

MNPS ACHIEVES **Year 3 Evaluation**

Preliminary Findings

Prepared by



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The Institute conducts research; works with a variety of partners committed to educational improvement to build capacity in school districts and communities; and shares its work through print and Web publications. Rather than providing a specific reform design or model to be implemented, the Institute's approach is to offer an array of tools and strategies to help districts and communities strengthen their local capacity to provide and sustain high-quality education for all students.

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In 2009, Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools launched MNPS Achieves, a “transformational change leadership” model that has engaged more than 100 leaders throughout the district and community in a systemic process to improve student achievement in the district. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR) has been engaged in evaluating the effort since 2010. Since our last report in 2011, we have surveyed 108 central office staff, 151 building administrators, and twenty-five Transformational Leadership Group (TLG) members; conducted thirty-five individual interviews and three principal focus groups; observed four quarterly meetings, eight co-chairs meetings, and two principal leadership institutes; and regularly reviewed news and documents published by the district. This brief summarizes our preliminary findings.

Accomplishments

INCREASED PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN MNPS.

Despite some well-publicized challenges, numerous central office staff and community members said that the district was no longer being seen as “that school system that is on the list” and that people are seeing positive things happening for students in Metro Nashville schools. A number of interviewees said that the district has improved in communicating positive messages through the media.

IMPROVEMENTS IN HIGH SCHOOLS. Almost everyone interviewed cited improvements in the high schools as a major accomplishment. Interviewees highlighted the success of the new academies and cited change in instruction and higher graduation rates. Central office staff highlighted the steady rise of total gradu-

ation rates and graduation rates of disadvantaged students, as well as increased options for students, including academies, virtual high school, and alternative schools.

PROGRESS ON INCLUSION. Many interviewees identified the continuing push for inclusion for English Learners and exceptional education students as one of the bigger district accomplishments last year, citing the significant change in decentralized delivery of instruction to those subgroups and an ever-increasing number of students attending their school of zone, thanks to schools throughout the district being better equipped to serve them.

BETTER ACCESS TO AND USE OF DATA. Interviewees identified the district’s data infrastructure and use as a significant accomplishment, citing the national recognition the data warehouse has received and the success of the data coaches. Several respondents commented that the technology department has been proactive in determining the district’s technology and data needs. Many people also said that the district has made strides in how it uses data – “not data for the sake of having data.”

INCREASED INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP CAPACITY. Many interviewees said that one of the district’s top priorities is developing instructional leadership capacity that includes but goes beyond principals. There is an extensive cadre of coaches, consulting teachers, content specialists, and mentors that serve as instructional support personnel throughout the district to ensure that leadership is distributed within schools.

Areas of Progress and Remaining Need

SCHOOL DISTRICT CULTURE. Nearly everyone interviewed said that significant positive changes in district culture continue – including higher expectations for both students and adults – which, like last year, many attributed to Dr. Register’s leadership. But some interviewees noted that some silos still exist in central office; others noted that the culture is more academically focused, but there is still much work to do to transform teaching and learning at the classroom level.

COHERENCE OF MNPS ACHIEVES. Last year’s report identified coherence among the district’s multiple initiatives as a critical issue facing MNPS. This year, many agreed that the district was making progress toward getting everyone working on the same goals, and many feel that a common language is developing around the district’s vision to transform teaching and learning and the elements of good instruction. But most interviewees agreed that coherence continues to be a significant challenge for MNPS. Several respondents said that there were too many initiatives for principals to have a good sense of the districtwide “big picture.”

COMMUNICATION. The increase in the amount and quality of communication and collaboration within the central office and externally to the community was a notable theme again this year. But some individuals and departments struggle with communication, and there was widespread agreement that the district struggles with communication between central office and the schools.

