



# Using a Portrait of a Graduate to Build Common Vision and Increase Coherence in a Public-School System

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Using a *Portrait of a Graduate*  
To Build Common Vision and Increase Coherence  
In a Public-School System

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.)  
Capstone

Submitted by

Todd D. Stewart

To the Harvard Graduate School of Education  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education Leadership

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## **Dedication**

I wish to dedicate this capstone to my parents, Heather and Duncan Stewart, and to my wife, Julie Stewart. The more I learn about education and about kids, the more apparent it becomes that my parents are the best educators I have ever met. The care and compassion they have shown thousands of kids over the years is, and will continue to be, my greatest inspiration in this work. My marriage mid-way through the Ed.L.D. experience moved getting accepted into the program down to only the second most out-of-my-league thing I have ever accomplished. Julie deserves way more than half of my diploma; she has been my coach, confidant, proof-reader, reality check, ride to school, study hall supervisor and best friend throughout this process and beyond. It is anybody's guess where I would be without her, but it wouldn't be pretty.

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Superintendent Maureen Binienda graciously opened the doors of the Worcester Public Schools to me and has allowed me to experience all aspects of the district over the past year. Maureen's tireless work ethic, relational approach and true desire to support all students have all provided positive models for my own leadership. I am appreciative of the other members of the Worcester leadership team as they were all open and receptive and welcomed me as a full member of the team.

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## Abstract

The American public education system is by design decentralized and lacking coherence. Yet, research within and outside of education indicates that increased coherence and common vision can lead to improved outcomes. Individual educators feeling agency over their own work is important to job satisfaction, school culture, and ultimately to student achievement. Tension often exists between a desire for school and individual teacher empowerment and efforts for increased coherence.

This capstone explores a school district effort to increase coherence through the creation of a system-wide *Portrait of a Graduate*. The goal of the project was to build commonality of expectation and vision while allowing teachers, principals and schools to maintain autonomy. It was hoped that if teachers and principals were central to the creation of the *Portrait*, shared vision would develop while individual autonomy was maintained. My analysis suggests that this type of undertaking can be effective in building shared vision amongst individual teachers and school leaders. However, structural change in the relationship between the central office and schools is also necessary for a common vision and true coherence to be developed and maintained system-wide.

## **Introduction**

Maureen Binienda, the Superintendent of Worcester (MA) Public Schools, a system of 44 schools, over 25,000 students and the Commonwealth's second largest district, is interested in building a shared understanding of district priorities and increasing system-wide coherence. At the same time, school-level autonomy is also extremely important to the Superintendent and it has been an important guiding leadership principle over her career. A lack of open, two-way communication has developed between the school department and some members of the larger community. The Superintendent and I, in my role as a resident in HGSE's Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.) program, believe a set of desired system-wide student outcomes may increase shared understanding throughout the system without curbing classroom level autonomy. We believe that such a process, if undertaken community-wide, may also serve to strengthen two-way communication between the school department and various elements of the community.

The current superintendent of schools is in her fourth year in this role after spending the prior 38 years at a single high school within the Worcester Public Schools, in the roles of teacher, department head, assistant principal and principal. Throughout her career, she has viewed efforts by the central office to limit school-based autonomy as largely detrimental to students, and as a building leader she believed that protecting her staff and students from burdensome district initiatives was a key part of her work.

As the superintendent's tenure as the district's top leader has progressed, she has become increasingly convinced that many schools, and some of the individuals leading

them, may lack the capacity to fully meet the needs of all of their students on their own. One of the superintendent's core strategies has been to improve building level leadership, changing leaders in more than half of all schools in her first three years. However, she is now convinced that more consistency across the district is required for further improvement, particularly in instructional practices and curriculum.

