FAIRFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

April 25, 2014

Please see the attached documents in response to follow-up questions from the April 23, 2014 BOE Budget Presentation at the RTM Education Committee meeting:

1. Outsourcing and Deficit Information
2. Staff Salaries and Union Information/Tenured vs. Non-Tenured Staff
3. Technology: Overview of Technology Configuration and Purchasing Requirements Memo
4. Technology: Economies of Scale Memo
5. Strategic Planning

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OFFICE OF THE
SUPERINTENDENT
FAIRFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

To: Members of the RTM

From: David G. Title

Date: April 25, 2014

Re: Outsourcing and Deficit Information

Outsourcing

The school district is open to the concept of outsourcing and has done so on numerous occasions. For example, our bus contract is outsourced to First Student. We have outsourced our Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy services and achieved savings. Most recently, we have not replaced two grounds workers and have outsourced the work to private contractors. And, of course, the Board of Education voted to outsource the Food Service Program and a contract is currently in negotiations. The BOE and district leadership had been monitoring the financial performance of the Food Service Program every year. As we noticed the fiscal issues, we took action to remedy the problem through outsourcing.

We are open to the suggestion of hearing what ADP has to offer. Every town's circumstance is different and we will follow up. Given that we have two payroll clerks for our 1500 employees, it is not clear what savings could be achieved by moving this function to an outside vendor. The Town of Greenwich hired ADP for its 3400 employees (town and BOE combined). According to minutes of a public meeting in February, 2014, ADP will cost Greenwich $800,000 for its services from October 1, 2014 through June 30, 2014, an annual rate of over $1,000,000. We will communicate directly with Greenwich to get more details.

Current Year Deficit Update

Due largely to unforeseen student outplacements in special education, we projected a year-end deficit for the current fiscal year of $1.4 million as of December 31, 2013. We immediately brought this matter to the attention to the Board of Education and Board of Finance, and instituted a district-wide budget freeze to mitigate this deficit. Services directly impacting the instructional program were not impacted, nor were matters of health, safety and security. Measures included not filling vacant non-instructional positions (custodians, maintenance), postponing capital purchases in technology and other areas, deferring major maintenance projects, asking schools to work down inventory of supplies, cutting down on substitute teacher costs, postponing some curriculum and professional development and requiring all employees going to conferences to pay their own expenses.

These prudent management practices, including sacrifices made by staff, have mitigated the impact of meeting our educational obligations to all students.

At the end of February, we reported to the Board of Finance that, based on these measures, our projected year-end deficit was estimated to be $469,000. As of March 31, 2014, the projected deficit is approximately $300,000.

Staff Salaries Increase
Union Contracts vs Non-Union Contracts

		Budget 2013-2014	Budget 2014-2015	Increase (Decrease)		Union Contracts	Non-Union Contracts
101	Teaching Staff	$ 68,309,520	$ 69,161,139	$ 851,619		$ 851,619	
103	Certified Support Staff	$ 6,312,213	$ 6,355,172	$ 42,959		$ 42,959	
105	School Administration Staff	$ 5,469,383	$ 5,495,738	$ 26,355		$ 26,355	
107	Central Administration Staff	$ 1,031,260	$ 1,052,097	$ 20,837			$ 20,837
109	Director/Supervisor/Manager	$ 694,225	$ 699,249	$ 5,024			$ 5,024
111	Secretarial/Clerical Staff	$ 3,213,978	$ 3,220,423	$ 6,445		$ 6,445	
113	Paraprofessional Staff	$ 2,881,998	$ 3,075,932	$ 193,934		$ 193,934	
115	Custodian Staff	$ 3,543,646	$ 3,665,167	$ 121,521		$ 121,521	
117	Maintenance Staff	$ 1,022,435	$ 1,022,528	$ 93		$ 93	
121	Support Staff	$ 1,115,099	$ 1,234,533	$ 119,434			$ 119,434
123	Info Tech Support Staff	$ 727,369	$ 727,369	$ -		$ -	
125	SE Trainer Staff	$ 570,547	$ 631,301	$ 60,754		$ 60,754	
129	Part-time Employment	$ 3,079,513	$ 3,116,406	$ 36,893			$ 36,893
131	Wage/Benefit Reserve	$ 700,802	$ 906,025	$ 205,223		$ 197,145	$ 8,078
133	Staff Replacement	$ (460,000)	$ (460,000)	$ -			
135	Degree Changes	$ 280,720	$ 181,800	$ (98,920)		$ (98,920)	
	Total	$ 98,492,708	$ 100,084,879	$ 1,592,171		$ 1,401,905	$ 190,266
						88.05%	11.95%

* There are currently 965 teachers and certified support staff. Of those, 752 (78%) are tenured, and 213 (22%) are not tenured.

