

## **Questions from the Audience – Partnership Community Meeting September 30, 2013 at the Bentley School**

**Are there any potential plans to move teaching staff from higher performing schools to the lower performing or struggling schools? If so, will the teachers who are replaced stay in district?**

*Not at the present time.*

**What place do music and art education have in the district? Where do they fit with the current focus and AIP?**

*Art, music and physical education classes continue to be offered with the same regularity/frequency as they were prior to our Level IV designation. While the AIP does not contain specific goals in the area of unified arts, we do hope that the work underway with the National Center on Time & Learning (NCTL) will support increases in the time allotted to these important subject areas as we consider plans to expand the school day.*

**How open is the Salem Public School System to enrichment programs? Who would be the best person or persons to talk with?**

*We are currently in discussions with the YMCA concerning their afterschool program and enrichment activities. While our initial focus is on the Bentley School, once successful we hope to expand these opportunities to other schools. Since this meeting, the School Committee has authorized the hire of a Director of Extended Learning Programs to assist us in developing further opportunities for both academic and enrichment activities for our students.*

**Given that all research shows that extending the school year greatly improves retention of knowledge learned, is there a plan to lengthen the school year at all schools, or keep cutting back? If school year is not extended, is the rationale strictly financial?**

*We are currently exploring the opportunities for expanding students' learning time through our work with the NCTL. We anticipate releasing a report on progress in late December/early January and completing a final proposal by the end of February.*

**How are specialists going to be affected by the change?**

*It is too early to tell although specialist representatives are involved with both the Collins and Bowditch planning teams.*

**Why is Witchcraft Elementary so large compared to other schools in the district?**

*With the exception of the Collins Middle School, it's a function of the space available. This factor, combined with the fact that Witchcraft Heights is currently a popular choice among parents, contributes to the full use of this building.*

**How are gifted and talented students being educated in the district?**

*Every effort is made to challenge students (e.g. the 100% increase in AP participation at Salem High School), who have the ability to excel beyond the levels of their peers' academic performance. Differentiated instruction is a focus area of our District Expectations for Teaching and Learning (at all grade levels) and staff have participated in several professional development trainings on this topic.*

**Will the PARCC be implemented next year?**

We have notified the MA Dept. of Education that Salem does not want to participate in the pilot PARCC testing trials this year. (We have other priorities that need to be addressed.) We do anticipate adopting this assessment in the future.

**Where was this sense of urgency in education before level 4 designation?**

*The level of educational accountability has been significantly increasing ever since the publication of A Nation at Risk over a decade ago. This concern has continued to increase leading to the federal "No Child Left Behind" law along with increasing efforts (across the state/nation) to raise the level of both the standardization of program offerings accompanied with high levels of accountability for results. Subsequently, our priorities have changed to reflect what's taking place and to meet the demands that our children will face in the future.*

**How are changes, such as Instructional Rounds, affected by teacher contracts and negotiations? Have you seen resistance and/or grievances filed which are slowing the momentum for positive change toward best practices for instruction?**

*While we have our differences from time to time over contractual issues and the challenges inherent in contract negotiations, we have found the Salem Teachers' Union (and other employee unions) willing to work with us as partners in tackling the challenges we face.*

**Where do the Curriculum Directors, department leaders and specialists come into the picture with regard to leadership coordination and articulation of instruction and professional development?**

*Their role is to support the AIP initiatives and change that is underway. They help us to bring focus, consistency and support to the work that is underway at all of our schools.*

**DESE noted in the level 3 report that the School Committee had no goals that held the superintendent responsible for student achievement. I saw no evidence that this was corrected in the just completed superintendent evaluation. Why not?**

*The DESE Level 3 report was based upon a review and site visit made to the Salem Public Schools during the year prior to my arrival as Salem's superintendent. (It should be noted that it took DESE 8 months to complete and share this report with me. It finally arrived two months into my term.) Shortly thereafter Salem was declared a Level 4 district.*

*The August 2013 Supt. evaluation process reflects a shift over to the new DESE evaluation system. (In the past the superintendent's evaluation was based upon the progress made in meeting the district's goals.) My goals for the 2013-14 school year are tied directly to student performance. We will have them up on the district web site in the near future.*

**Looking at year one accomplishments, why didn't many of these things already exist? Why didn't we have the systems needed to be successful in place?**

*There are many possibilities ranging from turn-over in administrative staff, conflicting priorities over budget shortfalls, the lack of a comprehensive system of student accountability... I can, however, tell you that they do exist now as a result of our shared work over the past several years.*

**There have been disconnects between SIP development and DIP (AIP) development in the past. New SIPs are due in December. How is the district improving alignment of the new SIPs to the DIP? AIP?**

*During the past several months I have visited and met with each school council and/or PTO. During these meetings I have reviewed the Accelerated Improvement Plan (Year II version) and the guidelines for the development of updated School Improvement Plans. To add to these efforts, the District AIP team members have been assigned to serve as a resource to individual school SIP teams as they update their plans between*

now and the end of December.

