
Leadership Assessment
of
Springfield Public Schools

January, 2007

INTRODUCTION

Following a three-day evaluation of Springfield Public Schools, SQI was asked by the Control Board to conduct an in-depth review of leadership processes. This feedback report contains the findings of this review. Strict confidentiality will be observed at all times and in every aspect of the Assessment Team's review and feedback.

THE APPROACH

Jan Johnson conducted a three-day site visit assessment of the school district with a focus on leadership and leadership processes. During the week, Jan interviewed all cabinet members with the exception of Mary Ann Connery-Simmons who was unavailable due to a death in her family. Jan also interviewed a small number of direct reports to Cabinet leaders. Jan met with Phil Puccia, executive director of the Control Board, with Mayor Ryan and also conducted a telephone meeting with Jake Jakeman, a member of the Control Board who has worked extensively with Dr. Burke over several years. Finally, she conducted a review of documents collected during the site visit.

Following completion of the site visit, Jan met with Laura Longmire and Linda Bond Thomas, the other members of the original assessment team to review her findings from this supplemental assessment of leadership and to develop feedback.

The following questions were used as an interview guide during on-site interviews. Not all questions were used in every interview. Questions were supplemented with follow-on questions based upon responses.

1. How long have you been a leader with Springfield Public Schools? How has the structure of the Cabinet changed over time? How does the structure of the Cabinet help you to serve students?
2. What are the key leadership processes used by the Cabinet to lead the district and to achieve desired student outcomes?
3. How do you as leaders review performance?
4. How do you set priorities for driving improved student achievement?
5. How do you ensure you balance priorities across all curriculum areas?
6. How do these reviews of performance result in actions to drive improvement?
7. How do you follow-up on key improvement actions to ensure that desired results are occurring?
8. How do you work together as a leadership team? How do you work cross-functionally to ensure an integrated approach to leading the school district?
9. How do you ensure effective communication across the entire school system?

10. The school district has been through a variety of assessments over the past year including our assessment last fall. How have you systematically reviewed the feedback from these assessments?
11. How have you used the feedback to drive improvement?
12. Can you give me specific examples of actions resulting from the assessment conducted by SQI?
13. How do you ensure that your actions as leaders are value-added for school leaders, teachers and students?
14. What do you believe to be Dr. Burke's most significant contribution / accomplishment since becoming superintendent?
15. Does Dr. Burke have any key developmental areas? If so, what are they? Do you see Dr. Burke continuing to improve his leadership abilities?
16. (For Dr. Burke) – Please tell me the key strengths of each member of your cabinet. Please share with me any developmental areas you see for each cabinet member.
17. How do members of the cabinet “role model” the organization's values?
18. How much time do you spend in schools? What do you do when you are there?
19. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of the leadership team?
20. What would you do to improve leadership effectiveness – to take leadership performance to the next level?
21. If you were the superintendent, what changes would make in the leadership system (processes, people, etc.?)
22. What are your proudest accomplishments as an individual leader? What are your proudest accomplishments for the leadership team?

Leadership – Strengths

(Based upon the supplement leadership assessment, limited changes in strengths were observed.)

- Senior leaders make up the leadership Cabinet and include all direct reports to Dr. Burke as well as the Instructional Leaders and the Director of Special Education. The inclusion of the Instructional Leaders and the Director of Special Education allow the “voice of the teacher, and the voice of the student” to be represented in Cabinet meetings.
- The Superintendent leads weekly staff meetings that are used primarily to share current and planned activities across departments and functions.
- Zone leaders provide alignment of the education processes within the schools. Leaders provide the direction and coaching for the School Instructional Officers within their zones. Instructional officers and zone leaders spend considerable time in schools and see their purpose as providing support to teachers and school leaders and removing barriers to achievement.
- Extensive leadership development has been implemented through the Wallace supported leadership academies. Over 70% of the principals and assistant principals are graduates of this program.
- With extremely limited funding, the Bureau of Adult Education provides strong leadership and dedication to meet the needs of students that have dropped out and for parents that desire to extend their education.
- Dr. Burke is perceived as an educator who cares a great deal about children and their success. He is liked and respected by his staff.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT: (Based upon the supplement leadership assessment, several opportunities for improvement were identified.)

