

INTRODUCTION

Rogers Public Schools (RPS) is at a pivotal point in its development. Student enrollment is growing rapidly and the student population is becoming increasingly diverse, a trend that contributes new perspectives, energy, and opportunities for cross-cultural learning. Student achievement at the elementary level, as measured by test scores, is higher than state and national averages, and the district is home to a number of students who have won many academic, athletic, and fine arts awards. The district also boasts a committed and caring staff that includes National Board Certified teachers, outstanding school facilities, and a supportive community.

The district is not, however, content to rest on these positive attributes. Rogers has long recognized the importance of continuous self-evaluation and improvement; the rapid enrollment growth and increasing student diversity—which, in addition to the benefits, taxes the district’s resources and requires educators to adapt instructional strategies—as well as encouragement from parents, business leaders, and civic leaders, have motivated the district to aspire to be not just a good school district, but a great one.

To help RPS move from “good to great,” the Rogers Development Foundation and district leadership in January 2006 hired Cross & Jofus, LLC, to conduct a needs analysis for the district and facilitate the development of a strategic plan. The result is the draft strategic plan presented below, which was developed by a strategic planning team of 13 individuals, including Rogers teachers, principals, district administrators, a board member, and civic and business leaders (see the section Strategic Planning Team for a listing of team members). This plan is presented to the Rogers school board and community for their consideration.

While it is the responsibility of the board to finalize any plan for guiding the system, the strategic planning team hopes that this draft plan will be considered seriously. It is based on a careful analysis of the district’s needs that was conducted with the assistance of teachers, administrators, parents, and community members from across Rogers School District. It is intended to guide the school system in its efforts to increase student achievement, close achievement gaps, and prepare all students for college and/or successful careers by improving the quality of its schools to world-class levels.

There is no question that RPS can accomplish this goal. To succeed, the district will need several key strategies. Mining and using the knowledge already existing in the system will be critical. So too will be a widespread conviction that the system can always improve, together with the capacity and will to put processes in place that will make improvement happen.

Achieving success will be far from easy. True systemic reform is back-breaking work that requires the support of the entire community—and the understanding that because implementation is an ongoing process improved student outcomes are several years away.

We believe, however, that RPS has the passionate and committed educators and the support from the community to be successful.

The plan begins with an outline of the guiding principles we used in developing the overarching goal and strategies for whole school and system improvement. The plan then details the goal and objectives for the school system as well as the strategies and action steps that should be implemented to meet the objectives.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR WHOLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Before drafting goals and strategies, the strategic planning team believed it was essential to define our philosophy about whole school improvement. After reviewing research and the plans of some of the most successful districts in the country, the strategic planning team began our work by establishing guiding principles for whole school improvement from which specific goals and strategies could be derived. We believe that these principles capture our philosophy for how schools and the school district should work to ensure that all students achieve at world-class levels. Although numbered below, these principles carry equal weight; all were considered when developing the goals and strategies, and we hope that all will guide implementation of the strategies outlined in the next section of this plan.

1) Focus on literacy, math, and science.

While all academic subjects are important for the full development of students, literacy, mathematics, and science are recognized as the essential building blocks that every student must master to succeed in school and life. The literacy skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) along with the mathematical skills (computation, reasoning, and problem solving) are the basic tools needed across disciplines and are critical for preparing students to succeed in any endeavor. In our technology-driven world, science has come to be recognized as equally important in preparing students for success. As a result, the district and each school will focus their instructional efforts on improving the literacy, math, and science skills of students in all grades.

Accordingly, district leadership will be expected to establish and implement high standards for literacy, math, and science at every grade level. District leadership will also be expected to provide to schools necessary resources and supports in the form of highly qualified staff, high-quality professional development, timely and meaningful data about student outcomes, instructional materials, facilities, and time for instruction and collaboration among teachers.

2) Use student work and data to identify student needs, improve instruction, and assess progress.

