



**North Middlesex Regional School District  
Entry Plan Findings Report  
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**Introduction**

As I have commenced my work as the Superintendent of Schools for the North Middlesex Regional School District (NMRSD), I have spent a great deal of time learning about the school system, each of its member towns, and the values of various stakeholders. The information I gathered came from observing classrooms and district leaders, attending school events, speaking with staff, students, parents, and community members, in addition to analyzing a wide range of district documents.

Based on data analysis, document reviews, and conversations, I have now identified some next steps that will guide us toward developing goals for the NMRSD. Over the next several months, district staff will begin the collaborative process that will result in the development of a new strategic plan, which will include both objectives and action steps that are specific and measurable. These objectives and action steps will be firmly rooted in maintaining what is working well in the district so that we can build upon these strengths while addressing identified areas for growth in order that our path be one of continuous improvement.

**Background**

Since my arrival in July, I have worked to learn as much as possible about NMRSD and the needs of all of its stakeholders. I have pursued a challenging schedule and participated in a wide range of meetings in order to obtain information critical to the district's continued success and its ability to move forward. The key objective of these meetings was to answer four (4) critical questions:

1. What are the strengths of our school district?
2. What are the biggest challenges that we face?
3. What must we protect (maintain) in our system?
4. What are our biggest opportunities for growth?

These meetings included:

- Regularly scheduled District Leadership Team, Elementary Principal, Secondary Principal, and Assistant Principal Meetings
- Regular meetings with my NMRHS Student Advisory Council
- Regular meetings with my NMRSD Superintendent Advisory Council
- Meetings with key town officials, including Town Managers/Administrators, Police Chiefs, Department of Public Works/Highway Departments, Selectpersons
- Bi-weekly Parent Coffees & Forums
- Individual Meetings with each administrator and school committee member

By meeting with these groups and individuals, I developed an expansive understanding of the district as a whole as well as each of the individual towns and their recent histories.

My entry plan helped me become as prepared as possible to lead effectively in the district. Additionally, my work helped me assess where we are and where we want to go as a district. My entry plan was designed in order to allow me to take the initiative in:

- Learning about key events, issues, and concerns that have influenced the school district with a focus on what is currently working well and how to continue on with that work and also to identify areas that need to be addressed.
- Learning about the norms, values, expectations, and goals of the community.
- Developing detailed objectives with specific priorities and action steps that will guide future work.

These initiatives have been addressed by immersing myself in the daily life of the North Middlesex Regional Schools. I have collected data through a systematic document review (e.g. MCAS results, assessment data, district policies, school handbooks, curriculum materials, etc.), visited classrooms within the district, conducted individual and group interviews with a wide array of district personnel and have hosted several informal coffees and open forums for parents and community members. In addition, I have met with members of the following key community groups as well:

- School Committee
- Selectmen
- Town Managers/Administrators
- Town DPW/Highway Department
- Union Leadership
- Clergy
- Town Recreation Departments
- Parent Organizations (i.e. PTO, Boosters, etc.)

## **Observations**

From the interview process through my first few months as Superintendent, I have been impressed by the passion, commitment, and interest that all of the district's stakeholders possess in the continued development and improvement of the North Middlesex Regional Schools. The fervor and conviction in the schools, coupled with the vision of where the district is now and what it can eventually become, have been evident on a daily basis as well as demonstrated by the community's support of a new high school building and the three accelerated repair projects. There is clear evidence that the educators in the district are committed to the students, and I am excited for the work that lies ahead of us as we strive to be a district that serves as a model to others.

### *Strengths observed:*

- The staff comprising the North Middlesex Regional Schools are talented and committed to student growth and development and hold a "Why not us?" mentality towards improvement. The district has seen an overhaul in curriculum, instruction, and assessment and all have bought into raising the bar for each other in their practice as well as student achievement. Teachers, Counselors, Nurses, Custodians, Food Service Personnel, Office Staff, Support Staff, and Administrators are dedicated and committed to their work, always seeking to improve, and are focused on student learning, social emotional health, and character development.
- The North Middlesex Regional School Committee is a dedicated and knowledgeable group of community members who are fully invested in supporting the development of a school system that benefits all students.
- District and building-based administrators are skilled professionals who embrace a team philosophy and are committed to creating and supporting systems that increase student achievement, growth, safety, and character development.
- Students are engaged in the school environment in a wide variety of ways. This is evident by their participation in before and after-school extra-curricular activities as well as their continual presence as school ambassadors at a variety of community events.

- Parents support our school system in multiple ways, which include but are not limited to participation in parent-teacher organizations, fundraising activities, volunteer work, and a strong presence at school-sponsored athletic, musical, and theatre events.
- Each of our member communities supports the school district's mission and possesses a great deal of pride in all that our district accomplishes.
- Senior citizens are visible in the schools and are committed to working with our youth in a variety of ways; i.e. community read-in, Memorial & Veteran's Day assemblies, etc.
- The district's special education programming is one that works to provide in-house programming within the least-restrictive environment. The programming is one that other districts both tuition students into and seek to model.
- The district's Fine Arts Program provides programming and performance-based opportunities for our students who are highly acclaimed across the region.