I joined the Worcester Public Schools in June of 2019 and have been working collaboratively with the superintendent on a range of issues. I have been thoroughly impressed with many of the efforts the system is engaged in to support teaching and learning. Yet, it is apparent to me that many teachers and leaders are feeling overwhelmed by the volume of initiatives they are being asked to undertake and the lack of readily apparent connection between many of them. The superintendent and I have discussed this perceived "initiative fatigue" and we both feel that efforts must be undertaken to streamline, synthesize and perhaps reduce the quantity of initiatives that principals and teachers are being asked to undertake.

In 2018, the Worcester Public Schools undertook a deliberate and inclusive process to develop a long-term strategic plan for the first time in recent memory (see appendix A). The process of developing the strategic plan was seen as valuable by many that participated and general sentiment from school leaders and teachers indicates that it has not limited building-level autonomy in any substantive way. This is important as the Worcester Public Schools continue to be a system that values building-level autonomy; the superintendent understands this through her own history.

However, the superintendent and I share a growing concern that a variety of initiatives that can be linked to the strategic plan may not be aligned with each other and

may be contributing to the “initiative fatigue” previously referenced. It appears that department leaders have begun operating under the assumption that as long as an initiative, goal or program can be linked to the strategic plan, then it is acceptable—even encouraged—that it be rolled out as fast and as robustly as possible to schools. Many of these initiatives are seen as important to improving student outcomes and some even as urgent. But, there is a lack of focus and coherence between individual initiatives and also between the various departments that lead them.

The senior administration and superintendent are not altogether surprised by this lack of coherence and common purpose. Most of the senior team has only been in place three years and they readily admit that the much of their time thus far has been spent trying to address urgent needs in the district and that these efforts have often been conducted in independent silos. The superintendent, who led a high school seen as model in terms of positive culture and student outcomes for many years, was shocked to learn only when she became superintendent that many of the schools in the system were functioning far differently than her own. Over half of all elementary schools were identified as significantly underperforming while seven were state-designated for turn-around at the time of her entry. Of the current district instructional leadership team, only two members were in place prior to her appointment as superintendent. Significant improvement can be seen in elementary school results in individual schools and district-wide while performance at the middle and high school level remains stagnant (MA DESE District Profiles, retrieved 3/5/20 from [www.profiles.doe.mass.edu](http://www.profiles.doe.mass.edu)). The superintendent and I believe that furthering the work of system improvement now hinges upon our ability to better align and coordinate efforts.

In addition, more can be done to foster a collaborative working relationship between the current district administration and some stakeholders in the greater community. Specifically, public dialogue centered on student discipline data and racial disparities in suspension rates has led to an exceptionally tense several months, culminating in public calls for stronger leadership this past June. While the superintendent has overwhelming support from the teachers' union, many parents, a majority of school committee members and many in the community, this public criticism has remained central to conversations about the school department and has led to a lack of true community engagement with some stakeholders.

The superintendent and I are now attempting to balance three unique and competing priorities. First, we wish for Worcester to remain a district in which school leaders and teachers feel a deep sense of autonomy and empowerment relative to the work that occurs in their individual schools. At the same time, we are deeply concerned with the lack of improvement in many schools and the lack of connection and coherence between the initiatives meant to help them; an even greater lack of cohesion between some central office departments is of additional concern. Finally, we are concerned that, at least among some in the community, open and productive dialogue with the school system is lacking.

The *why* of the work—whether it be specific and deliberate school turnaround efforts, a move toward high school re-design, networked teams of leaders, increased access to technology or a host of efforts relative to the strategic plan—has been missing for many staff members and building leaders. Various department leaders throughout the district have also expressed a lack of clarity around how their particular efforts fit within

larger goals and even feel that some of their efforts may have been working at cross-purposes with those of other well-intentioned colleagues. This sentiment has manifested itself in a range of ways, from technical issues like professional development scheduling conflicts between various departments, to more substantive ways such as a tendency for many senior officials to simply not attend or participate in those things they do not view as *theirs*.

