

Superintendent's Entry Plan

Andrew B. O'Leary

New Bedford Public Schools

Introduction

As Interim Superintendent for the 2023-2024 school year, I am continually inspired by the words of James Bunker Congdon, renowned New Bedford abolitionist. His reflection on our school system in 1848, that "All are and have ever been satisfied, and no schools in the Commonwealth stand higher than ours," resonates with me deeply. New Bedford has a rich history of leading the Commonwealth, and I am confident that it will do so in the future.

My entry plan reflects my core values and beliefs about public education and New Bedford Public Schools:

- 1) From students to educators, support staff, caregivers, families, administrators and committee and the broader community, **all have a valued role to play in New Bedford Public Schools**
- 2) New Bedford Public Schools is the best destination for educators and school support staff. Those who have dedicated their careers to public education can find no better place than this district at this time. To borrow a phrase we often use, **this is the work**
- 3) At New Bedford Public Schools, time and resources are strategically applied to ensure all activity is in service of **teaching and learning to ensure student success**

Interim Superintendent's focus areas:

1. Ensuring system coherence where all district activity is mutually reinforcing
2. Supporting school principals as the major lever for school improvement
3. Partnering and aligning with MADESE and our peer Gateway City districts
4. Launching a district climate survey for all stakeholders to guide a new District Strategic Plan for 2025-30
5. Relaunch of the Academic Achievement Sub Committee
6. Embedding a Professional Growth Model including a new PD system
7. Presentation of a Facilities Master Plan for 2025 to 2030
8. Full implementation of the PASS K12 system for school safety
9. Centering Special Education as a proactive investment in student success
10. Development of a comprehensive plan for success at NBHS

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First 100 days

Upon appointment as interim superintendent in April, I presented a brief two page memo to the school committee called an Interim Acceleration Plan. The memo acknowledged our strong foundations but noted areas of urgency in governance, state accountability, school leadership, and high school improvement. At the 100 day point in my superintendency, week ending October 13, I met with the central office leaders to review this memo, and am happy to note that the areas of urgency have been addressed with affirmative and decisive steps taken in each case. I have established more frequent and direct meetings with our Committee members and union leaders with shared dialogue on district governance, priorities, and direction. With the Deputy Superintendent, I have engaged directly with our partners at MADESE to gain a clear understanding of where the district resides in terms of state oversight and to set future opportunities for New Bedford within the state achievement and accountability system. All principal and school leader contracts have been reviewed with revised oversight, support, and evaluation systems put in place. Frequent and focused meetings with our high school leadership have set the stage for a fall to spring planning and pilot period with new leadership, new scheduling, staffing, and focused academic, health and wellness, and advanced pathways assured to launch in school year 24/25.

Context of School Year 23/24

This entry plan recognizes our district's most recent developments and future prospects. School year 2023-2024 is an interim leadership period and it is likely that by 2024-2025 the school committee and district will set plans for a three to five year period, potentially launching a new strategic plan for 2025-2030. I believe strongly that the experience of the interim leadership team will set the district up for a successful transition to this exciting era.

Comprehensive school districts like New Bedford have a wide and varied constituency and are at the intersection of competing priorities and demands. There is a larger ecosystem in which our schools reside, and change, reform and crisis always seem to lead public education policy. It often feels like traditional school districts like New Bedford must be all things to all people. Little wonder that as our nation's districts emerged from the Pandemic in 2021, the New York Times published an op-ed series asking *What Are Schools for?* New Bedford Public Schools must be ready at any point to answer that question with coherence and confidence.

My charge as superintendent is to ensure all members of the New Bedford community know *What Are [New Bedford] Schools for?* However, for any vision, plan, action, or decision, we must acknowledge the difference in our environment compared to the mission set for selective and screened admission schools in the Commonwealth. Clarifying the challenge we face reveals

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our strength and establishes our worth as an essential institution. The greater our understanding of our institutional role, the more we can establish our credibility as a district, the stronger will be our systems and performance, and the more likely we can ensure demands for ongoing investment and support are met at local, state, and federal level. In the year ahead this responsibility can be managed by continually revisiting the focus areas above. I see my role as superintendent as being a coherence agent - ensuring all activities are mutually reinforcing.

