members of the school board to quality education for all Manchester’s children and youth, and, of course, the dedication of our teachers, staff and administrators who every day give their best to the students in our schools.

All our work in the district is directed at fulfilling two fundamental promises:

- to the children and youth we teach to provide the best possible preparation for happy and productive lives in the 21st century, and
- to our community to work to become the best urban district in the state and in the country.

No other community in the State of New Hampshire has the kind of opportunities we have in Manchester to achieve these goals.

Redistricting

Challenge: Reorganize the fit between Manchester’s schools and its students to better serve the promise of educational success for all Manchester students.

The mismatch between the Manchester School District student population and the classroom spaces and other resources assigned for their education means that, as a school system, we are not providing the best educational opportunities to our students.

Changes over time in Manchester’s school-age population—especially in residential distribution and enrollment—have led to overcrowded classrooms in some schools, greater demand for programs than existing space can accommodate in other schools, and unused space in yet other schools.

This challenge requires a multiyear, system-wide solution.

Response: Reorganize the flow of students through the district’s schools in order to relieve overcrowded classrooms (and schools) and reassign underutilized space to more productive uses.

In short, fit the school system to current student needs.

Progress: In April 2017, the Board of School Committee adopted an initial redistricting plan to create a better feeder pattern for students moving through the school system.

- Reorganizing the school feeder patterns beginning in September 2017 led to a more streamlined flow of students from elementary schools into Hillside, Southside and McLaughin middle schools, and then into Central and Memorial high schools. The West Side school feeder pattern was already streamlined in this fashion.
- The plan also adjusted the school assignment for students living in the Mammoth Road area from McDonough to Smyth Road elementary schools.

- The new flow through the system benefits students by providing more continuity in their progress through the grades toward high school graduation.
- But this initial phase of redistricting did not address elementary school class sizes.

In April 2018, the Board of School Committee adopted a second phase of the redistricting plan designed to improve student learning in Manchester by reducing elementary school class sizes, creating a new grade 5-8 middle school model and returning underutilized space elsewhere in the system to productive use.

The plan was designed to improve the education for Manchester students and their families through a better allocation of resources and a clear vision of how to meet students' academic needs.

The second phase of the redistricting plan was discussed with the community at several public meetings, generating enthusiastic public support. The plan involves a more comprehensive reorganization of district resources and space that should eventually touch every corner of the district.

This phase will:

- Adjust the school feeder pattern to send Beech Street elementary students to McLaughlin middle school and then Central High School beginning in September 2018. This will reunite all Beech Street students at McLaughlin and balance the distribution of students to better meet their educational needs.
- Strengthen collaboration between Manchester School of Technology and Memorial High School in order to use space and resources at Memorial to expand student access to MST programs. Sharing space, teachers and other resources creates a campus comprising the two schools and expands the capacity of MST without building new facilities. Costs to be determined.
- Beginning in school year 2019-20, reduce class sizes to the extent finances and space allows. Create K-4 elementary

schools and a grades 5-8 middle school on the West Side. Expand this model to the entire district in 2020-21. The new class-size goal is 20 students in kindergarten, 20-22 in grades 1-2, 22-25 in grades 3-5 and 25-27 in grades 6-8. This will help teachers meet their students' needs and promote student learning at all levels.

- Create a grades 5-8 middle school model on the West Side in 2019 through a Network of Innovative Schools (Parker-Varney, Gossler, Northwest, Parkside and West High School) that will give all students expanded learning opportunities including the opportunity to earn up to 4 high school credits by the end of grade 8. This will require developing and purchasing a new grades 5-8 curriculum (2018 cost: \$357,850); strengthening middle-level staffing by 12 positions (2018 cost: \$652,400); and facilities improvements (2018 cost: \$312,000). The redistricting plan calls for expanding this model to the entire district in 2020-21.

- Extend personalized learning throughout the district by replicating the successful model developed at Parker-Varney elementary school, including collaboration of teachers, principals, families and community. The Parker-Varney model has increased family involvement in the success of students and led to a high degree of family satisfaction with the school program.

- Repurpose surplus space in high schools, 2018-2020. This includes:
 - Moving the district's central administrative offices to vacant space in West High School (November 2018) and achieving other transformations within that building (see the section on West High School transformation in this report).
 - Repurposing part of Memorial High School to house a consolidated district early childhood program. See item immediately below. To open September 2020.)
 - Sharing space available in Memorial High School to accommodate classroom needs for academic programs at MST. Open September of 2018.

