



STATE OF NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) Highly Skilled Professionals (HSP) Jersey City Public Schools (JCPS) Final Qualitative Report

Overview

After nearly three decades of State oversight, the New Jersey State Board of Education (SBOE) voted to return full local authority to the Jersey City Public Schools (JCPS) on July 5, 2017. With that vote, and the support of the NJDOE, the District developed a transition plan for exiting State intervention. The Transition Plan delineates the terms and conditions for returning full local control to the Jersey City Board of Education (JCBOE) as well as actions to be taken to measure compliance with the five key areas that form the basis of the Plan. Each of the key areas are complementary to NJQSAC, the State's system for school district accountability, and include performance indicators that measure progress and improvements during the JCPS transition period.

The concept of sustained progress frames the terms and conditions of the Transition Plan. The Plan utilizes metrics to measure progress and compliancy in the key areas of Fundamental Considerations for the overall transition, Governance, Instruction and Program, Fiscal Management, and Personnel. Based on the premise that progress will continue in the key areas, the current report focuses on the District's processes, actions, and resources allocated to complete the Transition Plan during SY 2021-2022.

The Transition Plan relies on tracking and publishing data that verifies sustained progress in the five key areas and other factors essential to the completion of the Plan. The State partners with a Comprehensive Accountability Office (CAO, an independent entity) to collect, analyze, and publish data; and measure compliance with the Plan's components. The findings of the CAO are entered on to an Accountability Scorecard which assigns a scale score for each of the metrics being addressed by the District.

The State also assigns Highly Skilled Professionals (HSPs) to provide guidance and expertise to the JCBOE and the District during the transitional period. The HSPs work with the District and the CAO to develop timetables for all activities related to and leading to the submission of data to the CAO (located at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University).

Part I: General Observations of Highly Skilled Professionals (HSPs)

During SY 2021-2022 organizational strategic shifts were observed which increased the level of oversight, expertise, and resources allocated by the District to meet the expectations of the Transition Plan. It was consistently observed by the HSPs that the strategies implemented by the Board and the District were increasing the probability for meeting the Plan's expectations. In this segment of the report, the HSPs addressed the impactful strategies the Board and the District implemented during SY 2021-2022.

1. Targeting the Transition Metrics

The HSP report conceptualizes processes and actions over time based on observations and interactions with the JCBOE, Senior Staff, and the District; that demonstrated a capacity for self-governance. The current submission of evidence focused on seventeen metrics. The HSPs selected twelve of the metrics after in-depth discussions with the NJDOE, the recently retired JCPS Superintendent, and Senior Staff. The CAO selected five additional metrics in the key areas of the Transition Plan.

In selecting the metrics, the goals of the HSPs were to focus on those metrics that garnered a scale score of less than three on the 2nd Accountability Scorecard; and document any additional evidence requested by the CAO. The targeted metrics were representative of performance expectations in each of the five key areas. Most notably, the greater number of metrics were selected in the key area of Fiscal Management.

2. The Transition Project Manager

As with any large organization, tracking data is essential for managing goals and expectations. To develop a successful management system by which the JCBOE, Senior Staff, and specific departments could provide data; the Superintendent assigned a Project Manager to develop performance goals and coordinate compliance with the selected metrics. As the Special Assistant to the Superintendent, the Project Manager warehoused data gathered from all sources. The Special Assistant and the HSPs conducted thorough reviews for each metric to ensure that evidence was properly aligned. The process engaged all responsible stakeholders; and provided maximum opportunities for documenting policies, actions, and programs.

3. Building Collaborative Teams

During the transitional period the positions of Board President and Superintendent changed on three occasions. The success of the Transition Plan is deeply rooted in the support, actions, and transparency of the Board President and the Superintendent. Their collective leadership is essential for the decentralization and effective communication of responsibilities, accountability, and explicit timelines.

Having established stability in these positions during SY 2021-2022, the District moved forward with effective strategies for establishing collaborative teams. With the assistance of the HSPs, the Board President and the Superintendent developed training modules in accordance with the Transition Plan for Board members and Senior Staff; while also establishing explicit timelines for documentation and actions. The Team approach for metric compliance was widely adopted throughout the District, as the Board and Senior Staff communicated directly with the HSPs and the Project Manager.

4. JCPS Determining Transition Metrics for Compliance Completion

To provide further technical assistance to the District, while utilizing tenets of NJQSAC, the HSPs developed a single continuum for effectuating metric compliance (evidenced in Metric #1- Communications with Senior Staff). The impetus for developing this document was to provide frameworks through which the Teams would work collaboratively on the metrics. The form entitled “Determining Transition Plan Metrics for Compliance Completion” outlines the roles and responsibilities for each metric; along with the person(s) responsible to complete the metric using evidence indicators.