Continuous review of student work is essential both for assessing individual student achievement and progress and for evaluating the effectiveness of instruction and instructional programs and supports. Consequently, the district must help educators

utilize student results from state and local assessments as well as formative assessments and classroom assignments developed by individual teachers. To do so, the district must ensure that there are: (1) high-quality student assessments aligned with standards and curricula; and (2) a system that collects and provides relevant assessment data that are valid and reliable, provided in a timely manner, and easily accessed and understood by users.

In addition, the district must work with schools to train instructional staff in the use of assessment data and student portfolios to monitor student progress, assess the effectiveness of teaching strategies and instructional programs, and plan for remediation or enrichments. Teachers and principals must have time to collaborate to examine the quality of student work as it relates to standards and to discuss instructional strategies that are most successful in improving student performance.

3) Focus professional development to improve instruction.

The district and its schools must be true learning communities where both students and staff learn and grow together. It is imperative that educators have the opportunity to continue to learn new knowledge, skills, and strategies throughout their professional careers, as is the norm in other professions.

The Rogers School District will provide high-quality professional development focused on teaching and learning to all instructional staff. Teachers and principals will have significant input into the content and delivery of both district and school professional development, but the professional development program shall be coordinated through a lead central office position. The professional development provided will be research based, job specific, relevant, and based at the school or classroom. Such professional development cannot be provided during a few days scattered throughout a school year, but must be ongoing throughout the year. The district must provide the time and other resources needed for the activities and support to be meaningful and effective.

The district must also provide specific professional development for district level instructional leaders and principals so that they have the tools they need to lead school-based professional development activities and provide the necessary follow-up with teachers to ensure that new skills and strategies are taking hold in classrooms.

4) Identify and replicate best practices for instruction.

To provide the most effective instruction, RPS will need to identify best instructional practices in use both within its borders and in other districts. The identification of these successful practices will be accomplished using both qualitative data (classroom observations based on established protocols) and quantitative data (results from both local and state assessments). In addition, the district will undertake a review of research and professional literature to identify other instructional practices that are demonstrating success in improving student achievement in classrooms throughout the nation.

While the identification of best practices is critical, the district must also put in place a plan to ensure that these practices are replicated in classrooms. The district will provide high-quality professional development activities to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to implement the practices. In addition, instructional leaders at all levels will be trained in these practices to assist classroom teachers in implementing them. Common planning time, collaboration, classroom observations, peer observations, model teaching, and systemic follow up will all become part of regular district practice.

5) Prioritize the instructional focus when allocating resources.

The Rogers School District has chosen to undertake a plan to dramatically improve academic achievement for all students and to close achievement gaps between groups of students. The district has taken on this challenging task during a time when resources are limited. Therefore, it is imperative that the district purposefully direct all available resources to its instructional focus. Board, district, and school decisions regarding resources must be made in light of how those decisions will affect instruction and student achievement.

The primary resources of staff, budget, and time are significant drivers of positive school change. The district and each school will include in their plans for improvement the effective use of these resources to meet the instructional focus. The district will undertake steps to ensure that each school has adequate resources and will work to maintain and protect these resources. Schools will be expected to utilize these resources in a way that directly and most effectively affects student achievement. District and school leadership will be trained in best practices regarding resource utilization and will develop assessment tools to determine the effectiveness of resource planning and usage on student achievement. District leadership will make ongoing recommendations and reports to the Board regarding resource needs and utilization.

6) Maintain safe and orderly environments conducive to learning.

A primary concern for parents and communities across the nation is that their children attend safe and orderly schools. The Rogers School District has established such an environment and is committed to maintaining it in every school. The district will continue to provide instructional strategies, along with activities both in and out of the classroom, that develop trusting, respectful, caring relationships among staff, students, and parents. The district will initiate ongoing two-way communication with parents regarding the importance of their support in establishing positive relationships between home and school. The district will also collaborate with community partners to provide resources and support in ensuring that every student attends a school where he/she feels safe and secure and well cared for.