- Create a preschool center in repurposed space at Memorial High School. The new center will have its own entrance, playground and parking. Consolidating services in two centers (the Bishop O’Neill center remains open) will better serve the needs of preschool students by streamlining transportation and making shared therapy services more efficient. It will open space in elementary schools. The construction cost for the new center is estimated at \$1.6-2.2 million.

The complete redistricting plan including a set of strategies and investments is proposed to meet the following goals by 2025:

- 80 percent of K-8 students will be proficient in reading and math.
- 60 percent of middle school students will complete Algebra I for high school credit.
- The high school graduation rate will be 90 percent (surpassing state and national averages).
- 95 percent of Manchester students will earn a certificate of employability and citizenship, ready for college, a career, the military or employment.
- 95 percent of families in Manchester will be satisfied with their children’s education.

Summer Learning

Challenge: Create learning opportunities that extend from the end of one school year to the beginning of the next for all Manchester students.

During summer months without formal instruction, many students fall back from the skill levels they'd achieved by the end of the school year in math and reading.

Low-income students, in particular, are at risk for losing ground during the summer because they may not have easy access to enrichment programs or reading materials. According to some national studies, by the start of high school, two-thirds of any income-based achievement gap can be attributed to summer learning loss.

Further, when students must spend time in the fall regaining forgotten skills, that makeup time lost to learning new material makes summertime losses cumulative. This disparity of opportunity can contribute to the achievement gap often seen in large, diverse communities like Manchester. Our low-income population is growing, so summer learning loss, if left unaddressed, will dramatically impact the overall success of our students.

Response: Mobilize the entire community—media, local business, educational and cultural organizations, foundations, school district staff and families—to support a district-sponsored summer learning initiative focused on reading.

Progress: “Booked for Summer” was devised in early 2017 and launched that summer. The program was expanded in summer 2018.

- "Booked for Summer" is a district-wide reading and learning program. Elements include posted resources for children and families, such as an event calendar, grade-level suggested reading lists for elementary and middle schools, and, in 2018,

a “Passport” program, with incentives for preschool–grade 8 students to engage in learning activities at various local sites. In addition, high school students have required summer reading. In 2018, all students entering grades 9-12 were expected to read “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave” by Frederick Douglass. The English departments of Memorial and Central high schools also selected at least one book for each grade to read.

- In 2018, in partnership with the Manchester City Library, “Booked for Summer” added its own bookmobile stocked with books of all grade and reading levels. The bookmobile—staffed by district educators, city librarians, community leaders and other volunteers—was donated and decorated by local businesses (Granite State Plumbing and Heating, Sousa Signs). A \$40,000 US Education Department grant helped stock the van. It stopped at city parks, pools and schools across the city every week from July 9 to August 10, presenting live readings by the mayor of Manchester and the first lady of New Hampshire, among other notables. Unlike traditional bookmobiles, this one is not a lending library. Every child who visits may choose one book to take home and keep. They can bring books back to swap for something new, but that is not required. Children are welcome to visit any stop as often as they wish.
- A key element to the success of the summer learning program during its first two years is the extensive community involvement it generated to work with the district teachers and staff. Local business, ranging from movie theaters to restaurants to the Fisher Cats, helped publicize summer the learning program, raise funds to support it and engage in special summer learning events. Other community partners included the Manchester City Library, Manchester Parks and Recreation, the Boys & Girls Club of Manchester, the Granite YMCA, the New Hampshire Institute of Art, the Millyard Museum, the SEE Science Center, Amoskeag Fishways, Massabesic Audubon, the Currier Museum of Art, The Bookery, and Barnes & Noble Booksellers.

West High School Transformation

Challenge: Transform West High School—with out-of-school learning opportunities, personal engagement with every student’s progress and a culture of high expectations—to lift its student achievement in school and after graduation above state and national standards.

In January 2017, the West High School faculty approved a new mission and set of core values. West’s students were not succeeding at the same rate as their peers in Memorial and Central. So West High School needed to remake itself.

