

To: Superintendent Chang
From: Excel High School Local Stakeholder Group (LSG)
Date: December 9, 2016

Attached to this memo is a list of recommendations that emerged from our research, from our community forums and other sources of input, and from our conversations. We believe that these recommendations will provide helpful guidance as you and your team develop a Turnaround Plan for Excel High. The LSG met on five occasions:

- Wednesday, October 26, 2:30 – 5:00pm
- Wednesday, November 9, 5:30 – 7:30pm
- Wednesday, November 16, 2:30 – 5:00pm
- Monday, November 21, 4:00 – 6:30pm
- Monday, November 28, 4:00 – 6:30pm

During our second and fourth meetings, we specifically invited parents, staff, and community members to share their perspective on the school. Additionally, all the meetings had some kind of participation from community members, students, and/or faculty above and beyond the voices on the LSG. During our deliberations, we reviewed school data, perception surveys, and a recent Monitoring Site Visit report conducted by AIR.

One of the strengths of Excel that came through from these meetings is the inclusive atmosphere of Excel and the positive relationships between the faculty and their students. Some of the most compelling testimony we heard came from current and former students who spoke eloquently and forcefully about this important aspect of their school. This attribute was supported by the recent AIR Monitoring Site Visit report that is referenced above. The AIR observers visited 22 classrooms using a standardized protocol (CLASS) to examine classroom instruction through three lenses: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. Observers noted an absence of a negative climate as well as strong indicators of a positive climate and teacher sensitivity. A deep concern raised by the LSG was the loss of this positive asset as an unintended consequence of the timing of the Turnaround Plan. This concern is related to the communication about the excessing of teachers on February 1, 2017 if the Turnaround Plan is not determined and finalized by that time. If this occurs, the LSG worries that some of the most expert and committed teachers who currently are part of the faculty will leave because of the uncertain nature of the jobs that might exist within the turnaround environment. This job uncertainty may very well result in a loss of institutional knowledge and accumulated expertise. Additionally, there is further concern that many of the new faculty will be professionals who are new to teaching and counseling and this will cause a major disruption for students and a potential loss of one of the strengths of Excel -- its committed and knowledgeable faculty. As you craft a Turnaround Plan, it is the LSG's **most important recommendation** that you do everything possible to accelerate the creation of this plan and its accompanying need for negotiations so that as early as possible in 2017, faculty will be aware of their status and the potential openings so that the school can maximize the opportunity to retain experienced and dedicated teachers and not lose this important asset to the transition. The LSG believes that this will benefit students greatly.

Based on what we have learned from our deliberations in combination with our own areas of expertise, we crafted the recommendations found below. We look forward to seeing the Turnaround Plan and offer you our continued support for this important endeavor.

Sincerely,

Susan Berglund, ESE's Office of District & School Turnaround
Marcus Walker, Teacher at Excel High School
Rajeeve Martyn, Teacher at Excel High School
Damara Ried, Administrator of Student Life at Excel High School
John Baker, Parent of Excel Student
Heather Kough, Educator for Health Resource Center
Philomena Asante, Boston Public Health Commission
Roselys Esteve, Private Industry Council
Ayele Shakur, BUILD Boston
Jack Leonard, University of Massachusetts, Boston
Ron Walker, Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color
Regina Robinson, Boston School Committee Member

Excel High School Level 4 Local Stakeholder Group Recommendations

I. Strengthen School Climate and Community

- a) *In the spirit of transformation and innovation, create small learning communities within the school that support vibrant teacher student relationships and the personalization of instruction.*
- b) *With a representative design team, develop a **signature** that distinguishes Excel from a traditional high school.* The LSG discussed two important potential ideas for a *signature* to increase the attractiveness of Excel while enhancing its climate and culture:
 - 1. *Capitalize on potential partners in the nearby Boston Innovation District¹ and with UMASS Boston to shape an early college high school that focuses on developing design thinking, science, entrepreneurship, technology, and the arts.*
 - 2. *Given the school's historical context and its future aspirations, create a school wide, interdisciplinary, project based focus on Facing History² and the study of race, class, segregation, and civic engagement.*
- c) *Change the name of the school to include the words³: South Boston High School. The LSG believes that the name of the school should honor the past history of the school and illuminate its new direction.*
- d) *Breathe life into the school's mission statement so that the words reflect how members of the school community work and learn together.*
- e) *Improve 9th Grade Orientation:* Efforts should be aimed at cultivating school pride in the 9th graders coming into the school. For many, Excel is not a school they have chosen to attend, but where they've been assigned (see I.b above). There needs to be an orientation that is not only academic-focused, but also aimed at building morale for the grade.
 - i. The staff needs to engage students at the 9th grade level and give them a sense of empowerment coming in, knowing what to expect and what is expected of them. Orientation should begin in the summer and continue throughout the year.