FAIRFIELD BOE DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

TO: DR. DAVID TITLE

FROM: NANCY BYRNES

SUBJECT: OVERVIEW OF TECHNOLOGY CONFIGURATION AND PURCHASING REQUIREMENTS.

DATE: 4/25/2014

CC:

The process by which the technology department selects the equipment used in district, by both students and staff and acquires it at the best value possible, is a multistep process involving many and is in compliance with the Town of Fairfield, Board of Finance approved bidding and procurement requirements (approved by the BOF October 2011).

The IT Department Manager works with many different constituencies to determine the necessary configuration and components of the computers and technology equipment acquired. These include, but are not limited to administrative and teaching staff responsible for particular curricular areas: Curriculum Leaders and Curriculum Liaisons; Library Media Specialists and Directors and Principals responsible for delivery of instruction.

For example, within the budget request for 2014-15, there is a request for laptops for the World Language Department. These are replacement units for laptop carts acquired six years ago for the secondary schools. This equipment is used in lieu of costly traditional classroom world language labs. In working with the World Language Coordinator, it was determined due to AP testing requirements, that the device must have a headset and microphone input and the ability to record to disk media. (AP requires, as a part of their tests, the students vocal responses be recorded and "burned" to a diskette (CD) and mailed to them for scoring). There are no other special requirements.

This configuration resulted in a budget request for a commercial grade, Windows laptop that had the ability to burn CDs. The dollar value used for budgeting purposes was based on a purchase made in the previous summer (2013-14) for a similar model and charging carts. Those units were acquired under CT state contract /WSCA (Western States Contract Alliance) pricing with a three year manufacturers on site, next business day warranty. That price was $650 per unit for 300 laptops plus 12 charging carts with network switches at a cost of $2,800 each for a total of $228,600.

Why do we use previous purchase numbers rather than a Google search for a similar laptop to create a budget number? The budget is built in November for purchases that take place the following July. Technology changes so quickly in that elapsed time, the originally specified equipment is no longer available. As a result, the actual purchase requires the selection of a readily available model that meets or exceeds the original configuration, at the best value available at the time of purchase.

Another example is the workstations for the CAD (Computer Aided Design) program at the high schools. This very intensive software program has very specific technical specifications. We worked with our vendor to review several different workstations with a variety of components to determine the best possible machine for our needs at the best price available under the BOF

purchasing rules. This is why these workstations are quoted at a much higher price than a standard desktop that would be used in a writing lab.

The department uses a standard configuration for desktops and laptops as a base to achieve several goals in addition to value:

1) A Windows compatible device which allows the computer to communicate with our district computer network and is compatible with district software (52+ titles)

2) Processing speed, memory and drive space required to provide a good user experience at the best possible price, and longevity. (Our average laptop lifespan is 5-6 years)

3) Efficiency of repair: Peripherals and Parts are readily available from reputable manufacturers

4) Commercial grade equipment (rather than consumer grade) where available- to ensure life span and the ability to stand up to being used by up to 45 different users a week

5) Purchase from reputable firms with reasonable return policies, warranties and guarantees who also meet the BOF consortium and bid requirements.

Standardization of brand and model, when compatible with the educational objectives mentioned above provide economies of scale in support, repair and training.

Standardization of peripherals, such as printers, are applied for equity in the classroom and to minimize the cost of supplies.

The district has migrated over the last five years from inkjet printers in the classrooms to monochrome laser printers. This effort was made to reduce the cost of supplies and improve the printing capability (e.g. faster output per minute) and capacity (of paper) for classroom printing.

The request completes the replacement of inkjet units; except where required for special purpose such as the high school art departments district wide. The dollar value budgeted per unit is $345 based on the average cost of the printers we have acquired; normally under GSA (General services Administration) pricing. These are considered professional or commercial grade printers, which print up to 35 pages per minute, and begin printing in as little as 8 seconds. They are wireless compatible (to work with our laptops and tablets without cables) and are networked so they communicate with all of our district equipment, and the software which communicates to the vendor that services and provides supplies for district laser printers. Each printer would be the sole printer for the classroom supporting students, faculty and staff- up to 30 individuals simultaneously.