In discussions about the lack of district coherence referenced above, the superintendent and I agreed that better defining the shared outcomes we wanted for our graduates was a logical way to address this concern. School systems across the country are developing various forms of a graduate portrait or profile—a composite of the skills and attributes we aspire for all graduates to have upon completion of high school—as a way to engage the wider community in developing shared goals and values and also as a mechanism to re-center their work to more directly focus on long-term graduate outcomes. We determined that developing our own *Portrait of a Worcester Public Schools Graduate* would be the first step toward increased coherence and shared vision across the system.

This project was particularly exciting to me and my own learning as immediately upon completion of my residency I will be embarking on my own district-level leadership position. As I think about my own leadership, I know I will need to balance the tension between the need for individuals and sites to experience autonomy and empowerment and the need for consistency and common understanding across a system. I am hopeful that this project will assist the Worcester Public Schools in balancing this tension while also providing me with a blueprint for navigating this tension in my own leadership.

The Worcester Public School System was introduced to the idea of the *Portrait of a Graduate* through a grant award during the 2018-2019 school-year. However, the idea was not substantively pursued at that time amid other priorities and without someone to take the lead to get the project started. After initial conversations about the need for increased coherence and some preliminary investigation of other systems' work building their own *Portraits*, we realized that this particular process and framework could be a helpful tool in achieving some of our most pressing goals around coherence building and community engagement.

Although different versions of this process exist, we based our work loosely on the model developed by Battelle for Kids. This particular model defines a *Portrait of a Graduate* as “a collective vision that articulates the community’s aspirations for all students. Locally developed, but globally positioned, the *Portrait of a Graduate* serves as a north star for system transformation. Providing strategic direction for the redesign of the overall educational experience for students, this collective vision reinvigorates and re-engages students, teachers, and community stakeholders” (Battelle for Kids, 2020, retrieved 1/7/20 from <https://portraitofagraduate.org>). A community’s *Portrait of a Graduate* is created by collecting data and input around the values, unique attributes and local economic conditions of a place, dovetailing that information with more generalized knowledge of how society and the economy are changing and then codifying a set of skills, attributes and attitudes most crucial to graduates for life-long success.

A *Portrait of a Graduate* is usually a very approachable one-page document with some type of visual that allows individuals from throughout the school system and wider community to easily understand the high-level aspirations a community holds for all

students. The product is used as a guiding document to align, test and vet current and proposed initiatives to ensure that all efforts are in service of common goals and outcomes. Ultimately, using the *Portrait* to drive vertical and horizontal alignment across grade levels, schools and departments ensures that any student entering kindergarten will logically graduate from high school personifying the *Portrait* (Battelle for Kids, 2020, retrieved 1/7/20 from <https://portraitofagraduate.org>).

In the following sections I situate this project at the intersection of the literatures of coherence-making and the uniquely incoherent nature of American school systems, change models centered on instigating change from within existing organizations and the importance of parent and community engagement and involvement in school systems. I will then describe the steps I undertook to complete the project and analyze the successes and shortcoming of it. Finally, I will discuss the implications of this project for myself as a leader, for the Worcester Public Schools and for the education sector at large.

## Review of Knowledge for Action

### *Coherence & Shared Vision Versus Autonomy & Independence*

A shared sense of purpose is key to any change initiative. Simon Sinek (2009) has brought the importance of a shared *why* for the work an organization undertakes to the mainstream. Sinek states “When most organizations or people think, act or communicate they do so from the outside in, from *what* to *why*. And for good reason—they go from clearest thing to the fuzziest thing. We say what we do, we sometimes say how we do it, but we rarely say why we do what we do” (Sinek, 2009 pp. 224). One could argue that Sinek’s observation of many organizations is particularly relevant to schools and school systems in which deep complexities and competing priorities are omnipresent; far too often teachers, administrators and students are simply *doing school* with little regard for any sort of collective or deliberate *why* behind the work. Most educators, when asked, point to lofty aims like positively impacting children’s lives or adding value to society as their reasons for teaching, yet the same teachers rarely mention such factors when asked about their day-to-day experiences or job satisfaction level (Ni & Rorrer, 2018). Likewise, many school improvement efforts currently underway in Worcester and elsewhere are presented as antidotes to specific problems or deficiencies in areas like standardized test scores or graduation rates, not as part of a greater effort to more holistically prepare students (Hess, 2010).