West High is struggling with the effects of low student engagement, declining enrollment, an academic tracking system that does not provide a college and career-ready curriculum for two of its four academic tracks, and a lack of college-going culture. Absenteeism is high, the dropout rate is high, test scores are consistently low, and the graduation rate is low compared with city and state averages. Of students who did graduate, post-graduation plans show lower aspirations than their city and state peers.

The new mission West High set for itself marked the beginning of its transformation from a traditional organization and method of teaching and interacting with its students to an expansive educational experience offering a variety of opportunities to succeed in high school and beyond.

The challenge for the faculty of West High School, for the district and for the city of Manchester is to make practical plans and then take the necessary steps to turn West’s new vision into a concrete reality for each one of its students.

Response: West High faculty and administration developed a vision for a transformed school that focuses on five key areas:

- Out-of-school learning
- Personalization of each student’s education

- College and career preparation for each student
- Student support and family engagement
- A school culture of high expectations

This re-envisioned West High would build strong partnerships between the school and the greater Manchester community, connecting the west side of the city with the east. West High School would form valuable relationships with local businesses, civic organizations, health care institutions and higher education institutions that would enable every student to participate in experiential, meaningful, and engaging learning opportunities that will prepare him or her for success in college, a career and citizenship.

In May 2017, the school board's Curriculum and Instruction Committee recommended that the district apply for a Barr Foundation grant titled "Preparing for Post-Secondary Success through the Wider Learning Ecosystem" to provide funds for further planning and implementation of the West High School transformation.

The district enlisted the Boys & Girls Club of Manchester as a lead partner and fiscal agent for the grant submission, along with other community partners, including the Catholic Medical Center, the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce and the University of New Hampshire.

Progress: In October 2017 the Barr Foundation awarded the school district \$300,000 to plan and initiate the transformation of West High School.

- The planning grant is allowing West High faculty the time and space to explore Manchester's learning ecosystem, made up of local colleges, businesses, hospitals, nonprofits, artisans, specialists and experts.
- Specialized planning teams comprising West High faculty and community partners, coordinated by the newly constituted West High Redesign Team, started working on the transformation as soon as the Barr grant was announced.

- To participate in guiding the transformation, a Community Advisory Committee facilitated by the Center for Collaborative Education was organized comprising the Boys & Girls Club of Manchester, the University of New Hampshire, the New Hampshire Institute for Civics Education, Saint Anselm College, the Catholic Medical Center, Granite YMCA, Manchester Community College, the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce, My Turn, Inc., the College for America at SNHU and the National Center for Competency Based Learning.
- Throughout the winter and spring of 2018, teachers, administrators, students, parents and community partners participated in deep learning around school design through site visits to model high schools in Rhode Island, Maine, New York, Pennsylvania and California, as well as webinars, reading, research and professional development opportunities.

Rightsizing

Challenge: Find affordable remedies to the misalignment between the district’s available teaching spaces and student needs.

Many factors that determine how we use the spaces in the district’s schools and other facilities have changed over the past decades: the number of students we teach, their needs, where they live, how we teach them, what programs they want.

Funding is also a factor in using space appropriately: we are paying for space we don’t need and paying for space we don’t use.

Aligning space with student needs promotes the district’s mission to deliver quality education to all its students, in part by being more efficient and effective with our resources.

Response: The redistricting plan approved in 2017 and 2018 and now underway is an effort to use our facilities and resources to better satisfy the educational needs of our students.

Fitting our existing facilities to student needs is the guiding principle of the plan.

In preparation for Phase II of the redistricting plan, the district completed a study of its facilities that found:

- All 14 elementary schools are near 100 percent capacity
- Central High School is at 66 percent capacity
- Memorial High School is at 75 percent capacity
- West High School is at 50 percent capacity

The redistricting plan now underway seeks to free space in the elementary schools to accommodate smaller class sizes and to reconfigure some of the excess capacity in West and Memorial high schools to accommodate other student needs and to use district administrative resources more efficiently.

Progress: The multipart reallocation of space now underway better fits the district to our students—to give it the right size for their education.