All technology department purchase orders are reviewed for compliance and value and approved by the Town Purchasing Agent.

Please see the memo on technology economies of scale for further examples of our efforts to acquire equipment to meet our objectives as a best value.

FAIRFIELD BOE DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

TO: CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATORS

FROM: NANCY BYRNES

SUBJECT: TECHNOLOGY ECONOMIES OF SCALE

DATE: 4/24/2014

CC:

The technology department has been able to obtain discounts via economies of scale on several projects and through central control of software purchases rather than school based purchases. The Town IT department, in turn, has been able to use some of these deals to obtain better pricing than they would otherwise have enjoyed. Examples include:

- The use of "bid deal" pricing with Hewlett Packard when purchasing large volumes of replacement equipment, such as Procurve switches, desktops; workstations; laptops and monitors. For example, the switch upgrade project which took place between the years 2009-2011. We were able to get an additional 13% discount for this project under the big deal, a savings of $94,520.

- Wherever available, we combine purchases of software and online subscriptions in order to get better discounts. As examples:

  i. The district obtains Microsoft licenses via a district subscription rather than the need to purchase them outright. This enables the district to keep current at a minimum cost. For example, to purchase an open license for Office 2013 professional (Current posted price on CDWG website $75.80 per computer) for each of our 6000 computers would cost $454,800. The district subscription, which provides for Office as well as hundreds of other required licenses (e.g. desktop operating licenses; SQL and Exchange client access licenses; etc.) is based on FTE count, and cost $85,693.40.

  ii. The IT department obtains district or site licenses for any product used across disciplines, or schools. For example, several years ago rather than purchase individual licenses for Photoshop Elements and Adobe Acrobat we moved to a district license based on FTE to insure all students had access to these products. We also acquired site licenses to Adobe Creative Suites used in several different programs at the high schools in lieu of individual licenses. This enables students to not be limited to using a particular lab, but any lab to work on their graphic arts, photo art; marketing and web development projects.

  iii. There are 52 instructional software or subscription titles which the district acquires centrally at best group, site, or consortium pricing. Examples include Encyclopedia Britannica, Type to Lean, Read and Write Gold, Follett library circulation and resources, and Gale resources.

FAIRFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

BOARD OF EDUCATION MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the RTM

From: Philip Dwyer, BOE Chairman

Date: April 25, 2014

Re: Strategic Planning

Strategic Planning

The Fairfield School District had a "Strategic Plan" that ended in June, 2013. This plan had been augmented upon Dr. Title's arrival with a *District Improvement Strategy* document that he prepared and shared with the Board of Education in 2011 (attached). We believe the planning process has moved beyond the stagnant five-year plan approach to a more dynamic planning process that requires annual updating. Thus, our district is guided by a *District Initiatives* document that is reviewed each spring and updated each fall. The primary focus of our improvement efforts are contained in slides 44 and 45 (attached) from last Wednesday's Power Point presentation.

Our current planning process is:

- In recognition of the end of the existing Plan, and that our Mission statement had not been reviewed in many years, the Board of Education created an Ad Hoc Mission and Goals Committee in Spring, 2013 and invited community representatives from the BoS, BoF, RTM, PTA and other interested residents to help us re-write the Mission, Long Term Goal and Educational Goals (for students) of the district ("Goals Policies"). Community engagement is required by education law. Because these Goals Policies are adopted as official policy, the Ad Hoc Committee's recommendations were presented to the Policy Committee of the Board of Education. The Board made edits, while conforming with the substance, and the BoE adopted these three Goals Policies in January, 2014.
- In the process of looking at Board Goals, we requested ideas from individual BoE members; this guided the next step in the planning process, the development of a long-range District Improvement Plan. The ideas were received in March-April, 2014 and will, together with staff guidance, form the basis for discussion at an upcoming BoE meeting. Staff will work in formulating a District Improvement Plan, based on BoE discussion. The Plan will include a variety of methods of measuring our progress toward meeting the updated Mission and Goals as

approved. Staff will also give regular updates on key components, so the BoE can help guide the document's development. Once completed, the entire District Improvement Plan will be approved by the BoE.