Teachers and school leaders regularly express a deep dissatisfaction with the multiple initiatives that are thrust upon them by districts. Often, as central office staff change or bureaucracy grows, added initiatives are simply layered on top of those already

existing with little or no regard to any theme or commonality between these initiatives or to any wider goals (Fullan, 2006). This leads to many initiatives being implemented only to the degree mandated, as those closest to the work do not necessarily see the specific initiative leading to substantive improvement. Teachers also become impatient with plans and initiatives that do not show immediate results if they are not confident that the district will continue forward with that particular plan or direction over a longer term (Hess, 2004). When Worcester principals were asked to list current initiatives underway in their schools they, on average, cited over nine (personal correspondence, 1/7/20).

Coherence may be the key to develop a collective *why* and also to establishing and continuing change processes for improvement in a school system. Coherence in school systems can be defined as “a shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work in the minds and actions individually and especially collectively” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, pp. 1-2). Fullan and others contend that a lack a coherence is natural any time an organization is making significant change in terms of leadership or direction. So, there will inherently be periods of markedly less coherence in any system. But, re-establishing coherence after such changes is key to prolonged success and improvement (Fullan & Ballew, 2004). The difficulty, particularly within school systems, lies in how to establish and maintain coherence while continuously improving and ensuring that for those throughout the organization, coherence is not achieved simply through the full removal of autonomies.

A lack of coherence is common in educational settings in the United States as it could be argued the system is built around incoherence. The American education system is built on a premise of local control, with far less state and national coherence than the

systems in most other countries. The U.S. system lacks a national curriculum, a shared understanding of priorities and to a large degree even a shared understanding of what good classroom instruction should look like. This is evident to teachers even before they begin their careers as most teacher preparation programs prepare novice educators to teach *nothing in particular to no one in particular* (Cohen, 2011). Many locales do not have aligned or agreed upon curriculum or pedagogical methods even within a single school system.

In Worcester, the district has a written mission and vision statement and similar school-level statements of purpose but many students and teachers are often unable to articulate the common goals or values of their specific schools or of the system at-large (personal correspondence, 1/13/20). Like other systems, Worcester has attempted to increase coherence and quality of instruction by adopting some standardized system-wide curricula. All kindergarten through grade six mathematics curricula has been standardized and attempts are being made to standardized the elementary English language arts curriculum. Outside of some Advanced Placement offerings, secondary level curricula are far more varied in Worcester. Even when high quality shared curriculum does exist in a system or specific grade-span, difficulties related to implementation and lack of professional development often stand in the way of actual coherence as the delivery of a common curriculum to different classrooms can be exceptionally varied (Steiner, 2019). Worcester's schools lack significant professional development time and resources due to the city's lack of local resources and cumulative state funding deficiencies over the past several decades. Standardized test scores between elementary schools using the same curriculum for math and ELA remain wildly

inconsistent in Worcester with some individual schools ranking in the top 10% and others in the bottom 10% of all Massachusetts schools on state assessments (MA DESE School Profiles, 2020, retrieved 1/7/20 from <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/worcester>).

If increased coherence of public-school systems that are naturally incoherent is necessary for improvement, questions arise around how best to build coherence. For reasons of practicality and effectiveness, top-down mandates rarely solve the issue of incoherence in public-education. The deep complexities of teaching and the unique characteristics of each student coupled with the necessity of a high level of student cooperation in the learning process all conspire to make teachers naturally more inclined to resist high levels of uniformity or mandates from those outside their classrooms (Labaree, 2000). While one can find some examples of top-down mandates of uniformity leading to improved student outcomes in certain charter school settings or small traditional districts, there are a lack of successful examples of this type of forced coherence-building in large, traditional systems (Pondiscio, 2019, Steiner, 2019).