Coherence, according to educational theorist Michael Fullan, can be achieved through four components: focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability. In the context of the relationship between school committees and district administrators, and in turn between district leadership and school based staff, coherence means all should share a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and align their efforts towards achieving common goals. They should also work collaboratively, learn from each other, and hold each other accountable for achieving these goals.

From July 1 to June 30, the following structures, systems, partnerships, actions, and products are the vehicles through which we will “work collaboratively, learn from each other, and hold each other accountable for achieving these goals.”

School Committee

Public School improvement starts with sound public governance. Our School Committee governs a considerable public investment and must require a highly functional, transparent, and ever improving school system. Activities, actions, and dialogue between district administration and Committee must see evidence of deep, regular and substantive review of priorities and progress. Collegial board oversight will enhance administrative efforts, ensuring all are entering an era of renewed accountability with clear, shared, non-negotiable goals for district improvement.

Sub Committees

- Governance & Policy Subcommittee

The School Committee Governance and Policy Subcommittee has the lead role in shaping district policy. Clear school governance was one major change brought about by the Education Reform Act of 1993. While our Committee may see periods without policy challenges, dispute or division, such an environment cannot be assured over the longer term. Hence the importance of this subcommittee's charge to maintain a balanced approach between governance and management aspects of the school district, aligning with best practices observed in Massachusetts school committees and boards. With a well functioning subcommittee, the district

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will more effectively navigate the roles and responsibilities of school committees, superintendents, principals, and school councils.

- Finance & Operations Subcommittee

The Finance & Operations subcommittee has the simple but crucial charge of “keeping the community informed.” The School Department budget represents almost 60% of the City’s resources and operating funds. School Committee members have a fiduciary responsibility for all district funds. Transparency in public reporting is a simple but powerful tool to meet this responsibility. Monthly financial reports show changes in our School Department’s position since the previous month and uniform function code reporting shows where and how funds have been spent and act as a fiscal forecast. Where the MA Constitution and general laws tell us of a town’s “duties to maintain schoolhouses, properly furnished and conveniently situated for...all children therein,” the subcommittee monitors the district and city progress in this regard, across our clearly defined levels of facility and operations oversight: custodial, maintenance and capital investment.

- Academic Achievement Subcommittee

An initial theory of action for the AASC is that *"if the subcommittee of the school committee and district administrators consistently links review of relevant school data with ongoing administrative and school practice, it will prompt and sustain a cycle of school improvement and district wide accountability.* The school year is underway and the AASC has already established a shared understanding of how these metrics are developed and interpreted at each level (from state to classroom and all points in between). This year, the AASC has preempted the state’s focus on the student absenteeism crisis and the sub committee’s rich dialogue around all school and district metrics will better assure all subsequent macro and micro decision making will align in support of student progress.

District leadership

In the 2023-2024 school year, we see new lead administrators: An Interim Superintendent, Interim Deputy Superintendent, a new Assistant Superintendent for Teaching & Learning, and an Interim Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Operations. I feel fortunate that, in a transition year, all but one of these leaders are longstanding district administrators and the overall staffing of administration is maintained at the same level as last school year. The larger District leadership includes the central administration team as well as district curriculum coordinators, department directors, principals and assistant principals. In any discussion of administration, we must acknowledge that districts are judged on their prioritization of student facing staff. It does not diminish the importance of an effective central office to acknowledge and respond to this

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public sentiment. For example, as we build next year's budget we will have an explicit administrative expenditure cap and a clear non union compensation philosophy. Senior district administrators are aware of their privileged position and their non-negotiable mandate to lead school and district improvement at the highest possible standard. Our district Leadership Institute sessions at the end of year in June and at the start of year in August were very well received and the sentiment of there being “one team” district wide was further embedded.