¹ Boston Innovation District is a city-sponsored hub on the South Boston waterfront, which is home to a variety of startups, technology and bio-science organizations, and other entrepreneurial ventures

² <https://www.facinghistory.org/>

³ Additional words might be part of the name of the school, e.g., South Boston High School for Civic Engagement

II. Strengthen student voice and choice

a) *Strengthen student leadership.*

- i. Teachers and administration need to engage with students and student leadership in a serious way. There are many great student leaders at Excel – engaging with them and making them feel like what they say matters is an important building block in turning the school around.
- ii. Develop a mechanism to have regular conversations with the students during the school day. Students need a chance to speak AND to have what they say considered in decision-making. Currently, *Excel Time* is a model of this kind of student advisory that could be a foundation for future work in this area.
- iii. Create internal *internships that allow students to provide important services to the school community.*
- iv. Plan regular meetings throughout the year where student leaders can review student/school culture data and other forms of input about the impact of leadership on the school community with the Headmaster. These exchanges should be part of the data that is considered within the evaluation of the Headmaster.

b) *Expand options and choices available to students.*

- i. The LSG discussed how too often “student choice” was not honored due to schedule limitations (see VI.b)
- ii. Expand opportunities for students to engage in after school options around the arts, JROTC, and sports.

III. Increase Opportunities to Strengthen Teacher Voice and Influence in the School

a) *Activate teacher leadership and increase opportunities for teacher voice to influence school decisions.*

- i. Develop a Teacher Leadership Team, elected by the faculty that gives expression for authentic teacher voice and decision making in shaping operational plans for the school.
 - Provide more opportunities for teacher input into program development, instructional decisions, and school design issues. When teachers feel safe to bring up their opinions around student placement and strategic approaches to student learning gaps, better decisions are often the outcome. Additionally, easy access to full grade (e.g., all 9th graders) data patterns as well as access to effective approaches that have been used in the past

for certain patterns of underachievement would support teacher developed strategies.

- ii. Plan regular meetings throughout the year where faculty, administration, and a third party can review school culture data and other forms of input about the impact of leadership on the faculty. These exchanges should be part of the data that is considered within the evaluation of the Headmaster.
- b) *Optimize Structures for Collaboration and Creativity*: Create more deliberate structures built into the school for intra- and interdisciplinary collaboration. For example, a science teacher is helping with a photography project, but it requires much extra work/and after school hours and is not part of the regular school day.
- c) *Increase and Maximize Planning Time*: There is a desire for more student support and interdisciplinary learning, but there needs to be more time allowed for teachers to work together.
- i. Currently, the teachers have a 49-minute planning/grading period. They are strapped for time, which hinders their ability to be innovative with lesson and project planning.
 - ii. There is a need for longer prep periods and more flexibility about who they get to meet with during collaboration opportunities.
 - iii. There is common planning time for departments that occurs twice a week (49-minute blocks). But that common planning time is often taken up by different initiatives and tasks that the administration wants teachers to focus on, usually oriented around test scores, as opposed to collaboration on initiatives that teachers value.
- d) *Improve Professional Development*: More professional development is needed for teachers. There is professional development that happens once a month for teachers, but they don't receive explicit training on things like using ASPEN, which has a great deal of utility. Lack of training becomes an impediment to taking initiative for more innovative teaching. Also, the PD is delivered in a *one size fits all* approach.