5. A Return to In-Person Activities

COVID-19 eliminated in-person activities fostering an adaptation of virtual solutions to gather, assess, present, and report on data during the transition period. There were notable transformations in strategies upon returning to in-person activities.

Enhanced communications were observed by the HSPs in addition to improved implementations of metric responsibilities and submissions. The in-person events increased the level of exactness for organizing the metrics, while reinforcing a sense of purpose amongst Board members, Senior Staff, and the District for completing the Transition Plan.

Part III: Processes, Actions, and Commitments in the Five Key Areas of the Transition Plan

The JCPS Transition Plan is based on five key areas complementary to NJQSAC. The District was required to demonstrate sustainability in these areas for specific metrics in SY 2021-2022. In this section of the report, the HSPs discuss processes and actions observed in the key areas that addressed the primary goals of the Transition Plan.

Fundamental Considerations

The Highly Skilled Professionals serve as liaisons between the JCBOE and the NJDOE in the implementation of the full Transition Plan. Through the HSPs the NJDOE assisted the District in meeting the expectations for the budgeting process, Board training requirements, and resources to accomplish the goals of the Plan.

The effective engagement of the HSPs is defined in Fundamental Considerations; which requires the individual(s) designated as HSP to have sufficient transparency and access to monitor the progress of the District; and report responsibly on the JCBOE's practices. The following activities were virtual and in-person events that facilitated State engagement through the HSPs.

- Board President meetings and written communications with the HSPs.
- Superintendent meetings and written communications with the HSPs.
- Senior Staff meetings and written communications with the HSPs.
- HSP Participation in the Board, Caucus, Retreats, and Committee meetings.

Additionally, the HSPs collaborated with the JCBOE and the District to identify and design training modules for the joint training of the JCBOE and Senior Staff, in accordance with the required training outlined in the Transition Plan.

The area of Fundamental Considerations also focuses on the JCBOE's Ethics and Policy practices with explicit regards that the Board commits zero violations of the School Ethics Act; and does not administer to the schools. Upon contacting the School Ethics Office (SEO) the District was directed to the NJDOE website which listed zero violations for the JCBOE for the last 12 months. The SEO also forwarded a historical profile for the JCBOE to the Office of the Superintendent.

The JCBOE adopted a revised Policy Manual during SY 2021-2022 which was approved at the March 22, 2022 BOE Meeting. The manual had not been updated since 2015 and represented a major accomplishment for the Board. Through the legal guidance of Strauss-Esmay, the revised manual was made available online as the firm continued organizing chapters for ease of reference.

It should also be noted that the JCBOE Policy Committee Meetings were routinely observed by the HSPs. The HSPs verified that the items discussed during Policy Committee Meetings were in compliance with ethical practices, and lacked any intent to administer to the schools, or interfere with the duties of District Administrators.

Governance

The key area of Governance addresses the ongoing training of the JCBOE and Senior Staff in Ethics, Governance Best Practices, and Board-Administration Relationships. These topics, the requisite training modules and professional development, were organized through the cooperation of the New Jersey Schools Boards Association (NJSBA), the JCBOE, the Superintendent, Senior Staff Members, and the HSPs.

The NJSBA mandated trainings are attended by individual Board members at various times during their years of service. The joint trainings in Governance for the JCBOE and Senior Staff were presented at Caucus meetings, Board Retreats, and New Board Member Orientations as required by the Transition Plan, and evidenced in the Governance metrics.

Instruction and Program (I&P)

The key area of Instruction & Program requires the District to analyze student achievement data in line with the current NJQSAC I&P indicators. The District traditionally utilizes the New Jersey Student Learning Assessments (NJSLA) data to guide an in-depth analysis of achievement for all subgroups, as required by NJQSAC. Due to COVID-19, the administration of the NJSLA was postponed for SY 2020-2021; which resulted in the District using formative and benchmark assessment data to inform immediate teaching and learning goals for SY 2021-2022. The results of these assessments were disaggregated by subgroups through data analysis and standards-based targeted instruction was designed to support students' needs for remediation or acceleration.

The District has been deepening the use of data to meet the needs of all learners. The use of common formative and computer adaptive assessments regularly has strengthened targeted instruction to enable teachers to collaboratively identify interventions to ensure all students are making progress. I&P has deepened its use of ***Performance Matters***, the District's data platform, to better triangulate data and use it more effectively. The data analysis of the assessments is used to support students in need of remediation or acceleration through the use of targeted-based instruction.