In addition to issues arising from implementation challenges that grow as the scale of the organization increases, forced coherence-building is also difficult at scale because those individuals most needed to implement systems and programs naturally value their personal autonomy. Daniel Pink (2009) argues that autonomy in one's work is one of the most crucial elements to satisfaction and productivity. This is especially true in public-education as teachers report perceived high levels of autonomy as a significant positive of their chosen career (Wermke, 2018). However, the same research that indicates autonomy is so important also points to a sense of purpose in one's work as vital to satisfaction and productivity too (Pink, 2009). In education—and specifically

when discussing coherence in education—autonomy and purpose often seem at odds. Efforts at standardization are often seen as intrusive to individuals’ own sense of ownership over their work.

For an organization to successfully increase coherence, it is crucial that the effort is undertaken at all levels. Fullan (2014) argues that “the only coherence that counts is not what is on paper nor what top management can articulate, but what is in the minds and hearts of members of the organization” (pp. 114). Achieving coherence within the American public-school system is further complicated because American public schools and systems are usually *loosely coupled* organizations; the connection between individual schools and district leadership is less structured than that of various branches or offices and the headquarters of organizations in other sectors. This *loose coupling* is natural in school systems as the work of any individual school or teacher is highly unique and varied (Weick, 1976). This lack of *tight coupling* is natural and not necessarily a negative aspect of education. Looser alignment within and across organizations can lead to greater empowerment of and control by those closest to the work, more agility to meet localized needs and can also serve as a safeguard to keep missteps or poor decisions from affecting the entire organization (Weick, 1976). These positive attributes of the natural state of *loosely coupled* school systems align with the Worcester superintendent’s experience as a long-serving school leader and also support her reticence to curb building-level autonomy. It is also possible that *re-coupling* after long-periods of *loose coupling* in schools could lead to turmoil amongst staff, with the possibility of deep discontent over the removal of autonomies and power previously viewed as rightfully theirs (Hallett, 2010). The superintendent and many other veteran educators remember an effort by a

previous administration to *re-couple* that was not viewed favorably at the time, and which did not ultimately succeed. The challenge lies in increasing coherence while maintaining the *loose coupling* natural to school districts.

In complex school systems such as Worcester, it is crucial that the relationship between central office personnel and principals is strong, as principals are the key connection between their schools and the larger system. In many change models designed outside of education, middle managers do not represent a constituency as key as building principals are in education. An important step to ensure a central office administration is most effectively supporting learning is for various central office roles to be re-defined to more intentionally support teaching and learning through direct connection to principals (Honig, 2008). Honig argues that although the school should be the appropriate unit of change, because of the *loose coupling* referenced previously, consistent and intentional action by central office personnel in support of principals and schools is crucial. Specifically, central office staff members who are in positions to most directly support principals' instructional capacity must be freed of other tasks to allow this support of principals to be central to their daily work. Other central office personnel must then have their roles re-defined to better support school-level improvement as well (Honig, 2008).

In addition to the necessity of coherence and shared vision between schools and between the central office and each school, these characteristics must be fostered between and within the central office departments that support schools. Like other large, complex organizations, the Worcester Public Schools has multiple departments and groups, each with their own identities, cultures and values. In groups like these, identities often

develop over time, can pre-date the current leader's tenure and can be very difficult to change (Balsler & Carmin, 2009). While diversity of opinion and perspective is often a great asset to an organization, fractured vision or competing ideas of the organization's core identity or priorities can derail efforts toward systemic change (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Current efforts in the Worcester Public Schools within specific departments are commendable but are often conducted with little to no coordination with other departments.