IV. Strengthen Parental Relations, Increase Parent Involvement, and Provide Parent Education

- a) *Expand opportunities for parent education and parent leadership*:
- Develop a parent web page.
 - Access the potential of social media to engage parents.
 - Strengthen the role of the current *Parent Council* and provide multiple opportunities for parent influence.
 - Learn what other high schools do to actively involve parents in the life of a high school.

- b) *Plan regular meetings throughout the year where parents can review school/parent culture data and other forms of input about the impact of leadership on the school community.* These exchanges should be part of the data that is considered within the evaluation of the Headmaster.
- c) *Communicate Effectively with Parents about Meetings:*
 - i. Use translators for all the languages spoken at the school and in students' homes. There are many translators available, but they aren't always used. Robo-calls and emails to parents are often only in English.
 - ii. Expand the time frame for notifications about the meetings. There needs to be time for messages to be translated, and then reminder emails sent.
- b) *Provide Multiple Options for Engagement:* Provide several options for parents to attend meetings at different times and possibly in a more central Boston location.
- c) *Offer Transportation to Excel High:* Public transportation is not great to get to South Boston. The students are coming from many different places around Boston. It is a struggle in BPS high schools all around; part of it is about how BPS does enrollment.
- d) *Take into consideration that for some parents, South Boston's racial history and stigma for black students and parents may inhibit engagement.* Work needs to be done to welcome parents and assure them that their perspectives and concerns matter.

V. Strengthen Community Engagement

- a) *Hire a Partner Coordinator.*
- b) *Rekindle the partnership with UMASS Boston* and develop Excel into an early college high school. (see I.b.1)
- c) *Provide a Feeder School Option* that would set aside a certain percentage of seats (20%) for students who attend current K-8 South Boston schools. In 9th grade, some students leave for private schools when they could have the chance for a great education at Excel.
 - i. Feeder school option could reduce crowding
 - ii. It is also a means to strengthen and rekindle community engagement in the school
- d) *Use South Boston Media* (newspapers, local cable, etc.) to promulgate school news and happenings.
- e) *Expand and capitalize on Internships/Partnerships:*
 - i. Expand the use of resources from surrounding colleges and college students in the Boston area. More college students could serve as tutors after school.
 - ii. Take advantage of the job opportunities/internal internships that are possible from nearby organizations and companies.

- iii. Create internal internships so that student expertise and energy can be tapped. (see II.a.iii above)

VI. Address Physical, Spatial, and Organization Factors that Impact School Climate

- a) *Upgrade and Fix Computers and Technology*: A big impediment is the lack of working technology and professional development for teachers to know how to use these technologies. Students also do not have consistent access to good working technology.
 - i. There are programs and activities that could be incorporated into teaching and learning but it is very difficult to do so. For example, there are “smart boards” in classrooms, but not the software that comes with them that allows for full functionality.
 - ii. Students and teachers need to have access to computers and Wi-Fi. For example, the computer lab has 16-18 computers, but often there are 30 students in a class. Teachers then have to take other students to other places and sometimes the Wi-Fi doesn’t work there.
 - iii. Blinds are needed for classrooms. Without them, teachers can’t use the projector during the day when the sun is shining.
- b) *Expand Library Use*: The library and other resources for independent study need to be more available for students to create a central hub of study, research, and collaboration. More personnel are needed to be able to keep the library open for longer hours during the week and throughout exam periods at the end of the year.
 - i. *Library Closure/Lack of Personnel*: The library is closed for the last two weeks of school during finals week. Keeping the library open and utilized for as long as possible during the day and throughout the year will strengthen school engagement and amplify an important set of learning resources.
 - i. *Reconfigure Layout of the School*: The building is very big and people often do not interact with certain students/staff from other sides of the building.
 - ii. *Centralize Location of Student Services*: Consider the location of the educators and partners providing services/resources in the school – they are very spatially separated. How can it be made easier for services to be coordinated and for students to access them?
- c) *Accelerate Needed Building Improvements*: Excel High School is an old building and it needs a facelift. The lighting, for example, does not create an appealing

environment. It is also disheartening to have technology constantly breaking down and pest infestations in the computer lab.