- No evidence was found of a defined, systematic leadership system through which senior leaders set and communicate direction; organize, plan and align; execute flawlessly; evaluate, analyze, and compare performance; motivate employees; reward and recognize; and continuously improve. While examples were provided of some of these elements being accomplished, the examples were anecdotal and based upon the strength of individual leaders versus systematic based upon defined processes. Without defined, systematic leadership processes, the success of the organization is dependent upon the skills and abilities of individual leaders rather than dependent upon processes that can ensure predictable and repeatable results. Leadership success requires a strong orientation to the future and a commitment to improvement and innovation. Increasingly, this requires creating an environment for empowerment, agility, and learning that we did not find in Springfield leadership.
- While most district employees understand the “Culture of Achievement” as their ultimate desired state and can articulate the three district goals, at this time there is

no consistent shared vision of where the district is going or how they will achieve their goals. While Dr. Burke indicated that there are five priorities that have been identified for this year, there was not a consistent understanding of these priorities among key stakeholders interviewed.

- While senior leaders constitute the leadership Cabinet, there is not clarity on the role of the Cabinet. Leaders do not perceive this group as the “Leadership Team”; rather they look on the Cabinet primarily as a communication framework to share what is occurring in various departments. The weekly meeting appears to be mostly a staff update. In reviewing agendas over a two month period, no evidence was found of substantive agenda items requiring leadership decisions. It was impossible to review minutes from these meetings as none are kept, nor are key action items captured. Beyond the weekly Cabinet meeting, little interaction occurs among the “Cabinet.”
- While the leadership Cabinet exists, no evidence was found that they act as a cross functional team to make decisions, and ensure an integrated approach to leading the district. Leaders frequently indicated that most work is accomplished in departmental or functional “silos”, rather than through integrated teamwork among leaders. While it was indicated that leaders will provide help if needed outside their own department, this is the exception rather than the rule. Several leaders indicated that there is no sense of teamwork among senior leaders and the Cabinet does not act like a leadership “team.”
- While some senior leaders spent considerable time in the schools, this is not consistent across the Cabinet. Some senior leaders spend very little time in schools interacting with building-level leaders, teachers or students. Many leaders seem to be significantly removed from their ultimate customer.
- No evidence was found of a systematic way to determine key organizational metrics, to review these on a regular basis and to take action based upon a review of organizational performance. No evidence was found that senior leaders have a “management by fact” mindset. Individual leaders may review some measures for their department or function, but no organizational set of key metrics has been defined that are consistently captured, analyzed, and reviewed by the Cabinet. Organizational reviews should cover all areas of performance. This includes not only how well you currently are performing but also how well you are moving toward the future. Review findings should provide a reliable means to guide both improvement and opportunities for innovation that are tied to the district’s key objectives, success factors, and measures. Therefore, an important component of an effective organizational review is the translation of the review findings into an action agenda sufficiently specific for deployment throughout your organization and to your key stakeholders such as business partners, parents, potential employers, or post-secondary educational organizations. While student performance is reviewed, often this is an annual review and measures are severely lagging. Without a robust set of leading and lagging indicators that are captured, analyzed, and reviewed, the organization is unable to proactively drive improved student performance. Additionally, little evidence was found of a robust approach to comparative analysis

or benchmarking that would allow the organization to not only understand their performance, but also to identify potential best practices from which to learn.

- While school-level accountability is a key focus of the district, no evidence was found of an environment of accountability for senior leaders. Several leaders interviewed cited lack of accountability as the most significant opportunity for improvement at the senior leadership level. There is a perception that there is no systematic follow-up on assigned action items coming out of Cabinet meetings. Additionally, leaders perceive that there are few, if any, consequences for failing to accomplish key deliverables or achieve expected outcomes.
- There is currently no process in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the Cabinet or the leadership system. While each senior leader has an annual performance appraisal, these focus on individual performance rather than on the performance of the leadership team. Performance evaluation should be a key element of an effective leadership system.
- While significant leadership development has occurred through the LEAD program funded through the Wallace Foundation, this has been primarily focused on developing future school-level leaders. Little evidence was found of professional development for senior leaders.
- There is no formal process for succession planning to identify future leaders. Evidence was not found of a systematic process through which senior leadership competencies have been defined, leaders evaluated against these competencies, and developmental plans developed and executed to ensure “bench strength” exists for all key senior leadership positions. There is a strong perception that prior appointments to senior leadership positions have often been “political” and not always based upon the best person for the job.
- While the organization has undergone a variety of “mandated” assessments in recent years, evidence of a systematic approach to learn from feedback provided is lacking. A “learning environment” was not evident. Leaders appeared more focused on rebuttal to feedback rather than on learning from the feedback and using it to drive improvement.