School building leadership

Principals move their schools. I can say without reservation that we have a great corps of building leaders. Our principals are former New Bedford educators, former NBPS students themselves, parents of NBPS students, and are a group who have an overwhelming collective experience in teaching and learning in Massachusetts and beyond. I am constantly impressed as they take on the oft-times sole responsibility of leading and guiding their school community towards success. Our collective work in central office and in governance is to match their passion with a strategic vision, build a shared definition of instructional leadership, and resource the positive learning environments our principals create. Leading these leaders is the primary responsibility of the Deputy Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent for Teaching & Learning. Since September, a modified series of principal meetings are underway, a weekly Whaler 180 update to building leaders has been improved, classroom observation tools introduced and new evaluators and central office liaisons assigned to buildings. While the work takes place in classrooms and buildings, these channels will ensure consistent, productive and well managed oversight of and partnership with our principals is in place.

NBPS employees and collective bargaining units

I can confidently state that we as a district have strong, productive partnerships with our staff, in large part via partnerships with the union leadership of the New Bedford Educators Association, AFSCME, the Federation of Paraprofessionals and the New Bedford Support Specialists Union. We should not overlook the negotiation cycles that just ended and the considerable time and effort and strategic planning that led to that point. Current negotiated agreements received overwhelming support from the respective unions, with a large majority of votes in favor. This marks the district as a system with the ability to maintain positive labor relations and foster a spirit of cooperation among our employees. Human resource management is a constant demand, however, and by year's end we will be forecasting future bargaining plans and, prior to that, reopening the High School MOA, establishing an administrative spending cap and compensation philosophy, and setting district plans to address Massachusetts' educator pipeline, diversity and licensure crises.

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MADESE partnerships: Since July, Darcie Aungst and I have considerably engaged with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Meetings with each of 6 MADESE Associate Commissioners and MADESE teams such as Center for School & District Partnership and the Office of Statewide System of Support allows us to align with the model of accountability and assistance that MADESE/MABESE will establish from school year 23/24. As of October I have been appointed by Commissioner Riley to the Accountability and Assistance Advisory Council (AAAC) which will make recommendations to the Commissioner for future school years. From the instructional Prioritization Institutes in spring and summer, through expanded Commissioner's visits to UP schools NBHS and Hayden McFadden last month, to our calendar of state district engagements to come, I am satisfied our building of structured and informal relationships between district and state will ensure that all MADESE sponsored initiatives are reinforcing district strategy.

Gateway City and related partnerships: I am committed to maintaining our active role in regional and statewide networks. As superintendent, I lead our engagement with the Urban Superintendents Network, MASS association of superintendents, and I sit on the board of MASBO for school business officials and the South Coast Education Collaborative. As discussed during our School Committee review of conference requests, we must be disciplined and deliberate in application of staff time and resources, but we will see direct staff and student benefit through participation in the aforementioned networks, in MASC, AASPA, the Internationals Network, MASCA and more. From new early college networks to peer district focus on English learners and multilingual learners, to school construction, these networks are dynamic, relevant, and present numerous opportunities for New Bedford to lead and learn from our peers.

New Bedford community partnerships: Superintendent entry involves meeting as many city stakeholders as possible and in the 100 plus days since July 5th I have been fortunate to meet with dozens of representatives of local community organizations, including but not limited to the Immigrants Assistance Center, Mujeres Victoriosas, CEDC, Centro Comunitario de Trabajadores, the New Bedford Education Foundation, the Whaling Museum, One Southcoast, Gifts to Give, legislative delegation members, Discovery Language Academy and the DeMello Center, Greater New Bedford Youth Alliance, the Carney Foundation, GNB Vocational, PACE, and the Coalition for Health Equity and Early Development and the Play On Foundation. Community stakeholder meetings continue and I am mindful that in all cases a coherent means of linking these groups with New Bedford student needs should be the benchmark for partnerships, time, and effort dedicated. At the same time, relationship building with city

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departments is an oft overlooked but powerful means of meeting our mission and since July, I make regular, deliberate contact with NBPD, NBFD, DPI, city solicitors, city IT, parks and recreation, housing, facilities/fleet management, and purchasing and other city departments, as so much of our work is cross cutting and in service of city families.