Data was collected from the June 20, 2021 "Marking Period 4 Professional Development Survey" to plan professional development for SY 2021-2022. All administrators, teachers, support staff, assistants and paraprofessionals/aides were required to complete the survey to identify the most current instructional needs of the district and professional development needs for SY 2021-2022.

In 2021, the state resumed statewide testing through the Stronge Start Assessment. Combined with the formative and benchmark assessments, Stronge Start allowed the District to blend data from different sources to analyze student achievement across NJQSAC indicators.

Fiscal Management

The key area of Fiscal Management delineates the District's budget requirements and fiscal obligations. The District engages the community during the budget planning process. The budget is then constructed on Systems 3000, guided by the goals and objectives set forth by the Superintendent of Schools. System 3000 also accommodates budget projections for departments and schools.

School budgets in the JCPS are aligned with the Superintendent's goals and objectives to ensure equitable allocations for all students to support student achievement. Division Directors assist schools in reviewing relevant data and program outcomes to determine individual needs. The Business Administrator/Board Secretary has a fiscal obligation to complete monthly reports and present a fiscal forecast three times a year, as described in the Transition Plan, and documented in the Fiscal metrics. Cash flow management and reimbursements for grant awards are also evidenced in the metrics. The Board Secretary's Report for lines items is currently in compliance

with State regulations. The JCBOE members attend Finance training offered by the NJSBA, the Superintendent, and the Business Administrator.

Personnel

Within the key area of Personnel the District continues to implement AchieveNJ to support ongoing professional learning and growth for teachers and administrators. This includes training school leaders yearly to rigorously and fairly evaluate teachers using the Danielson Frameworks for Teaching and Learning 'Practice Instrument'. School administrators and Supervisors are trained in understanding and implementing the Stronge Principal/Supervisor Effectiveness Evaluation System, which incorporates the seven Principal Performance Standards for their evaluations.

Teachers are trained in the use of the Danielson Framework for Teaching and Learning, which provides uniform vocabulary and expectations for high quality teaching, thereby offering a coherent framework for identifying teacher needs and organizing support. By engaging in consistent conversations around teaching and learning, teachers and leaders improve teacher practice and support student learning. The analysis of evaluations by administrators and the evidence-based feedback they provide during observation conferences, offer specific opportunities for improvement and guide the individual professional development of educators.

Principals, Vice/Assistant Principals and Supervisors support teachers based on their evaluations; and exit low performing staff when appropriate. Teachers who are placed on Corrective Action Plans (CAP) must receive additional support by working with their administrators in creating a professional development plan that is designed to address and correct the needs identified in their evaluations.

The District continues the practice of sending Senior Staff contracts to the Executive County Superintendent for review and approval. The practice continues with the submission of the newly appointed Superintendent's contract to the County Office.

Part IV: Summary

The Final Qualitative Report is submitted by Highly Skilled Professionals with authority under N.J.S.A. 18A:7A 14(e)(2): to provide oversight, guidance, and technical support to the JCBOE and the JCPS during the transitional period. The report of the Highly Skilled Professionals is based on virtual and in-person observations at Board, Caucus, Retreat, Committee and District meetings. HSP engagement included regular scheduled meetings and written communications to the Board President, the Superintendent of Schools, and the Project Manager to review the goals and benchmarks of the Transition Plan. The HSPs were engaged constructively in all transition domains, and routinely observed the Plan's implementation.

The JCPS progression through the Transition Plan was not without obstacles. As mentioned previously, the District has undergone three changes in the positions of Board President and Superintendent during the transition period. In-person learning was suspended during the COVID-19. During that time, the Transition Plan was navigated remotely impacting the District's capacity for gathering and aligning information for the Plan.

The HSPs have observed processes, actions, and commitments implemented by the JCBOE and JCPS that demonstrate the District's capacity for self-governance. There are policies in place, as the Board has adopted a revised policy manual, and the joint training of the Board and Senior Staff in Ethics, Governance Best Practices, Finance, and Instruction and Program has placed an emphasis on collaborative leadership. Decision making for increasing student outcomes and organizational effectiveness sustained the District's continued improvement during the transitional period. It is the recommendation of the Highly Skilled Professionals that full local authority of the Jersey City Public Schools be returned to the Jersey City Board of Education free of state intervention.

Report Collectively Submitted by:

Dr. Alexis R. Colander, NJDOE-HSP

Dr. Stephen Cowan, NJDOE-HSP

The HSPs wish to thank the Board President, Superintendent, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, and Senior Staff for their contributions to the Final Qualitative Report.