The district and each school will include in their improvement plans strategies to monitor and respond to issues and/or events that threaten the positive environment that has been established. The focus of the district is to create an environment that prevents children

from falling between the cracks and that fosters a sense of security, caring, and belonging among every adult and child in every school.

7) Engage families, community, and partners to support whole school improvement.

School districts do not operate in isolation but must build close relationships with families and communities to ensure that every student receives an education that allows him or her to develop fully. The social and economic vitality of communities is dependent on the quality of education provided to all children, but the responsibility for raising and educating a community's children does not rest with the schools alone. Therefore, the Rogers School District will actively engage all segments of the Rogers community in providing for the needs—academic and non-academic—of all students.

The Rogers community has embraced the goal of collaborating to provide a high-quality learning experience for every student. The district and each school must be particularly proactive and creative in reaching out to parents to engage them in their children's education. The district will also reach out to engage community leaders from business, government, service organizations, religious institutions, and institutions of higher learning to develop partnerships to provide for the development and care of all students. Finally, the district will create opportunities for parents and the community to have meaningful participation in the life of the district and each school.

8) Value racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity.

A highly desirable place to live, work, and raise a family, the Rogers School District and the community it serves are increasing in size and diversity. Growth and diversity bring opportunities, rewards, and challenges to the district as it focuses on ensuring that every student achieves at proficiency or above. The district and its schools will embrace and celebrate the racial, ethnic, and cultural mix of the community's families and students. Strategies will be in place to build a district that values inclusiveness, where all students feel they belong and are respected. The district and schools will reach out to all segments of the community and provide a welcoming environment that encourages all stakeholders to quickly become participating members. Strong community partnerships will be established to help the district meet this guiding principle.

The district will develop strategies to address the academic and social needs of all students so that no achievement gaps exist between any groups. Specific programs and resources will be established in schools to ensure that this happens. Particular attention will be focused on students whose language is other than English and students who are economically disadvantaged. All programs, academic and extracurricular, will take steps to ensure that all interested students are encouraged to participate.

GOAL, OBJECTIVES, AND STRATEGIES FOR WHOLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The vision driving our work was that Rogers Public Schools become one of the best districts in the country. To meet this vision, RPS needs to meet one goal:

All students meet high academic expectations and graduate from high school prepared for college and/or successful careers.

To achieve this goal, Rogers Public Schools will need to meet the following four objectives:

- 1) The district and schools deliver a coherent and rigorous educational program.
- 2) The district and schools build instructional capacity through high-quality teachers and leadership.
- 3) The district supports schools in providing positive and engaging learning environments.
- 4) The district and schools operate efficiently.

~~The strategic planning team developed a number of broad strategies that will help the~~ district and its schools meet each objective. For each strategy, we included at least one concrete “action step” that should be implemented. These action steps are a means to provide sufficient detail to the strategies so they can give direction to administrators and educators during the implementation process. The action steps should be considered neither optional nor comprehensive. Rather, they should be considered as starting points and guides as the district develops action plans—complete with timelines, budgets, and assigned responsibilities—which will likely include additional action steps for each strategy.

Objective 1: The district and schools deliver a coherent and rigorous educational program.

- 1) Measure progress toward meeting this objective. Indicators should include:
 - a) Disaggregated results from local and state assessments,
 - b) Disaggregated results from teachers’ formative assessments and grades,
 - c) Value-added assessment results,
 - d) Disaggregated graduation rates,