I have also learned that while there is a great deal of success in the district, there are also opportunities for growth, which I have placed in the following three (3) categories:

1. Consistency Framework
2. North Middlesex as a "District"
3. Instructional Practice & Meeting the Needs of All Students

These categories are, of course, interrelated; however, they are broken into greater detail individually below. The essential questions that I ask are intended to be a starting point to commence the process of addressing these opportunities for growth as well as the continuous improvement of NMRSD. Please keep in mind that the findings and essential questions do not currently formulate a plan but provide a solid foundation from which our forthcoming strategic plan will emerge.

### **Consistency Framework**

- A culture exists where full participation in administrative meetings was inconsistent.
- In years past, a pattern developed where the chain of command was not always fully adhered to allowing building decisions to rise to the district level without following progressive channels.
- Administration across the district has been inconsistent with student and staff investigations and appropriate notifications.
- Custodians and nurses have shared that, depending on the building in which they work, they are not always seen as members of the "team" and seek acknowledgement for their role in servicing students.

- The district's Extended Learning Program, which was piloted last year, was not something that was supported district-wide from its inception. Although a committee was created, it was a sub-committee that lacked school committee, central office, and high school representation.
- The use of ASPEN as an avenue of communication (primarily grades 7-12) is inconsistent and is based on timely teacher input. Parents have reported that this handicaps them a great deal in being proactive with their children and makes it difficult to support student learning and progress monitoring when ASPEN is inaccurate and not updated. Additionally, some schools within the district direct their staff not to post grades.
- Since arriving in July, it has become apparent that there is a wide array of inconsistencies that have impacted the environment for employees. These include:
  1. Individual contracts are inconsistent with both language and compensation.
  2. The teachers' contract was not followed consistently with regard to approval of personal days, number of planning periods, length of lunch times, numbers of classes, etc.
  3. Some positions in the district completely lack or have either unclear or antiquated job descriptions.
  4. Both building administrators and district office staff have gone without being formally evaluated consistently with targeted feedback.
  5. Many decisions from the district office (i.e. returning paperwork, hiring, etc.) take a very long time. Overall, the response for immediate needs has been good, but routine support lacks follow through.
- Community members feel they do not consistently have a clear picture of events that are taking place within the district and are looking for more transparency and communication.
- Many district policies are outdated. Facility use fees, if issued at all, have been inconsistent and school lunches, where the district is currently close to \$30K in debt, does not follow policy.
- It has been reported that some building principals value data more than others, which has led to inconsistencies when making data-driven decisions, resulting in some of the current issues going unaddressed.
- Adherence to ALICE emergency protocols is inconsistent and not taken seriously across the district.

### *Essential Questions for the NMRSD*

What steps and structures are necessary to create a culture of collaboration and support for the NMRSD administrative team?

How do we work to ensure that the “chain of command” is followed consistently throughout the district so that administrators are empowered in their areas of expertise?

How do we increase parent and community engagement in the improvement of our schools and properly communicate their input and participation?

How can we communicate more effectively and consistently with parents and community members in order to strengthen partnerships and connections?

How can administration, school committee, and collective bargaining units move away from past practices in order to develop more consistent practices in the future?

How do we support our administrators and educators to embrace data and move towards data-driven decision-making?

### **North Middlesex as a “District”**

- Themes have emerged to bring more consistency across the elementary and middle school levels so that there is more of a “district” feel. Currently, each elementary school and both middle schools operate differently from a programmatic and scheduling standpoints. Additionally, there are also differences with the elementary and middle school student handbooks at each school, which are sometimes in conflict with one another.
- The district’s capital improvement plan is looked at annually and updated, but little is done to allocate money to ensure that the district keeps pace with the plan and buildings obtain necessary and equitable attention.
- It has been reported that North Middlesex Regional High School is lacking in public relations and marketing. Students are looking for more displays of student work and more visuals to provide for a more welcoming and personalizing atmosphere. This is often the result of a new building. Students have reported an overall impression that their opinions are not valued. That being said, like other districts, NMRSD is faced with the challenge of losing students from our middle schools to Nashoba Valley Technical High School, Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School, and other charter and private schools. There is a strong belief from people both within the school system and from the general community that the departure of students is partially due to the lack of awareness about the positive features of NMRHS and the assumption that students will come regardless of alternative choices.