- Since planning is more dynamic today, the BoE and Dr. Title have reviewed accomplishments, as measured against the annual *District Initiatives* list, each spring. The list of *District Initiatives* has been updated at the beginning of each school year in 2011, 2012, and 2013 (and will be updated again in 2014). These annual updates have conformed to the existing strategic plan (2009 – 2013), the *District Improvement Strategy* document produced by Dr. Title in 2011, and the goals of the BoE.

We believe we have an appropriate, thoughtful planning process in place which guides the district annually and gives it a long term vision as well.

A District Improvement Strategy for the Fairfield Public Schools

David G. Title

For the past six months I have been learning as much as I can about the Fairfield Public Schools. As part of my "Entry Plan" I have conducted dozens of one-on-one and small group interviews, observed classroom instruction in every school, met with representatives from each PTA and read a wide range of documents to help me understand not only the current status of the Fairfield Public Schools, but also to understand the history, tradition and culture of this community and its school system.

In developing this document I have also drawn on my professional experience in education over the past 32 years and my 6 months of experience leading this school district and observing its operations first-hand. My learning about Fairfield and its public schools will continue. As that happens, undoubtedly strategies that, at this point, seem fruitful may not turn out to be so, and other strategies will be necessary. The ideas in this document, therefore, reflect my best thinking at this time but these ideas are subject to refinement in the future.

As I have said repeatedly at public appearances, our school system does not need a complete overhaul. It is a high-performing system on many common measures. We offer a comprehensive program in academics, arts and athletics. Our student performance measures are among the highest in the state. Hence, the urgency for change may be less immediate here than in other school systems.

However, in an ever-changing world, complacency sows the seeds for decline. Just a few examples – changes in the student population, changes in workforce requirements, changes in technology – illustrate that if we simply continue the status quo, our performance may not keep pace with the world.

If we have programs or systems that are working well, then continuing to support those programs or systems makes sense. Where we can grow and improve our programs or systems – that is where we can focus our change efforts. Given that we cannot focus on an unlimited number of initiatives, we need to focus our efforts on the change initiatives most likely to give us a good return on our investment of time, energy and resources.

One common thread through much of my entry plan discussions has been a sense of what I term "initiative fatigue." Often, this feeling comes about because the school system takes on many disconnected change initiatives that cannot be implemented well. As a result, many change efforts fail to achieve the promised results and the resulting cynicism makes future change increasingly difficult to achieve. What I hope to outline here is a strategy to focus our energy for future changes – a lens, if you will, through which proposed changes will be viewed before implementation begins.

THE GOAL

Before we can begin to talk about change, we need to understand the goal – the end – we have in mind. My simple version reads like this:

Our goal is to ensure that all students acquire the skills and knowledge outlined in our comprehensive, rigorous instructional program.

In other words, we are here to improve student achievement. Offering a comprehensive, rigorous program is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to achieving this goal. We need to maintain a first-rate instructional program that ensures that students who master it are prepared for success in the 21st Century. The instructional program, as I see it, is not simply the academic courses, but encompasses, for example, displaying good character, problem-solving ability, collaboration skills and technological proficiency. It must be continually updated, which means weeding out obsolete elements that are no longer relevant to a 21st Century education. In other words, *what* we teach is critical – after all, doing a marvelous job of teaching the wrong content is not the outcome we want.

A truly premier school system ensures not only that the instructional program is first-rate, but also that all students achieve it. If we are to become a premier school system, our mission must be to "ensure" student success (not "hope" or "inspire" it). A truly premier school system targets success for all students.

MEASURING PROGRESS TOWARD THE GOAL

Given that our "end" is student learning, our progress toward that end needs to be measured in terms of student learning. Some examples of benchmarks that could be used to determine progress toward this goal are as follows (I invite discussion of additional measures or replacements of these suggestions):

- Percentage of student performance at Goal and at Advanced levels on CMT and CAPT
- Percentage of students performing at Basic or below on CMT and CAPT
- Number and percentage of students achieving 3 or higher on AP exams
- Number of students successfully completing a co-curricular program or activity (during school or after school)
- Percentage of students achieving their goals on Individualized Education Plans
- Percentage of students achieving the district standard on district-designed common assessments (meeting district standards on curriculum)
- Percentage of students achieving success in their first year of college
- Number of high school students needing credit recovery to graduate

These are neither precise targets nor an exhaustive list. For example, there is no measure of a student's character development. They also represent data we may not be collecting currently. I bring them forward to lay out the general concept that we measure our success by examining data on student achievement. Determining the exact targets, timelines and measures is beyond the scope of this document. Improved student learning is the goal; everything else is a means to that end.