TEACHER EVALUATION. In 2011-2012, Tennessee became one of the first states to implement a comprehensive, student-outcomes based, statewide educator evaluation system. The new system placed a strong focus on individual improvement and accountability and set common expectations for highly effective teaching. Several respondents reported apprehension on the part of teachers, but many, particularly principals, reported positive experiences and suggested that it has led to substantive conversations between principals and teachers. Challenges still exist, including the sometimes-overwhelming time commitment for principals and limited support in evaluating other employees such as counselors.

Issues Moving Forward

EVOLUTION OF THE TLG STRUCTURE. We continued to hear, as in the past two years, that TLGs have positively affected district capacity and culture. District staff and community members repeatedly mentioned the infusion of community engagement, expertise, and resources into the district and the district’s willingness to not only open its doors but also invite community members to be collaborators in transformational change. TLG work has become more collaborative in nature. TLGs have provided a critical vehicle for collaboration within the central office, helped articulate an overarching vision to align and focus departmental work, and enabled critical support for pushing forward a reform agenda.

As MNPS Achieves entered its fourth year, we also heard concern from community members that the energy and urgency of the initial years is waning and that community participation is dwindling. Co-chairs were conscious of the need for their work to be transformational rather than operational, but a few respondents questioned whether the TLGs were beginning to slide into an oversight role. These issues suggest that the TLGs may no longer be the most effective vehicle for transformational change, raising the question of how to maintain focus and urgency and continue to integrate community leadership and support in transformational work.

STRATEGIC PLANNING. Respondents acknowledged progress on efforts to connect the many initiatives that are part of MNPS Achieves but expressed concerns about overall coherence. We heard a developing consensus that what is missing is an overarching strategic plan. Respondents felt that if leadership could describe how all the initiatives fit together, it would help key internal and external stakeholders understand the district's vision. Some recognized the work to align the various initiatives with the system's five goals, but some felt that work had limited impact. This could be an opportune time to articulate a strategic plan that incorporates TLG initiatives, Race to the Top priorities, and state directives and describes the ways in which the efforts fit together to move the district forward.

COLLABORATION WITHIN CENTRAL OFFICE AND BETWEEN CENTRAL OFFICE AND SCHOOLS. Central office roles and responsibilities have become increasingly important to the success of MNPS Achieves as the work of transforming teaching and learning intensifies. As primary links in the district's culture, central office staff have a significant impact on the day-to-day operations of schools.

Shared vision and purpose. Clear progress has been made on a shared understanding between central office and school-based staff that increasing student learning and achievement is their primary focus, suggesting that there is greater realization that as a district, they will get there faster by working together rather than alone. There also appears to be a shift under way from simply creating the buy-in for collaboration to moving staff and the system toward owning the practices that reinforce a collaborative culture. Growing pains in this effort are felt most often by school-based staffs that are the end users of most central office supports. Recently, a group of central office staff affectionately known as the "Gang of Nine," began meeting with a consultant to develop strategies for moving the service-oriented culture shift forward. The group has engaged middle management, clerical staff, and others in central office departments to develop norms and expectations for the kind of service they will provide to schools.

Clarity of roles. School-level staff see clarity around roles and responsibilities of central office staff as a critical issue. They receive directives from multiple sources, often without sufficient understanding of the hierarchy of roles in the central office. These multiple directives sometimes reveal com-

munication gaps between central office departments. Principals understand that they must prioritize the initiatives that they will implement in their schools, but setting those priorities without a transparent view of the district structure is challenging. The issue of role clarity is also important for some central office staff, who as a result of a new assignment or changes in responsibilities in their position are finding that there is a lack of understanding about their roles.

Differing school and central office perspectives on joint decision making. Principals and central office staff had strikingly different responses in several key areas. More than half of central office staff consistently agreed that MNPS central office “shares responsibilities and decision making with site-level administrators,” and the degree to which they agree with this statement has consistently increased over the last three years. But principals have not agreed strongly that central office “shares responsibilities and decision-making,” and they have agreed less about this statement over time. Central office staff have also increasingly agreed every year that central office “creates structure, time, and resources for administrators and teachers to participate in joint decision-making,” while principals’ perceptions have been increasingly less positive every year. Both groups were less in agreement this year than they were last year that central office “creates opportunities for educators at the district and school level to take on new leadership roles.”