- Parents, staff, and students report limited opportunities for students to interact between levels (elementary/middle/high) to see each other in action. Some of these opportunities that currently do exist include:
  1. 8<sup>th</sup>-grade field trips to the high school
  2. Between-level mentoring
  3. High school graduates walking through their elementary schools
  4. District-wide dances/mixers
  5. Future Patriots
  6. Patriots Read
- There is a perception that district schools, various school-based organizations, and town recreation departments compete with each other in offering events that are in direct conflict with one another and that a master calendar of events does not exist.
- As a general rule, there is little awareness among staff, parents, and community stakeholders about the role of the school committee and its members. Meetings are generally not well-attended unless a significant issue (i.e. turf field vote) is on the agenda and highly publicized.
- The district website is viewed as outdated and can be challenging to navigate.
- Town leadership has asked that the budget process needs more transparency. Part of that transparency will be providing drafts of the budget early in the process, providing examples of how the district is saving and making money, and sharing the multiple and positive accomplishments of our students. Additionally, district leadership has shared that budget hearings have been poorly attended by town officials in the past, so transparency is offered. There are currently Joint Board Meetings held to discuss the budget with town officials.

### *Essential Questions for the NMRSD*

How do we create more opportunities for our building leadership to work more efficiently in an effort to create consistent practices and programs at our elementary and middle schools?

How do we create partnerships between school-based and town-based organizations to eliminate the current competition for programming that currently exists?

How can we more effectively market the benefits of attending NMRHS in order to compete with area technical, private, and charter schools?

How do we involve the staff and students at NMRSD in developing a strong culture and creating an environment where everyone's contribution is viewed

as important in attaining our goals and providing schools that everyone wants to be a part of?

### **Instructional Practice & Meeting the Needs of All Students**

- The most prevalent concern raised by teachers across the district is that they are feeling overwhelmed with a variety of current and ongoing initiatives (i.e. curriculum mapping, common assessments, SEL, Intervention Blocks, Data Leadership, new ELA curriculum, etc.), resulting in a lack of time to properly implement what is being asked of teachers. Such operational overextension has led to the perception among teachers of “doing a lot poorly, but little is being done well.” This is compounded by the need for the district’s leadership team to work more collaboratively to not overload teachers. Many teachers view the term “pilot” as a decision to adopt an initiative, practice, or program that a few teachers will implement in the first year and then train their colleagues for full implementation the following year.
- As a district, there are not enough internal supports to deal with ongoing and new initiatives, coaching, data analysis, and educator evaluation. The roles of the Assistant Superintendent and Building Principals cannot adequately support the intricate and individual needs of teachers. As compared to other districts of similar size, we do not have administrator-level coaches, coordinators, or directors to support the expansive needs at each school level.
- Standardized testing data (MCAS, SAT) indicate that student performance has been flat in the areas of mathematics and biology and there are persistent achievement gaps for special education students.
- According to students and parents, the NMRHS schedule is overwhelming for many students. The schedule is made up of 8 classes where students take 5 and drop 3 each day. While it has led to increased flexibility for students who are looking for more electives, the 8 overall classes that students are responsible for at one time are more than the majority of schools across the Commonwealth, where 6 to 7 classes are far more common practice.
- As discussed at parent forums, the Nissitissit and Hawthorne Brook Middle Schools operate on different schedules. Additionally, there are differences in the amount of time students are in “core” class, which has led to transition issues at NMRHS, as well as performance differences on the MCAS.
- As with many other districts, the annual budget is tight in NMRSD leading to staff cuts, class size issues, decreased program opportunities, and the inability to improve curriculum areas and student supports.

*Essential Questions for the NMRSD*

What are the formal structures and practices that exist for the support of ongoing collegiality, collaboration, and reflection to improve student learning?

How can we build instructional leadership capacity to lead the ongoing development of curriculum, teacher supports, and learning environments that maximize growth and instructional practices?

What training and supports are necessary for staff to develop, strengthen, and support professional learning communities within each school?

How can supervision and evaluation be used more effectively to support and develop more skilled educators that will in turn increase student learning?

### **Next Steps**

The North Middlesex Regional School District has many strengths, the most obvious are its wonderful students and committed staff. In order to fully take advantage of these strengths, we must work together to become as sound as possible in the areas of leadership, community, and public relations, our status as a district, the implementation of effective instructional practices to meet the needs of all students, and the establishment of greater consistency of practice across the board. These findings will serve as our foundation moving forward and guide our work with district and school improvement planning, professional development, and budgeting.

During the second half of the school year, I will be working with school committee, administration, staff, students and community members to create a new strategic plan, through a transparent process, to address the aforementioned areas that require our attention. My goal is to bring this plan to school committee for approval in August 2019.

I am truly excited to embark on this exciting endeavor. I would truly like to thank all of the staff, students, community members, town officials, and others who have shared their thoughts and offered me advice throughout this process. I truly believe that the North Middlesex Regional School District can, through continued commitment and teamwork from all stakeholders, become a model, not just for regional districts, but for all districts across the Commonwealth.