HOW TO ACHIEVE THE GOAL

Any strategy of improvement is, at its heart, based on a series of "if then" propositions that underlie the work. One may agree or disagree with these "if then" propositions; we may find that they seem correct now but are found to be inaccurate later. For example, we undertake professional development of teachers under the belief that if we improve the skills of teachers, then student learning will improve. Over time, that conditional statement has not always proven to work in practice. There may be a missing link in the chain – that is, something else that needs to occur to get the result one wants. In this case, it may be that the "if then" statement may be modified to state that if we improve the skill sets of teachers and if they change their instructional practices as a result, then student learning will improve. Hence, an improvement strategy is always subject to modification based on results.

The first underlying "if then" in this improvement strategy is this:

If we improve instruction of our rigorous program, that will lead to greater student achievement of it.

Diagram 1 shows this simple relationship.

Diagram 1

Although this relationship sounds obvious, it is not clear that either educators or the general public actually fully believes it. Consider how often individuals will attribute student achievement results to factors other than instruction when asked to interpret results. Societal ills, video games, family background, the internet, home life and so forth are often listed as the primary factors influencing achievement.

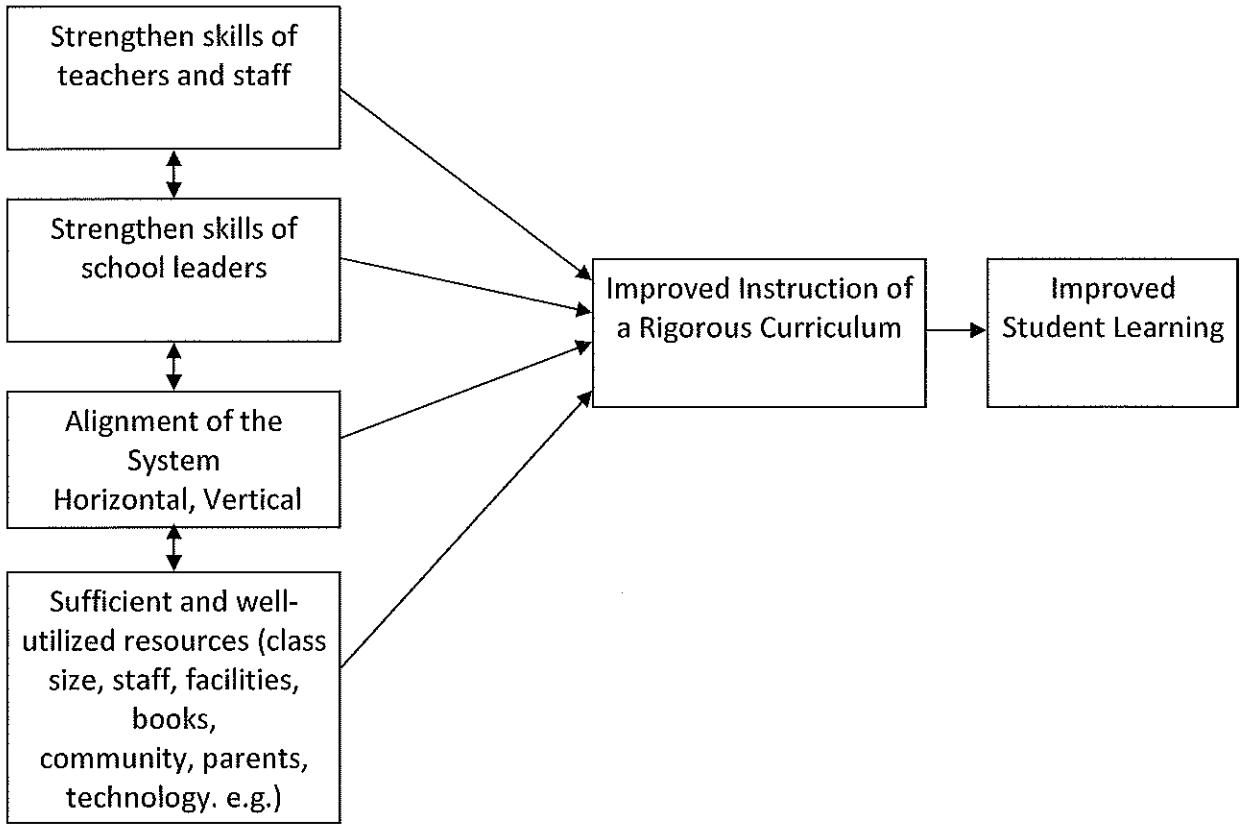
FOUR AREAS OF CONCENTRATION

The next step in building a district improvement strategy is to identify a limited number of focus areas that have the most promise for improving instruction. Every "good idea" can be linked somehow to improved instruction; the issue is which ideas have the greatest promise of showing gains in student learning for the resources we devote to implementing them. In the corporate world, terms such as "return on investment" or "cost-benefit analysis" would apply here. In our case, one of our scarcest resources is time. Money is another scarce resource but time is often more within our control.

Just because something takes little time or few resources does not mean that it is worth doing; similarly, just because something takes a large amount of time or resources does not mean it is not worth doing. It is the expected benefit (in terms of accomplishing our goal) in relationship to the time and resources spent that's important. In other words, where is the best place to commit the time of our staff to get the greatest return in terms of student learning?

I see four broad strands that, were we to concentrate our resources and make significant progress in each of these areas, would pay significant dividends in improving classroom instruction and, therefore, improving student learning. They are Teacher Skills, School Leader Skills, System Alignment and Instructional Resources. Diagram 2 shows the connection.

Diagram 2



The verbal "if then" of this diagram reads like this:

If we improve the skills of teachers and staff, and if we improve the skills of school leaders, and if we have horizontal and vertical alignment of our system and if we have sufficient resources, then instruction will improve and student learning will increase.