- i. *Consider the impact of metal detectors on the climate and atmosphere of the building.*
 - o When one considers the school to prison pipeline, can we reconsider the police presence that students see as soon as they walk in the building?
 - o This routine erodes trust between students and the adults.
 - o We need to have constructive dialogue about this issue.
- d) *Improve Information Sharing:* There needs to be more information sharing among service and resource providers in the school. For example, providing the health resource center staff with access to shared documents.
 - i. Have a hub to unify information so that the staff and partners can know what is happening in the school to share responsibility. Also, the location of the services within the building could be more convenient.

VII. Refocus and Strengthen Instruction

- a) *Strengthen the work and influence of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT).*
 - i. Increase the frequency of meetings.
 - ii. Use members of the ILT to model lessons and engage in classroom rounds.
 - iii. Promote and model co-teaching.
 - iv. Coordinate the work and focus of the ILT with other stakeholder groups (the site based council, the parent council, and the faculty at large).
- b) *Expand programs for student self-development.* Work in collaboration with school partners to provide all students with opportunities to strengthen mindsets, habits, and essential skills that are the foundation of powerful learning.
 - i. Strengthen offerings in self efficacy, growth mindset, and social skill development.
- c) *The schedule is seen as a significant limiter of learning opportunities.*
 - i. *Student needs should shape the schedule, not the other way around.*
Currently, there is a perception that student needs are subservient to the dictates of the schedule. The LSG recommends that the schedule must more effectively and adaptively respond to the needs of the students and that student choice (where it occurs) needs to be more effectively honored.

- d) *Increase the number of guidance counselors.*
 - i. *Two guidance counselors are inadequate for their current set of responsibilities and expectations.*
- e) *Increase teacher support for working with specialized populations.* With an increase both in class size and the number of students with specialized needs, teachers need more support in the form of co-teaching and more collaborative opportunities with special educators, counselors, ESL teachers, et al.
- f) *Increase support for new teachers.* Given the relatively high percentage of educators who are new to teaching, the support and induction of new teachers needs to increase and become more effective.
- g) *Teach beyond the tests:* Teachers want to bring enthusiasm and creativity to engage all students and not have their progress measured just by test scores. Students need to be seen as citizens; whole social and emotional learners. There is a core group of staff at the school that want to make that approach how Excel operates.
- h) *Offer skills training:* Students need to be taught how to use Microsoft Office programs, like Microsoft Excel and attaching documents to emails. They have the Chrome books with Google Docs, but they need to have these other skills too for the internships and partnerships that are set up for them.

VIII. Strengthen Leadership, Shared Responsibility, and Professional Collaboration

- a) *Leadership is lacking; trust has been diminished between the faculty and the administration.*
 - i. *Teachers do not feel comfortable sharing their perspective and insights; there is an atmosphere of anxiety within the school culture.*
 - ii. *Teacher voice and perspective are not often reflected in school decisions.*
- b) *The LSG wants the prompts under the title “Leadership” in the INSIGHT survey to become meaningful sources of feedback to the administration and a source of goal setting and growth. The prompts⁴ are:*
 - i. *Teachers understand how our actions contribute to school priorities and goals*
 - ii. *Leaders at my school seek out feedback from teachers*
 - iii. *When my school leadership commits to a program or priority they follow through*
 - iv. *My school has effective instructional leadership.*

⁴ Instructional culture INSIGHT, TNTP 2016, BPS South Boston HS-Excel, page 5.

- v. *My school leaders articulate a clear overarching vision that drives priorities, goals and decision making within the school.*
- vi. *My school leaders model the behavior they hope to see across the school community*
- c) Develop a Teacher Leadership Team that provides meaningful input in shaping operational plans for the school. (see III.a.i)
- d) Plan regular meetings throughout the year when faculty, administration, and a third party can review school culture data and other forms of input about the impact of leadership on the faculty. (see III.a.ii)

IX. **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

- a) Excel currently has significant capacity in the form of a team of committed, experienced, and skillful teachers who are ready and willing to contribute to the revitalization of the school. Taking advantage of this asset could be an important aspect of a successful turnaround.
- b) Sustainability was an important topic of conversation. The LSG members have experienced turnaround in other locations and want changes to last beyond an initial few years. The Turnaround Plan must contain ideas and structures that can endure when the influx of additional funds that sometimes accompany turnaround work no longer exists.