Rightsizing projects underway or scheduled include:

- Move the district’s central office from McGregor Street to renovated space in West High School. Moving the central office to West High School will save the district \$100,000 a year in real estate costs and will immediately contribute to reducing our debt service costs. The move of the central office will bring West High School space utilization to 75 percent capacity. The central office moved to West in late 2018.
- Repurpose available space at Memorial High School to accommodate a consolidated early childhood program. Estimated cost for the work now underway is \$1.6-\$2.2 million. Adapting available space rather than building a stand-alone facility, will save an estimated \$3 million. The new center will open in 2020.
- Enhance space at Parkside Junior High School at a cost of \$312,000 to meet the needs of students in the school’s new grades 5-8 configuration. Moving grade 5 to Parkside, beginning in 2019, creates space for reducing class sizes in the feeder elementary schools Parker-Varney, Northwest and Gossler Park.
- Dedicate available space at Memorial High School to accommodate the academic program needs of a larger enrollment at Manchester School of Technology. This eliminates need for new facilities at MST, estimated to cost \$8 million.

Leveling

Challenge: Assure that every Manchester public school student has access to the same opportunities to succeed as every other Manchester public school student.

The assignment of Manchester students to different academic tracks in high school works against some students' success. If high expectations encourage success, it is equally the case that low expectations deprive some students of the opportunity to enjoy the same success.

Leveling—the practice of sorting and separating students into different class levels based on their perceived abilities—has been a standard practice in Manchester Public Schools. But we now know the practice is not good for all our students.

An extensive body of research on leveling suggests that assigning students to low-level classes depresses achievement instead of helping students make progress. Research also shows that students in low-level classes fall further behind, but when that leveling is eliminated, student achievement improves while students in what had been higher-level classes continue to thrive if the “de-leveling” is done appropriately.

Our job is to see that every student has an equal chance to succeed.

Response: It is a goal of the district to provide all students the opportunity to discover their interests, talent and potential without presuming a static ability. While some degree of leveling is appropriate, such as an Advanced Placement class versus a regular class, when done inappropriately, leveling can do harm to our students by leading to low expectation.

One example of low expectation that is common in the US, and has been the case until recently in the Manchester Public Schools, is assigning summer reading for students heading into Advanced Placement classes but not for students in a basic class, when arguably, these students need the encouragement just as much or more. In another example of unequal expectations, until recently,

our students could meet graduation requirements without taking any science lab classes. Given the current emphasis on STEM subjects and the increasing need for a high-tech workforce, how could we claim to prepare our students for college and careers, and to participate in a complex economy and society, without such academic experience?

Progress: In 2017, the district was awarded a \$295,000 Nellie Mae Educational Foundation grant to plan high-quality educational opportunities that enable learners—especially and essentially underserved learners—to obtain the skills, knowledge and support necessary to become civically engaged, economically self-sufficient lifelong learners.

In late 2017, the superintendent charged the district's middle and high school principals with starting discussions in each school about ending the practice of leveling. He asked each school to start discussions about leveling, to examine school data to see to what extent leveling has contributed to student outcomes and the overall environment in the school.

Working to eliminate leveling requires a shift in mindset from low expectation for some students to high expectations for all, accompanied by the necessary support systems and opportunities for every one of our students.

The following considerations are necessary for any realistic discussion of eliminating leveling:

- Strong commitment, resources, and time to make this transition.
- High level of expectation for every student accompanied by high-level support and opportunity available in our schools.
- Stable and committed leadership from the school board, superintendent, and at the building level and in the community.
- Struggling students must be supported; students who are struggling cannot be expected to learn higher tract curriculum without the appropriate support.
- This process must begin at the 6th grade level.
- This process requires a long-term approach to phase-in.

- One strategy is to begin with math and science at the middle schools.
- High level of engagement by all stakeholders.
- Ongoing professional development for teachers, administrators and staff.
- Transparent communication to any parent concerns, particularly to assure parents that we can eliminate low-level classes without negatively impacting advanced student performance. For example, Advanced Placement classes will continue to be available.
- Robust community engagements to make sure that the academic, social and emotional needs of our students are being met.

Assessment

Challenge: Develop uniform student progress assessment practices in the district that yield useful results without taking up productive classroom instruction time.

The district has been challenged by two distinct issues associated with student assessment:

- Concern among families and teachers that too much time is devoted to testing.
- Lack of district-wide assessment tools and practices.

In order to evaluate the educational value of a curriculum—the study materials and overall content of a plan and method for teaching a subject such as math or literacy—you must measure student progress. Are students learning the subject? Without periodically assessing student skills, you can't know whether you're providing the best possible education.