Category 1: Leadership	No Evidence	Just Beginning	Early Effective	Effective Approach	Cycles of Improvement	Sustained Results
There is a clear vision and laser-like focus about increasing student performance and closing the achievement gap in the school.	0	X	2	3	4	5
The district leadership facilitated development of the shared vision through a process that includes all stakeholders.	X	1	2	3	4	5
The shared vision reflects an expectation of high academic achievement for all students, the needs and priorities of the community it serves, and that the organization is high performing.	0	X	2	3	4	5
The Superintendent and Board have a shared vision, which guides and informs policy and district practices.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Board processes and procedures are in place to ensure majority Board consensus toward the shared vision of high performance.	0	X	2	3	4	5
Board executed its role in setting policy and monitoring district performance.	0	X	2	3	4	5
Senior leaders regularly review school performance reflecting both short and long-term goals and compare the results to high-performing schools.	X	1	2	3	4	5
District/School administrators define and articulate high standards with bold and equitable student achievement goals.	0	X	2	3	4	5
District leaders establish, articulate, model, and maintain a value-driven and ethical culture.	X	1	2	3	4	5
District leaders (at all levels) regularly review organizational performance against the district/school goals.	0	X	2	3	4	5
District administrators provide direction and support to principals as they implement school reform efforts that are aligned with the district's bold and equitable student achievement goals.	0	X	2	3	4	5
Leaders are reviewed and evaluated for performance to improve leadership effectiveness and the leadership system of the school.	0	X	2	3	4	5
Leaders at all levels of the school actively support and are involved in key community activities.	0	X	2	3	4	5
Senior leaders are visible.	0	X	2	3	4	5
Senior leaders communicate frequently and effectively with staff and students.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Senior leaders develop trust between leadership and staff by prioritizing teamwork and delegating decision-making when possible.	0	X	2	3	4	5
Senior level students are involved in providing leadership and modeling for other grades of students.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Category Score: 1						
Strengths:			OFIs:			

Sample responses to questions . . .

1. How long have you been a leader with Springfield Public Schools? How has the structure of the Cabinet changed over time? How does the structure of the Cabinet help you to serve students?
 - “Joe has worked to rebuild an infrastructure that had been eliminated by the prior superintendent.”
 - “While we have a cabinet, how this helps serve students is not really clear.”
2. What are the key leadership processes used by the Cabinet to lead the district and to achieve desired student outcomes?
 - “We don’t really have defined processes.”
 - “We have defined processes across the district for meetings, but the Cabinet does not follow this process.”
 - “We have some key gaps in process. For example, policies are not in place to provide guidance in all important areas. We need basic education on school law – governance is desperately needed.”
 - “We need better leader selection processes.”
 - “We lack defined processes. We also lack defined roles for the Cabinet. As a result, we lack focus.”
3. How do you as leaders review performance?
 - “We don’t have regularly scheduled reviews of performance.”
 - No process for performance reviews.
 - “The cabinet has no set reviews of performance other than to review MCAS data annually.”
4. How do you set priorities for driving improved student achievement?
 - “We really don’t have a process for setting priorities.”
 - “We set priorities at our annual planning conference; however, our review progress is haphazard.”
 - “Priorities are set during our annual retreat; however, most priorities were reactive – very little focus on being proactive. Some priorities have not been executed and no attention is being given to those areas.”
5. How do you ensure you balance priorities across all curriculum areas?
 - “We don’t. Priorities don’t seem to be balanced across the curriculum.”
 - “If you aren’t math or English, you aren’t a priority.”
6. How do these reviews of performance result in actions to drive improvement?
 - No responses to this question.
7. How do you follow-up on key improvement actions to ensure that desired results are occurring?
 - “We have lack of process around this.”
 - The cabinet has no discipline around follow-up.”
 - “We are not disciplined in reviewing actions.”

8. How do you work together as a leadership team? How do you work cross-functionally to ensure an integrated approach to leading the school district?
 - “The team gets along well; however, we are really siloed.”
 - Cohesive, collegial, collaborative.
 - Lack good communication – no main mechanism for communicating.
 - “We aren’t very collegial – we aren’t good followers.”
 - “Our cabinet is made up of individuals with functional responsibilities – we don’t work as a team.”
 - “We don’t.”
 - “Few opportunities exist for teaming. We surfaced this issue at our retreat, but nothing has changed.”
 - “The cabinet is not a team. Everything you want you have to fight for. We are very fragmented.”

9. How do you ensure effective communication across the entire school system?
 - Weekly principals newsletter – bi-weekly principals meeting
 - Connect-Ed
 - Memos from department heads and other leaders
 - District-wide communications taskforce has just been resurrected.
 - “We have too much top down communication – not enough bottoms-up.”