- e) Disaggregated percentage of students accepted by accredited colleges or universities,
 - f) Percentage of students taking remediation courses in college or university,
 - g) Percentage of students graduating from college or university,
 - h) Curricular and instructional audit,
 - i) Disaggregated percentage of students participating in selected classes and programs,
 - j) Disaggregated percentage of students taking rigorous courses, and
 - k) Disaggregated percentage of students passing and excelling in rigorous courses.
- 2) Align the district's standards, curriculum, pacing guides, assessments, professional development, and instruction. Action steps include:
- a) Conduct a curriculum and instructional audit.
 - b) Conduct a thorough audit of assessments to determine whether locally developed instruments combined with the state-mandated assessments are measuring what is taught, the degree to which they are aligned to one another, and whether some tests could be eliminated because of redundancy or irrelevance.
 - c) Ensure that every teacher in grades K-5 routinely assesses and tracks the reading, math, and science achievement levels of every student and has a plan for improvement.
 - d) Urge the state to administer a single augmented assessment and to report data in a timely way.
- 3) Make explicit and public a plan for systemic education reform to improve student outcomes and school quality. Action steps include:
- a) Convene a team of district and school leaders.
 - b) Describe clearly and in multiple ways the district's and schools' current levels of student achievement and the plan for improvement.
 - c) Monitor the implementation and effectiveness of the plan. Evaluation efforts should include benchmarking the processes of other effective districts across the country.

- 4) Plan the strategies and identify the resources to begin work on the development of district standards, goals, objectives, performance indicators, and sample classroom strategies for listening, understanding, speaking, reading, and writing ESL by grade and by English proficiency levels. Action steps include:
 - a) Urge the state to advance its timeline for development of a new test to assess English language proficiency. In the absence of the state's development of a new test, work with the Arkansas Department of Education and legislators to allow Rogers to use its own assessment. In addition, work with the state to modify the process of administering portfolio assessments so that they can be used for instructional purposes.
 - b) Conduct an evaluation of the district's ELL content standards and curriculum.
 - c) Develop the capacity to conduct testing in Spanish and other languages to identify students who need to receive special education services or who qualify for gifted and talented programs. Review the process and assessments used in the district to determine whether they reflect the best and most current practices.
 - d) Review the exit criteria for the ELL program to ensure that the key element considered in determining whether the student continues to be categorized as ELL is his or her English proficiency.
- 5) Structure the central office to support the district's goals of improving the quality of schools, implementing a managed-instruction theory of action, and increasing student achievement.
 - a) Ensure that senior central office staff have the knowledge, skills, and credibility with principals and teachers to lead school improvement efforts.
 - b) Review the roles and responsibilities of the curriculum specialist, assistant superintendent, and deputy superintendent positions to improve student performance and school quality.
 - c) Put in place systems and staff who focus on and have the requisite skills to improve communications among the central office and schools.
 - d) Ensure that the district's leadership team has ongoing, focused planning sessions in which it discusses district-wide issues such as curriculum and instruction, school improvement, budget, staffing, facility needs, communication, and other strategic issues. The team should include principal and director-level representation and should model an

atmosphere of collaboration and joint decision-making based on high-quality data.

Objective 2: The district and schools build instructional capacity through high-quality teachers and leadership.

- 6) Measure progress toward meeting this objective. Indicators should include:
 - a) Percentage of instructional staff generating at least one year of student academic growth as measured by value-added assessment,
 - b) Percentage of instructional and administrative staff earning outstanding ratings on peer and supervisor reviews,
 - c) Rating of professional development by teachers and principal,
 - d) Percentage of staff representing minority groups, and
 - e) Observational protocol administered by principals and district administrators.
- 7) Expand efforts to recruit and retain a highly qualified, more diverse instructional and administrative staff. Action steps include:
 - a) Remove barriers to hiring high-quality teaching candidates in a timely manner.
 - b) Recruit outside the state for hard-to-fill positions.
 - c) Assign central office responsibility and develop a plan for enhancing the mentoring program for new teachers.
 - d) Offer incentives to highly effective teachers to teach in hard-to-fill positions.
 - e) Ensure that the diversity of the student population is adequately reflected in the teaching force.
- 8) With significant input from teachers and principals, restructure the district's professional development plan to focus on improving the quality of instruction and delivery of curriculum. Professional development should be tied to academics and curriculum, focused on school and district goals, based at the schools, built on real-time collaboration, conducted regularly, and evaluated regularly. Action steps include:

- a) Identify and convene a working group of district administrators, principals, and teachers.
 - b) Analyze student outcome data, strengths and weaknesses of current professional development, and best practices in professional development in other districts.
 - c) Develop a professional development plan as part of the education plan (see strategy #3).
 - d) Evaluate the effectiveness of professional development and make changes as appropriate.
- 9) Build the skills of and provide support for instructional staff in meeting the needs of ELL students. Action steps include:
- a) Using strategies from other high-performing districts and support from an external consultant, develop and provide targeted training for general education teachers and administrators to provide them with tools and strategies to help meet the needs of ELL students.
 - b) Identify and invest in resource people—language specialists, literacy coaches, assessment experts, counselors, and social workers—to support all teachers in serving ELL students.
 - c) Develop an aggressive recruitment and hiring plan that includes increasing the number of teachers with ESL endorsements and the number of bilingual personnel at all levels of education.
- 10) Develop staff (teacher, principal, and central office administrators) evaluation procedures using value-added assessment and peer review as well as a differentiated salary and career advancement policy that provide for both accountability and incentives for the improvement of student achievement. Action steps include:
- a) Identify a reform model.
 - b) Implement and evaluate the effectiveness of the model.
- 11) Identify, enhance, and distribute leadership at all levels of the district (central office, building, and classroom). Action steps include:
- a) Identify highly effective teachers, principals, and district administrators.

- b) Recruit highly effective teachers, principals, and district administrators to serve in various roles—mentors, trainers, participants in developing improvement plans, monitors of plans—in the improvement process.
- c) Include in the professional development plan, strategies for developing other leaders.

Objective 3: The district supports schools in providing positive and engaging learning environments.

12) Measure progress toward meeting this objective. Indicators should include:

- a) School reports,
- b) Student and parent surveys, and
- c) Observational protocol administered by principals and district administrators.

13) Actively involve families, community and political leaders, and service organizations to help support district goals. Action steps include:

- a) Solicit ideas and needs from all key stakeholders.
- b) Develop an engagement plan.
- c) Evaluate the plan.

14) Remove barriers to student learning. Action steps include:

- a) Eliminate lost instructional time.
- b) Develop methods to minimize internal and external mobility issues affecting student achievement.
- c) Focus support programs and services to ensure that all students are achieving at proficient or advanced levels as measured on assessments.
- d) Use time after school, before school, and in the summer to augment regular school programs, especially for those students with the greatest needs.
- e) Ensure students understand the relevance of academic material.

15) Focus on improving performance at the secondary level. Action steps include:

- a) Reevaluate the allocation of time, including that spent on core academic subjects, in secondary schools.
 - b) Focus course offerings in the high school on key subjects by eliminating those that have marginal enrollments and are not central to the curriculum.
 - c) Foster relationships between students and adults in schools.
- 16) Create options for high school student assignment in addition to the drawing of boundary lines between the new and current high schools that will ensure demographic diversity. Action steps include:
- a) Convene a team of district, school, and community leaders to research options for providing students and parents choice of high schools and to make recommendations for implementation that take into account school quality, student and parent interests, and equity.
 - b) Implement choice provisions.
 - c) Monitor implementation to ensure that all schools maintain high levels of quality, meet student and parent interests, and ensure equity and fairness for all.
- 17) Create options for differentiating high schools to provide expanded choice and unique working opportunities with higher education or other partners. Action steps include:
- a) Convene a team of district, school, and community leaders to research and recommend ways to differentiate high schools to meet a variety of student and parent interests and to create partnerships that provide support and distinction.
 - b) Implement recommendations.
 - c) Monitor implementation to ensure quality and student and parent satisfaction.
- 18) Develop and implement a plan and strategies to send a strong message throughout the district and community that the district values ELL students' cultures and languages. Action steps include:
- a) Add a bilingual central office staff person who is fluent in Spanish, has a strong understanding of Latino culture, and sets community expectations for Hispanic family engagement.