**What data or information will be available to parents specific to individual schools regarding educator performance?**

*Some information on the percent of Salem teachers who are “highly qualified” under NCLB, have graduate level degrees, etc. is available on the DESE website. During the next several years we expect that more information on teachers’ qualifications and performance will be made available to the public as performance levels are correlated with MCAS results and student/parent surveys become part of the teacher evaluation process.*

**If MCAS scores set the floor for student achievement, DDMs are a great opportunity to establish student outcomes beyond test scores – characteristics necessary to help students get to and through college. How are these outcome measures being developed? How will they be measured? Will they be communicated?**

*DDM stands for district determined measures. They represent another component of the assessment systems being developed through the DESE. The “good” news is that the district, within the parameters of DESE guidelines, has some choice over what this second measure of academic achievement (apart from the MCAS results), will be. In Salem’s case, we will be using the ANet and Galileo results as this second measure. We’re also obligated (at our expense) to create additional measures for our grade K-1 students that are not presently in place. Public reports of our progress in this area will be shared once available.*

*While DESE reports that this set of new measures will be in place by the end of the current school year, we anticipate that it is going to take at least another year to fully comply with new requirement, given the planning and work involved.*

**What measures might be useful to add to the monthly data dashboard? Would there be other measures to access/track less frequently (every 6 months? annually?) such as teacher, parent, and student surveys? And what is the district doing to develop and implement these?**

*The concept of a data dashboard is analogous to that of your car, you have all of the data up in front of you in real time that allows you to make ongoing adjustments to your travel.*

*Student attendance, disciplinary reports, tardiness, classroom grades, assessment (ANet, Galileo, MCAS) results, subgroup performance... the list of possibilities is extensive. The challenge we presently face however is not one of determining what to measure (we know what’s important), the challenge is to find working/useful data dashboard software, to help us to compile this data in real time. (It’s much too time consuming to do by hand and maintain it in an up-to-date fashion.)*

*The DESE is working on a system called Edwin. However, at present it is more of a promise than a reality.*

**Also, how are we measuring success of other initiatives/programs such as summer programming (ALL – not just BELL), adult education, extended day, etc.)? And if any of these programs are extremely successful, what does the district plan to do with expanding those (i.e., adult education, Parent-Child Home program)?**

*Program evaluations conducted to date have been limited and varied on a year-to-year basis depending on student needs especially in the areas of special education and English Language Learners. As noted previously, the School Committee has authorized the creation of a new administrative position that will be focused on the creation of expanded and extended learning opportunities throughout our schools. We anticipate that this person will help to strengthen the development, implementation and evaluation components of our work in this area.*

**Are class sizes equal across all schools in the district, especially elementary K-5 schools? If not, how can teachers be evaluated fairly? Please explain. And how can school levels be accurately calculated? Please explain.**

*At the present time class sizes are not equal across our elementary or middle school levels. While improvements are being made, we have more work to be done in this area. These efforts include more frequent*

*communication with our Parent Information Center staff, making adjustments to what schools/classes are open and which are closed for additional students on a month/month basis.*

*The issue of class size is more complex than numbers. (Roland Freyer would tell you that it doesn't make any difference.) Consideration also needs to be made for the level of various students needs, the physical space size of the classroom, whether there's a paraprofessional assigned to it, etc.*

*We are aware of parent concerns around this issue and will continue to work to address them.*

**There has been lots of discussion tonight about the importance of leadership, principals and VPs. Can you talk about the impact upon schools that don't have that? There has been no consistent leadership at NBS and we have entered a second year of an AIP with no permanent principal. Why?**

*Consistent, strong leadership is at the core of our turn-around efforts and it has also contributed to our ability to turn-around our schools. At present this position has been advertised, a screening committee of parents/staff has been formed and the search for a new principal for the Bowditch School is underway. We remain confident that, through our combined efforts, we will find the best principal for this school in the near future.*

*It should also be noted that during the coming months we will undertake principal searches for both the Collins and Bates schools as well. Finding the best person to fill these positions will also be essential to our long-term progress.*

**When will the detailed results of the BELL summer learning program be released to the public? Are plans being made to continue the program? Will it be expanded? How will the cost be covered?**

*A copy of the report on the success of this past year's BELL program, that was recently presented to the School Committee, is available on the district's website.*

*Presently, we are uncertain as to what plans will be made for next year's summer program. The options available range from the in-house creation of a broad-based summer program, to the issuance of a Request for Proposals in contracting these services. No definitive decision has been made.*

*The funds that supported the BELL Program were taken from general city appropriations, grants and scholarship funds provided through BELL partners.*

**Please explain the extraordinarily high ratio of high needs students at the Bentley School compared to other Salem schools? Is this distribution, in its current form, legal?**

*I'll address the last part of this question first. If we had purposefully created this inequity to the disadvantage of some of our neediest students then I would say yes, it was/is illegal. We did not.*