One limitation of this graphic is that it does not display the interplay possible between each of the four boxes. Improved skills of school leaders, for instance, often will lead to improved skills of teachers and staff. Certain resources can lead to greater alignment of the system. Improved teacher skills can lead to greater alignment. Think of these four boxes as a connected set of change efforts rather than the discrete boxes that appear on this page.

For each of these areas, I will describe the specific area where there is room for growth; improvement efforts may overlap from one strand to another.

STRENGTHEN TEACHER SKILLS

The most direct route to improved learning is through the continuous development of teacher skills. We have many skilled teachers in Fairfield. Our student achievement results are very good. However, keeping teacher skills current is important because of the changes in the student population and expectations for student learning. Hiring the best and brightest is always a priority, but after hire, teachers need to continuously update their skills. For example, the demographics in Fairfield have changed over the past decade. The English Language Learner population is rising. Colleges and the workplace expect greater skill levels from our graduates than ten years ago. Technology continues to evolve, so teachers need to learn how to use instructional technology to improve student learning.

Another area for growth that relates not only to teacher skills but also to the other three focus areas is the analysis and use of student performance data, in particular by teams of teachers. We can make great strides in pinpointing where we need to improve student learning by looking at student performance data in a collaborative and systematic way. Our teachers need skills in collaboration and data analysis, timely access to meaningful data and the time to do this work well. Moreover, analysis of student performance data should be the driving force for the focus of professional development efforts.

STRENGTHEN SCHOOL LEADER SKILLS

Teachers need support in improving instruction. Principals, assistant principals, headmasters, housemasters and curriculum leaders/liaisons play a critical role in assuring that instruction in each classroom is of the highest possible quality. There are virtually no instances in the literature where a school has made sizeable gains in student achievement without a solid school principal. School leaders provide the balance of support and accountability required to improve instruction.

Principals need a skill set in analyzing and taking action based on student performance data. They need to be able to develop school improvement plans based on student data and work with teams of teachers to enable them to work collaboratively in developing new strategies for improved learning. They also need to be able to articulate a shared vision of what good instruction looks like in the classroom, and they need to be able to give feedback to teachers, collectively and individually, that will encourage teachers to continue effective practices and change ineffective ones. They also need to know how to support teams of teachers as they struggle through this new process; collaboration is a learned skill.

AN ALIGNED SYSTEM

This strand has many components; most of the issues that parents, teachers, principals, Board members and community members mentioned to me fall into this bucket. Words such as "equity," "consistency" and "fairness" were frequently used to describe some elements of the school system. In fact, aligning a system of 17 schools may be the central challenge facing us.