Communication between central office and schools. One area that showed little change from last year among principals but a significant change among central office staff was the extent to which they agreed that “interpersonal communication and relationships between schools and central office help improve schools’ performance.” Central office staff were far less likely to agree with this statement this year in comparison to last year, perhaps resulting from the challenges of implementation. Also, perceptions of communication channels as being “open in MNPS” are still quite low among principals, while central office staff have shown a marked increase in their favorable response to this statement – perhaps signaling that efforts to reach across departments and break down silos are beginning to pay off internally for them. Principals commented frequently that their experiences in getting support from specific central office departments has been positive but that central office as a whole is still disjointed, with departmental interactions happening individually rather than collectively when they involve a common issue or message.

SCHOOL/PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY. We heard much discussion, but little certainty, about the level of autonomy individual schools, and especially their principals, should have to make decisions. Principals and central office staff generally agreed that the central office culture has improved and is more service-oriented and supportive to schools. There was also a sense that the long-term vision is for schools to have more autonomy with accountability and more ownership of reform.

But school leaders and some central office staff question the level of control that the central office retains. Some also questioned whether central office staff truly believe that schools have the capacity for the authority some envision for them. Our data suggest that the shift to servant leadership is welcome, but that there is interest in continued discussion about the decisions schools/principals should have control over, the authority that remains at the central office, and the relationship between autonomy and demonstrated capacity.

TIER ALIGNMENT. The lack of alignment among elementary, middle, and high school tiers is a theme that emerged strongly across all stakeholder groups. Some noted the beginnings of a conceptual shift and common language around thinking about K–12. We heard examples of district staff collaborating across tiers or making deliberate efforts to forge connections, but there was an overall sense that tiers operate independently with different visions, varying success in planning and working collaboratively, and different implementation even of common initiatives. Cluster meetings were mentioned as a possible structure for increasing communication and collaboration at the school level, but in their current form they are not able to overcome the gaps. A few central office leaders brought up alternate models or structures that would better promote alignment between the tiers, usually involving the addition of a leadership position, such as a chief academic officer, focused on K–12 instruction.

SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF GOOD

INSTRUCTION. Last year, most respondents were unable to describe a shared understanding of good instruction across the district, calling it “fuzzy” and “hard to articulate.” This year, many people suggested that there was still no common definition of good instruction, but many others brought up common elements, especially differentiation (consistent with last year’s data) and student engagement (a new theme this year). As with last year’s findings, many respondents suggested that the three tiers all have their own definitions of good instruction but that there is no clear K–12 vision. Many respondents mentioned differentiation as an important element of the district’s vision of good instruction, but we often heard that there is no common understanding of what differentiation is. According to the theory of action, a shared understanding of good instruction is a prerequisite for improvement gains.

Teacher quality. Tennessee has made teacher quality a cornerstone of its reforms, the most conspicuous being the new teacher evaluation system inaugurated in the 2011–2012 school year. MNPS has devoted significant resources to training school leadership and disseminating information to school staff around teacher evaluations, and the efforts by MNPS in this area have been recognized statewide. The most prominent way MNPS builds teacher capacity is administrator-directed through the new teacher evaluation system, consistent with the state mandate on evaluation and MNPS’s focus on reforming at scale through high-quality school leadership. The district has also invested in “bottom-up” efforts to improve

teacher quality. The Teacher Leadership Institutes (TLI), for example, were praised by several interviewees, and there is palpable excitement by TLI members about its potential to begin to transform their own schools. However, moving forward it will be important for MNPS to evaluate the impact of the TLI as cohorts return full-time to the classroom empowered as leaders. Though the TLI may be succeeding in its goal of retaining high-performing teachers by engaging them in leadership functions, the scale of a reform like TLI is currently too limited to have an impact on teaching quality systemwide.





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