*A large part of the inequity that's been noted and is reported to have occurred within the past 5-6 years is the result of a student assignment policy/practice that was not designed nor weighted (based upon need) to promote the equal distribution of students across all of Salem's schools. This prior practice favored those who registered their kindergarten children early allowing all of the seats in many of our other schools to be filled almost immediately with those remaining at several of our schools- including Bentley, to be taken up by those registering later in the spring and summer months. Characteristically, those are the families who are more transient, may have greater levels of need, etc. (Please forgive the generalization.)*

*During the past two years the school assignment policy has been changed. Aside from sibling preference (given to the sibling of a child already attending a specific school), a percentage of seats are "set-aside" at all of our schools. This percentage of seat assignments set-asides is set annually and based upon the socio-economic split (District-wide, Free/Reduced lunch counts) between those families with higher than average levels of need and those without. In practice during the past two years, this has created much more of a balance particularly in our kindergarten classrooms, throughout the district.*

**Are the assessments conducted by multiple individuals to avoid bias conclusions?**

*Teacher assessments (evaluations) are conducted by the school administrator who has direct contact with the teacher(s) being evaluated. The evaluations are based on observations, conferences, day-to-day interactions, etc. Teachers also provide samples of student work and other “evidence” to support having met the Standards and Indicators of Effective Teaching Practice. Most teachers have a primary **and** secondary evaluator contributing to the evaluation.*

**What was your reaction to Somerville’s teacher (NI) evaluations being nulled? Does it have an impact on how other districts evaluate?**

*In my opinion this was a “philosophical issue” gone wrong. The superintendent based upon his belief that we are all involved in a never-ending process of improvement, requested that all of the teachers in the Somerville Schools be ranked no higher than proficient in their first year of participation in the new evaluation process. Upon further consideration he gained a better understanding of the arbitrary nature of his request and he rescinded it. While it has no direct bearing on the implementation of Salem’s evaluation system, I have filed it under “lessons learned”.*

**The example was given about the Boston Schools and their evaluations. More recently, an article said that Boston had to redo its evaluations because they were so low. How does this impact the evaluation process moving forward? Does redoing them undermine the process statewide?**

Again in my opinion, we are in a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” situation as educational leaders. Are there teachers (and administrators) within the SPS who are doing an exemplary job day in and day out? Yes, and there are those who are not, particularly in light of our level 4 status. It’s should also be noted that DESE defines proficiency as the “expected, rigorous level of performance for educators. It is a demanding but attainable level of performance for most educators...” At present we are tackling the evaluation of each teacher/administrator on an individual basis without quotas. As Supt. I review the work of those recommended for both exemplary and unsatisfactory rankings, to help support the integrity of our evaluation system.

**Have there been any studies at the individual student level – as they move from grade to grade, and school to school, to see exactly where problems are arising?**

*We have done some comparative research on the MCAS results of students as compared to their time enrolled in the SPS. In general terms we found that the longer a student is enrolled in the SPS, the better s/he scores on the MCAS.*

*The DESE has also created a “cohort measure” that tracks the same group of students’ MCAS progress from grade to grade over time (as compared to this year’s 3<sup>rd</sup> grade vs. last year’s 3<sup>rd</sup> grade when a different group of students is involved).*

**Do our administrators take the time to visit other school districts to see what’s working outside of our bubble?**

*Yes, we encourage visits to other schools, particularly urban schools that are directly involved in turn-around efforts. During the past year, our administrators have visited public schools in Boston, Lowell, and Fall River that have made significant gains in student achievement.*

**As we have heard this evening, an effective principal is vital to the turnaround effort. What is being done to recruit the most effective principals for our schools that have or anticipate having vacancies?**

*To assist us with this important task, we are in the midst of talking with companies and consultants who are involved in administrator recruitment. We intend to select one to assist us on a contracted services basis in the near future.*

*Our Director of Human Resources is also actively involved in teacher and administrator recruitment through*

*attendance at regional job fairs, our participation in the SchoolSpring.com network and through a variety of formal and informal means to attract qualified candidates to Salem.*

**Teachers already have such a heavy workload. I'm concerned about adding all the evidence – collecting and 'bookkeeping' to their jobs. What are you doing to ensure that these additional requirements don't take away from prep time & student interaction time? (Especially for new/newer teachers.)**

Our intent is two-fold. That is to provide our teachers with training and support as they work to improve their professional practice, and to utilize a variety of means to “free them up” during the course of their day to accomplish these tasks and as well as to pay them for the additional time/effort involved in their participation on various committees involved in this additional work.

One of the unfortunate aspects of today's accelerated rate of needed improvement is the fact that beyond Salem, we/they continue to encounter a variety of new state/federal level initiatives ranging from the new teacher evaluation system, to WIDA (ELL) program revisions, to addressing the various components of NCLB.

On a positive note, we do provide our new teachers with individual mentors, professional development, and graduate level coursework during their first two years here in Salem.

In closing, thank you for your interest in the Salem Public Schools and the important work that's underway.

Steve Russell, Superintendent