In the educational world, alignment can be thought of in two ways – so-called "horizontal" alignment and "vertical" alignment. Both are important to achieving our goal.

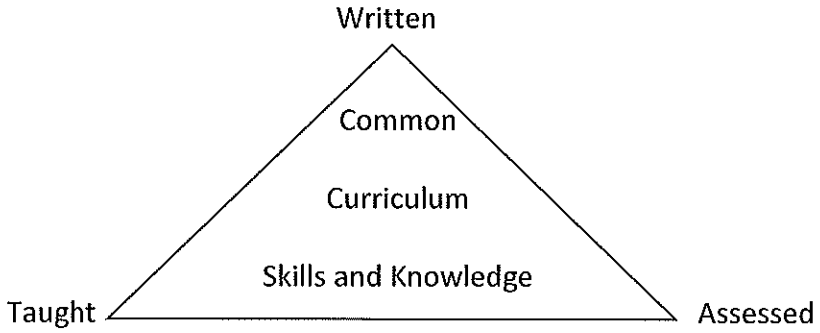
HORIZONTAL ALIGNMENT

This type of alignment means that there is a consistency in the educational program and resources across the same grade level and subject area. We have horizontal alignment when the curriculum being delivered in every second grade classroom across the district is consistent. We cannot expect students to master a rigorous instructional program (that is, our curriculum) if the written curriculum is not, in fact, the taught curriculum and the assessed curriculum. A teacher may be doing a great job of teaching and assessing a curriculum, but if it is not the one approved for that grade level or subject, we do not have alignment.

Alignment of assessment is a growth area for us. Common assessments are a good way to ensure consistent delivery of curriculum without constraining teacher flexibility in how they teach. Assessments must align to the written curriculum and the taught curriculum. Diagram 3 shows this relationship.

Diagram 3

Curriculum Alignment



Horizontal alignment does not require identical teaching techniques or identical resources. Teachers need some latitude in their instructional styles as long as the approved curriculum is being implemented as designed. There are limits to the degree of variability, but consistency does not necessarily mean identical. One downside to a push for horizontal alignment is that it encroaches on some staff members freedom and, as such, can generate a negative reaction those who have been able to "do their own thing" with little thought for how it impacts learning across the school district.

Horizontal alignment can also relate to the equitable distribution of resources. Technology – both hardware and software – would be "Exhibit A" of this issue in Fairfield.

Responsibility for horizontal alignment often falls to district leaders, as it is their job to ensure the implementation of the instructional program system-wide. Principals can assure such alignment within their buildings, but the roles of curriculum leaders and central office leaders fall into this arena. Well-functioning grade level or subject area data teams can also bring about greater horizontal alignment within a school.

VERTICAL ALIGNMENT

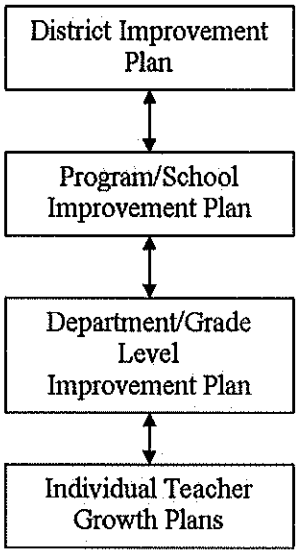
A system that is "vertically" aligned has a consistent program of instruction from grade to grade. There are no gaps in student knowledge from one grade to the next and there is no unnecessary duplication of curriculum. The growth area for Fairfield in this arena appears to be at two transition points – from fifth grade to sixth grade and from eighth grade to ninth grade. Some districts experience an issue from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten but at this point that seems to be less of a concern than the two mentioned above.

The real power of vertical alignment can be seen when improvement efforts at all levels of the system are consistent. For example, when the vision of what good classroom instruction looks like in the eyes of the superintendent, director of curriculum, curriculum leader, principal and teacher is aligned, there is a greater probability of full implementation. When teachers receive "mixed signals" about what effective instruction consists of, one will not get full implementation. For example, a teacher may get advice on instruction from her principal, reading consultant, curriculum leader or Director of Elementary Education. If all of these individuals are not "on the same page," then the teacher is confused.