The absence of district-wide assessment tools and practices stands in the way of setting district-wide curricula. What is perceived as excessive or unnecessary testing undermines families' confidence in the district's ability to make good decisions about their children's education. Inconsistent assessment practice also creates uncertainty among teachers.

These issues are longstanding. In 2013, the board-commissioned Curriculum Audit noted that the district “did not have a comprehensive student assessment and program evaluation plan or any guidance for an approach to developing such a plan.”

Response: In April 2017, we established an Assessment Committee to take on the challenge of improving K-8 reading and mathematics assessment practice and performance data.

The committee found that there were too many assessments taking place in the district and that the data produced by these assessments was inconsistent because schools weren't using the same assessment tools. Having agreed on the need to establish a district-wide student

assessment practice, the committee researched options and recommended the tools iReady for K-8 mathematics, iReady for 2-8 reading and PALS for K-1 reading.

Progress: In Sept. 2017, the school board accepted the Assessment Committee's recommendation for district-wide student assessment of K-8 reading and K-8 mathematics.

- After the board adopted the recommended assessment strategy, district administration held public forums to describe the iReady assessment tool and the new district-wide assessment plan.
- Feedback from the forums and from other sources was unanimously positive.
- One particular advantage to the new assessment strategy identified in discussion is that assessment of 1-8 reading and mathematics allows greater collaboration between elementary and middle schools and better tracking of student progress for parents, teachers and administrators.
- Many teachers and parents expressed appreciation that spending less time on testing will allow more time for teaching and learning.

The iReady assessment program was successfully inaugurated in the fall of 2017 and continues today.

The results provide the district with critical data for determining what kind of instructional and support improvements the district could make to achieve its goals for numeracy and literacy.

Closing the Budget Gap

Challenge: Close an annual budget gap while protecting new spending necessary to fund plans for improving the delivery of quality education to Manchester students.

For several years, the Manchester School District has had a structural budget gap—a gap between the revenues the district receives and the expenditures it *must* make to fulfill its legal obligations. The district will be challenged by this structural budget gap for the foreseeable future because its revenue from taxation is fixed and revenue from other sources is declining, while expenses over which it has no control are rising.

Causes for declining revenue include loss of high school tuition paid by surrounding towns that have built their own high schools or who choose to send their children to other districts, loss of a program of state aid for building maintenance, and loss of state pension support—declining from 35 percent of annual pension funding to 0 percent.

Increases in required spending include unfunded mandates for special education programs, pension costs shifted to the local level, and changes to the building aid support.

The district is doubly challenged by this built-in budget gap because it is committed to an ambitious set of plans to improve the education it provides its students. If we use \$1 to close the budget gap and we need \$1 of new spending to support our redistricting plan or some aspect of the West High School transformation, that means we have to find \$2 in our budget.

The proposed 2019 Manchester School District budget developed by the district administration was \$2 million higher than the Manchester tax cap limit. The budget included almost \$1 million in new spending to support redistricting by adding new teaching positions in order to reduce some elementary class sizes and acquiring a new grades 5-8 mathematics curriculum.

We can't plan to spend more than we take in. And we can't give up our ambitions for Manchester's students.

Response: District administration recommended to the school board certain strategies for closing the gap between its original—or “needs”—budget and the tax cap budget. These included:

- Holding steady on technology equipment procurement, strengthening technology infrastructure and increasing fiber and broadband capacity with federal E-rate and state infrastructure funding, using existing equipment for teachers' professional development, and seeking Digital Equity grant funds.
- Rightsizing the district by moving the central office, continuing the long-range facility plan to guide current and future space allocation, and working with the facilities department to find cost reductions for excess space.
- Using grant funds more efficiently and effectively by shifting Title I to district level program support and reducing workforce through attrition, shifting of resources to maximize the service delivery model throughout the district, aligning professional development opportunities for maximum impact and aligning programs and resources for all students to help with efficiency and equity.
- Making transportation more efficient by instituting bell-time changes for in-district, charter and private schools, applying for grants to replace buses to eliminate debt service increase, advocating for purchase of buses with State Volkswagen settlement, developing procedures regarding preschool transportation, and maximizing Medicaid to Schools revenue with transportation reimbursement.
- Managing special education services more effectively and efficiently by negotiating contracts with Charter Schools, analyzing the professional and technical line for savings, hiring a Court Liaison to provide efficiencies in court placements, reallocating staff to maximize Special Education

Aid, and developing policies, procedures and practices.