10. The school district has been through a variety of assessments over the past year including our assessment last fall. How have you systematically reviewed the feedback from these assessments?
 - “Feedback was emailed out. People were asked to provide evidence to “rebut” opportunities for improvement.”
 - “Springfield has been under siege. We are under constant scrutiny by ‘alphabets’ – SQI, DOE, etc. It gets to the point that you don’t really pay attention.”
 - “We’ve had many assessments – some helpful, others not.”
 - “We reviewed the feedback and provided our rebuttal.”

11. How have you used the feedback to drive improvement?
 - No process was described for using feedback.
 - “We really haven’t.”
 - “We’ve been assessed to death.”
 - “We have used information from assessments to “band-aid” problems. We can’t continue to just band-aid when we need surgery.”

12. Can you give me specific examples of actions resulting from the assessment conducted by SQI?
 - “I remember reading it, but can’t give you examples of what we’ve done.”
 - School instructional officers are using feedback to improve strategic planning.

13. How do you ensure that your actions as leaders are value-added for school leaders, teachers and students?
 - “We don’t always do this. Some leaders have too much on their plates.”
 - “The concept of servant leadership is not prevalent across the district. Some cabinet members talk the talk but don’t walk the walk.”

14. What do you believe to be Dr. Burke's most significant contribution / accomplishment since becoming superintendent?
- "Joe holds many balls in the air. He cares a lot. He understands issues – he knows more than anyone else I know."
 - "We are definitely holding our principals more accountable."
 - Allocation formula for schools achieved equity in staffing.
 - Step-up Springfield
15. Does Dr. Burke have any key developmental areas? If so, what are they? Do you see Dr. Burke continuing to improve his leadership abilities?
- "Joe needs to get into the schools more."
 - Hold people more accountable.
 - "Joe needs to not be so nice."
 - "Need to stop hiring less than qualified leaders."
 - "Not everyone is held to the same standards."
 - "Joe listens and understands, but this may not always lead to action."
 - "Joe is fair, and objective, but he is slow to react to some critical things. He loses focus on things outside of math and science. He is open to other views, but doesn't always take action. He has a hard time being tough but when he does get tough, he may be overboard. "
 - "Joe micromanages."
 - "Dr. Burke is a good person. He allows me to talk – unfortunately, I don't always see action."
16. (For Dr. Burke) – Please tell me the key strengths of each member of your cabinet. Please share with me any developmental areas you see for each cabinet member.
17. How do members of the cabinet "role model" the organization's values?
- "We don't have the discipline we need to role model. For example, we don't follow meeting protocols. We are also not as diverse as we should be."
18. How much time do you spend in schools? What do you do when you are there?
- 60% -- observe, coach
 - 20%
 - Very little.
 - "It is insufficient. We need to be in schools more to look for evidence of what's happening that is really helping students."
19. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of the leadership team?
- "We are working hard to narrow our focus on improvement – trying to focus the lens. We keep trying to band-aid things."
 - "We've had an absence of focus on what we want and expect. This is why our students aren't achieving."
 - "We are not very high performing. If we put pieces together and work as a high performance team with processes, we can win."
 - "We haven't looked deep enough to see why people aren't learning."
 - "We don't really evaluate cabinet performance. We don't take minutes in meetings. There is no record keeping."
 - "Some leaders aren't leading effectively."
 - "I would create some leadership processes. We have none."

20. What would you do to improve leadership effectiveness – to take leadership performance to the next level?
- “Improve meeting disciplines.”
 - Have all senior leaders meet monthly with principals to talk with them directly about student performance.
 - “Evaluate performance of principals and move them at appropriate rates. Some people are moving into principalships too fast.”
 - Put people in the “right” jobs.
 - “Address the issues with the building. We have no privacy. The working conditions are deplorable.”
21. If you were the superintendent, what changes would you make in the leadership system (processes, people, etc.?)
- “Communicate future needs. I would tell the ‘whys’ we do things.”
 - “I would add some structure – create a communication’s office and a grant office.”
 - “I’d create more focus – help people see how what they do impacts children.”
 - “I’d invest in building the team and in maximizing team capabilities. I would move some of the leaders into other roles.”
22. What are your proudest accomplishments as an individual leader? What are your proudest accomplishments for the leadership team?
- Data driven performance analysis.
 - Project Lead
 - Rebuilt the infrastructure
 - Getting contracts in place.