The same is true of improvement plans in general. In an aligned world, elements of the district's improvement plan are evident in the improvement plans of the schools and in the individual improvement plans of grade levels, departments and teachers. Each of these improvement plans may differ because, if done well, they are based on student performance data specific to that teacher, grade level or school. Working toward a common process of analyzing data at the teacher, grade level, school and district level that leads to an alignment of improvement plans would concentrate our resources throughout the system on the most critical areas.

Diagram 4 shows the vertical alignment of improvement plans. The arrows indicate that information flows in both directions to inform our practice. For example, if "differentiating instruction" is a district-wide improvement strategy, evidence of this practice should be evident throughout the system. Conversely, evidence from the "ground up" – the individual teacher level – can and should inform department/grade level/school strategies.

Diagram 4



RESOURCES

Without a certain level of resources, all of the skills and alignment work may be limited in its effectiveness. Resources can include class size, additional staff to support struggling or advanced learners, books, materials, technology, software, adequate facilities as well as community and parent resources. The relationship between resources and student achievement does hinge on staff trained to use them effectively, hence the emphasis on teacher and school leader skills. Without adequate resources, however, the best-laid plans for improvement may fall flat.

In an era of limited financial resources, we need to assess the "return on investment" of our resources. Again, the "return" needs to be measured in terms of improved student learning as the outcome. With limited dollars, for example, are we better off investing in technology or people? The answer is not obvious nor is the answer always binary. Without the technological resources, for example, to provide teachers and principals with real-time data about student performance, we cannot implement a solid program of student performance data analysis.

A THEME

Concentrating our resources of time, energy and dollars into these four focus areas will yield the greatest impact on student learning. One theme across all four areas is the improved use of student performance data to drive our decision-making. For example:

- Implementing a district- and school-wide protocol in the use of student performance data to improve instruction and target services to children
- Implementing school improvement plans based on student performance data
- Implementing professional development for teachers based on student performance data
- The alignment of district, school, department, grade level and individual teacher objectives/goals based on student performance data

CONCLUSIONS

The school system provides outstanding learning opportunities for students. To ensure that all students master our rigorous curriculum, we need to concentrate our change efforts in the area

that will provide the greatest leverage to improve instruction. I have identified four main "lenses" through which to view our current and any proposed change initiatives.

The district does suffer from a case of "initiative fatigue." Sometimes this condition is caused by the district undertaking so many initiatives that none can be done well; sometimes it is caused by people not being able to understand how the many initiatives underway are tied to a bigger picture for change. I hope through this general framework for district improvement we may be able to tackle both parts of the problem. Change initiatives that do not directly and clearly address improvement in classroom instruction as outlined here can be phased out; at the same time, we can show how the remaining initiatives fit into the bigger structure by tying them directly to one of the four "lenses" outlined in this document.

Generally speaking, fewer change efforts done well are more effective than many change efforts done not as well. Concentrating the scarce resource of time in the areas where the "return" (in terms of student learning) on "investment" (in terms of time) is greatest is critical. Time is scarce because the day-to-day managing of a complex school system takes up a vast amount of teacher, school leader and district leader time. Carving out time to implement change initiatives is an important part of leading, but if the day-to-day managing of school begins to erode, then change efforts will be sidetracked. In addition, some change initiatives are required of the school district due to changes in state or federal law.

Despite these constraints, change is necessary. Before undertaking any new initiative, the decision-makers – whether they are the Board of Education, central office leaders, principals/headmasters, curriculum leaders, teachers – need to demand that the time invested in such an effort will likely have a significant and positive impact on improving instruction and therefore lead to our reaching our goal of ensuring that every student masters the skills and knowledge outlined in our rigorous instructional program.

4

Key Instructional Improvement Initiatives

- Develop and consistently implement School Improvement Plans based on data and research-based practices
- Consistent use of data teams at district, school and grade/dept. levels
- Develop and implement common performance assessments aligned to the Common Core
- Improved intervention strategies for struggling learners including Math Science Resource Teachers, Math Resource Teachers, Language Arts Specialists and workshop classes for high school math students

4

Key Instructional Improvement Initiatives

- Develop and consistently implement updated curriculum aligned to the Common Core and State and National standards on a regular basis
- Update and consistently use texts, materials and technology to support new curriculum and assessments
- Continuous professional learning for all staff members, including Instructional Rounds
- Maintain clean, safe and secure school environments in support of the above initiatives