- Reduce workforce through attrition based on enrollment to have minimal impact on students.
- Improve central office efficiencies by improving position utilization.
- Improve schools by investing in our students through redistricting, limited initially to the west side.

Progress: In March 2018, the school board approved a budget for fiscal year 2019 that matched expenditures to revenues and preserved \$344,191 in new spending to support redistricting.

Support for the School Board

Challenge: Find opportunities to assist school board members in the fulfillment of their complex responsibilities.

Public education in the US is controlled at the local level. It is the enterprise of thousands of communities. Can the Manchester school board take advantage of the best practices of school boards around the country in the discharge of its critical and complex responsibilities?

The fundamental responsibility of the school board, as the elected representatives of our community, is to establish policies that direct the management and accountability of the school district. These policies define and control the work of the district's administrative and instructional staffs, as well as describe the board's own responsibilities.

Control of the district and its operations rests with the school board and the top administration staff answering to the board. Ultimately, how successfully the board does its work directly affects all students in our schools and their families, the district's teachers and staff, and the community.

Response: From time to time, the board has commissioned independent reviews of district operations, including its own. The latest was performed by the International Curriculum Audit Center in 2013. That report made recommendations about board policymaking and governance of the school district.

In a continuing effort to improve the quality of the education it delivers, the board has been using retreats and focused discussions to examine its practices and ways that it can improve its functioning. This has led to an ongoing commitment to improvement of board effectiveness for the benefit Manchester's students.

Progress: In late 2017, the board authorized the superintendent to pursue grant funding to support board development activities and long-term planning.

In further board development work, the board is using “The Essential School Board Book: Better Governance in the Age of Accountability” as a reference for studying current best practice. Nancy Walser, the book’s author, led a discussion with the board and is available to moderate future discussions.

Strategic Planning

Challenge: Make the future of Manchester Public Schools the business of the entire Manchester community.

The school district is preparing to develop a new strategic plan. How can the community and the school board and district administration work together to make the planning process—and its product—a plan for the future of the city itself, not for its schools alone?

Manchester's future homeowners, parents, taxpayers, business owners, doctors, teachers, employees of every kind of business, civic leaders and voters are its school children today. How well our schools serve these children will determine Manchester's future.

Everyone has a stake.

Response: Conversations about the future of Manchester's schools among a small group of Manchester business and civic leaders beginning in early 2018 led to the formation of Manchester Proud, a volunteer organization dedicated to organizing and funding the development of a strategic plan for the Manchester School District in partnership with the school board. The superintendent of schools is a member.

Manchester Proud was founded on the premise that an innovative strategic plan for Manchester's schools, generated through community engagement and independent research, can provide the goals and inspiration Manchester's schools need to excel. Manchester Proud believes that in order for a plan for Manchester's schools to succeed, it must reflect the priorities, concerns and aspirations of the Manchester community as a whole. The strategic plan must be made *by the people of Manchester for the children of Manchester*.

Manchester Proud is supported by a spectrum of businesses and community, civic and educational organizations and institutions including the Catholic Medical Center, the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce, the Manchester Boys & Girls Club, the Granite YMCA, the YWCA, the Manchester Rotary Club, the

Manchester Police Department, Amoskeag Industries, WMUR, Merchants Automotive Group, Velcro USA, Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, the Manchester-Boston Regional Airport, Saint Anselm College, Southern New Hampshire University, the University of New Hampshire Manchester and dozens of others representing a cross section of community life.

Manchester Proud is hearing directly from residents, school system teachers and staff, families, students, and business leaders in forums that range from one-to-one conversations to town hall meetings.

Progress: In May 2018, the school board voted to enter into a partnership with Manchester Proud to develop a new strategic plan for the district, accepting the civic organization’s offer to provide resources for developing a community-centric planning effort.

Manchester Proud will fund three components of the planning process—project management, strategic consulting and community engagement—in coordination with the district’s administration and its leadership.