- b) Provide support to schools in preparing communication materials for parents to ensure correct and appropriate word use and grammar in other languages, particularly Spanish.

Objective 4: The district and schools operate efficiently.

19) Measure progress toward meeting this objective. Indicators should include:

- a) Central office staff, principal, and teacher surveys,
- b) Parent and student surveys,
- c) Periodic management reviews, and
- d) Program evaluations.

20) Use the strategic plan and data to make future Board policy decisions and supervise district functioning. Action steps include:

- a) Make strategic Board decisions that focus all district resources and systems on the improvement of student achievement.
- b) Create administrative tools to report on the effectiveness of all education programs and make regular reports to the Board.
- c) Target low-performing schools with needed resources.

21) Regularly engage local, state, and federal officials so that they become better informed about and supportive of RPS. Action steps include:

- a) Co-sponsor with the mayor and business leaders a community summit focused on serving all students and engaging all families.
- b) Develop a plan for ongoing meetings with community and political leaders at all levels.

22) Assess the Board's performance—including how meetings are held, how it receives information and discusses policy, and how decisions are made—relative to strategic goals. Action steps include:

- a) Identify organization to help conduct assessment.

23) Identify and secure new resources from local, state, and federal governments as well as corporations and foundations that can be used strategically to increase student achievement. Action steps include:

- a) Estimate the cost of strategies in strategic plan.
 - b) Prioritize implementation of strategies.
 - c) Seek funding from entities likely to support prioritized strategies.
- 24) Develop a high-quality research, evaluation, and assessment system that would provide for the evaluation of programs, development of local tests, reporting of data, and training of school staff in using data to improve instruction. Action steps include:
- a) Determine whether district needs can best be met by hiring staff or contracting with a third party.
- 25) Create transparency in budgeting. Action steps include:
- a) Develop and communicate clear policies about how resources are allocated and who is accountable for expenditures at the central office and school level.
 - b) Provide training to principals and district staff on how to access and analyze fiscal data.
- 26) Ensure that funds are used in ways that have the greatest possible impact on student achievement. Action steps include:
- a) Compare per-pupil investments and student outcomes across schools and by student population and program in order to more efficiently and strategically deploy resources.
 - b) Optimize transportation to reduce costs. Options include staggering the start times of elementary schools, defining walk zones, and asking students to “opt in” to transportation.
- 27) Develop a comprehensive facilities plan for the next decade with input from the community. Action steps include:
- a) Develop an enrollment projection for the next decade that includes estimates for ELL and low-income students.
 - b) Review and improve the way in which the department of buildings and grounds responds to requests from schools for repair and maintenance.
- 28) Enhance the efficiency of human resource management. Action steps include:
- a) Consolidate HR duties in the HR department.

- b) Include senior staff in the budget decision-making process.
 - c) Review, update, and develop job descriptions for all district positions.
- 29) Revise the district technology plan, with supporting policies, guidelines, and job descriptions that leverages technology as a tool for instruction, collecting and reporting data, communicating, and using computers and various applications throughout the curriculum in support of student learning. Action steps include:
- a) Investigate the need for and responsibilities of a chief information officer and support staff.
 - b) Take advantage of significant expertise in the local business community to ensure that technology investments are the best available.
 - c) Conduct a review of existing technology infrastructure and equipment in the district to examine stability, connectivity of schools, access to data, speed, and interoperability and to advise the district about future configuration options and staffing needs.
 - d) Convene a technology plan implementation group, including content experts, to guide decision-making and provide support to the CIO. Explore and implement ways to allow increased access and flexibility to the district's system while maintaining a reasonable level of security.
 - e) Identify and implement, as appropriate, examples of successful technology plans and approaches in districts with similar needs as well as from national organizations.
 - f) Transition from using locally developed software to using generally accepted, commercially available software, as appropriate.

STRATEGIC PLANNING TEAM

The following members of the Rogers community contributed hours of their time, talent, and energy in developing this strategic plan.

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