Students and families: Amid the above listed inventory of meetings, deliberations, plans, and progress, I want to be clear that the most important application of my time and effort is with students, student facing staff, families and caregivers. Fortunately, this is also the most rewarding way to spend my time as superintendent. I have been surprised at how energizing and rewarding it has been. Each month I have increased my number of visits to schools and will shortly launch a formal classroom visitation schedule. To date I have been able to join most school open house events, join meetings of NBHS student clubs when invited, launch a superintendent/student lunch series, and meet with our NBHS student representatives and athletic captains. In the same spirit as our annual convocation, I have been able to open assemblies of new staff, our educator mentor program, and annual trainings of our facilities staff - all with the intent of impressing on staff my heartfelt belief that those who have dedicated their careers to public education can find no better place than this district at this time. I am regularly contacted directly by caregivers and parents and employees, and wherever possible and without compromising appropriate reporting and labor relations channels, I have met with caregivers, students, and staff about concerns, undertaken exit interviews, and considered our families and educators' ideas for school improvement.

Ongoing communication: I am a strong believer in availing of multiple opportunities to speak about the work, needs, and achievements of New Bedford Public Schools. I am proud of our students, and proud of the ability of New Bedford's dedicated educators to lead the work in the state in all aspects of PK-12. In my current and previous roles, I have shown how a clear and rich public dialogue about New Bedford Public Schools is proven, with examples, to "shake up" additional resources and support for the work, and, importantly, it reinforces focus internally and locally. As outlined above, transparency in governance and operations is also a strategic imperative for the district. Most importantly, communication with students, caregivers, and families is a powerful lever for academic achievement. In this regard, while we have an impressive array of communication and family contact efforts underway, I am not yet satisfied that we have set a unified and uniform means of linking our work with its ultimate beneficiaries: our students and families. Some underutilized areas I plan to revisit in the coming months include: district newsletters, our SEPAC, ELPAC, family use of gradebooks and learning systems, and parent councils.

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SUPERINTENDENT'S GOAL SETTING

I am participating in the New Superintendent Induction Program (NSIP), recommended by DESE, MASS, and MASC. NSIP supports Superintendents to be instructional leaders, build strong relationships with their school committees and union leaders and develop high functioning leadership teams. Per the objectives of NSIP, the goals established for a Superintendent's first year should set a feasible timetable for that work and ensure forward momentum for improvement efforts at school and District levels.

Goal 1: Effective entry and school year launch for students and staff. Within 100 days the Superintendent will present an entry plan with demonstrable progress reported on up to 10 focus areas. Focus areas address the current school year's most urgent and most opportune means to direct district activity and resources across teaching and learning, human resources, finance and operations and community involvement.

Goal 2: Climate survey and Strategic Plan development. By Spring, the District will have specific feedback from all district & community groups about NBPS most critical needs and a process underway to set strategy and goals for district progress from 2025 to 2030.

Goal 3: High School Improvement Plan. By April, a school improvement plan for NBHS will be presented to the School Committee, including a new collectively bargained MOA, a system of improvement with clear scheduling, course taking pathways, faculty development, and a college and career community of practice, all monitored by measures of student health and wellbeing, 9th grade passing rates, increased graduation rates, a lower drop out rate, and greater pursuit of advanced learning. In addition, this multi year Plan will see New Bedford High school no longer "designated as in need of broad/comprehensive support" or an "Underperforming school."

Goal 4: (Professional Practice) New Superintendent Induction Program (NSIP). Interim superintendent will develop skills in strategy development, data analysis, and instructional leadership by actively engaging in the first year of the New Superintendent Induction Program, the Urban Superintendents Network, and related school district networks.

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