In the months since the school board formed the partnership with Manchester Proud, the organization has taken these steps to start the planning process and enlist the widest possible community engagement:

- Solicited proposals from qualified consulting firms to assess the Manchester School District and its individual schools and, based on that assessment, to make recommendations for public discussion of strategies the district could implement to improve student outcomes and opportunities.
- Engaged Reaching Higher NH, a public education policy and community engagement resource, to coordinate public outreach for the collection of ideas and comments from the Manchester community, which will ultimately set the terms of any strategic plan.

- Established a community-friendly website for gathering and disseminating news, calendar announcements and other information about the strategic planning effort.
- Began a door-to-door canvassing effort to solicit Manchester residents' thoughts about the city, the schools, and visions for the future.
- Commenced holding town hall-style meetings to answer questions and listen to community input.
- Recruited multilingual volunteers to extend community outreach.
- Provided \$30,000 for the Manchester School District's membership in the Council of Great City Schools, a coalition of 70 of the nation's largest urban public school systems. Membership will entitle the district to use the council's consulting services at no additional cost.

The school district and Manchester Proud hope to have a strategic plan proposal to present to the school board by the beginning of the 2019-20 school year.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

In the past two years, the school board, the superintendent, the district's teachers, staff and administration, and the Manchester community, from civic leaders to our students' families, have worked together to accomplish much for our students.

Together, as reported here, we made significant progress in these areas:

- Aligning our schools with our student population for more efficient and effective use of district resources to educate our students.
- Finding ways to reduce the falloff in students' academic progress between one school year and the next.
- Transforming West High School into an educational platform that incorporates out-of-school learning with personalized education in the school to produce an education that prepares every student for success.
- Reassigning district teaching and administrative space to maximize benefit to our students and efficiency for the district.
- Developing better ways to educate students with varying abilities without foreclosing achievement opportunities for any student.
- Developing district-wide assessment systems that promote educational outcomes.
- Closing the budget gap while accommodating spending that supports programs and initiatives to improve the district's performance for its students.
- Supporting the development of best practices in the school board's governance of the district.
- Continuing to work closely with Manchester Proud on developing the district's next strategic plan.
- Further reducing class size at the elementary and middle school levels.
- Strengthening middle schools by providing foreign language, health and reading teachers, and social workers.

Work in these areas produced progress, directly and indirectly, in closely related areas. In the past two years, we have also made significant progress in reducing class sizes, reducing excessive assessment and working with community based organizations to address chronic student absenteeism.

It should be noted that our priorities and efforts have been driven by what we heard from the families, staff, students and community members who attended our Coffee and Conversation listening sessions. Their overwhelming concerns included reducing class size, reducing the amount of time students spend on testing and ending the ten-year-long debate on redistricting.

Also, after significant effort, for the first time in five years the Manchester School District is no longer on the NH Department of Education Bureau of Special Education Compliance Improvement Monitoring active watch list.

But we have a long way to go to meet our goal of providing our students and community a school system equal to any in the nation.

Many of the challenges listed in this report will continue to demand our attention and undiminished efforts:

- Redistricting, so critical to our success as a school system, is as yet unfinished.
- West High's transformation will continue to require resources, partnership building and innovative thinking.
- The rationalization of our approach to assessment is in its early stages.
- Making educational opportunity equally available to all our students by rethinking academic tracking will be an ongoing discussion until we get it right and see student achievement improve as a result.
- The school board must have the tools it needs to provide sure-handed, forward-looking governance for the district on behalf of both community and students.

The progress reported here has been guided by the 2014 Curriculum Audit with particular reference to these six priority areas:

- Student achievement
- Learning organization
- District operations
- Communications and customer service
- Effective and efficient allocation of resources
- Family and community partnerships

And, of course, as we continue to meet the challenges we know, we will find new challenges to test both our inventiveness and our perseverance on behalf of the education of our students, who are the reason we do this work, and on behalf of the future prosperity of the community.

I have been privileged to serve as the district's superintendent during the period covered by this report.

I want to close the report by thanking everyone who works for or touches the work of the district and to extend my deep appreciation to the families, staff, students and community members who gave voice to what they hope their schools can be.

We all share the great responsibility of preparing Manchester's children for lives of fulfillment. I believe there is no greater privilege.

Bolgen Vargas
Superintendent, Manchester School District