The inability of central office staff to directly support principals is made greater in Worcester because there is a real and well-documented inadequacy to the size of the central office team. As budget cycles have been increasingly difficult, the priority of the superintendent and school committee has been to provide direct services within schools, leading to a significant understaffing of the central office. This lack of central office capacity coupled with the number of urgent issues the administration discovered upon their entry, have transpired to create a system in which it is very difficult to step away from urgent work and focus on any type of vision or longer-term work. The Eisenhower Matrix is a framework for determining which work is important, which is urgent, which is neither and which is both. The matrix is based on a quote attributed to Franklin Roosevelt in which he argued that those things that are urgent are rarely important while those that are important are rarely urgent but that we are naturally occupied by that work which is more urgent and as a result neglect that which is actually most important (Krogerus & Tschäppeler, 2017). In education, strategy and overall vision are recognized as important but are often put aside for the urgent work that is omnipresent in schools and districts. Not surprisingly, the inability of leaders to remain focused on strategy or vision

is a known barrier to coherence (Moore, 1995). Being able to delegate and better plan work processes is key for a leader to maintain vision. However, Moore cautions that “these devices (delegation and planning) are rarely successful in themselves”. Rather, he argues, “to stay focused on the important, then, managers need broad, consistent statements of purpose – a ready touchstone for examining their use of their own time and attention” (Moore, 1995, pp.90). All leaders, but most specifically those at the highest level of an organization, need a strong and consistent vision to guide their work if they are to remain focused on the most important matters and not simply those that are most pressing at any given moment.

Coherence making is different than getting *buy-in*, a concept often referred to by leaders in public education and other fields. While coherence is centered on a shared understanding of a known and embraced way of doing, *buy-in* is much more about persuasion and convincing others to adopt methods, programs or ideas of leaders or others from outside the organization. Said differently, coherence is about building a shared understanding, *buy-in* is about winning others over. Thus, settling for *buy-in* as opposed to open dialogue and discussion in service of *coherence making* can lead to compliance and cynicism as opposed to shared vision and ownership (Wagner & Kegan, 2006). Achieving coherence in school systems which are naturally incoherent while ensuring that those individuals throughout the system maintain a sense of autonomy requires clear vision and direction from leaders while ensuring that those closest to the work are an integral part of all change processes.

### ***Instigating Change from Within the Organization***

One method of reconciling individuals' need for autonomy and empowerment with a desire for more coherence and shared vision is to enlist those who choose to voluntarily engage in the work (Kotter, 1998). In his eight-step model for change (see Appendix B), Kotter contends that although a small guiding coalition of leaders is necessary to instigate change, the real work must be carried out by a *volunteer army* comprised of individuals motivated to see change from across all aspects of the organization (Kotter, 2019). Models that call for innovation or change to happen outside of the realm of the daily operations of the organization often rely on a small group of leaders or even the chief executive alone to decide when and how to infuse a drastic change across the entire organization (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2016). In light of the high level of individual responsibility inherent in teaching and the degree to which educators value their autonomy noted previously, this type of external impetus for change seems often ill-suited to public education. In the case of Worcester, where the actual change we are seeking is increased coherence across the system, it seems logical that involving as many individuals as possible from throughout the system would be far more successful than utilizing a model where a smaller number of individuals was leading the change process.

Effective and lasting change in organizations often occurs only if the change is embraced and led by individuals from across the organization (Kotter, 1998, 2019). When investigating the conditions under which various education reforms have succeeded or failed, Cohen and Mehta (2017) find that along with other similarities, those reform efforts that were successful addressed a *felt need*, a problem that teachers

themselves believed worthy of attention. In cases where this was not the case, otherwise logical ideas failed largely because those required to implement the desired change did not feel a pressing need to see the change succeed.

The vast majority of change efforts attempted in public education are ultimately aimed at the classroom level. Wagner and Kegan (2006) point to the necessity of leadership to enlist and support individuals across all levels of the organization. Specifically, they state that all must be supported “in ways that enable deep understanding of the reasons for this challenge. Leaders must then find ways for these individuals to construct solutions to their problems of practice” (Wagner & Kegan, 2006, pp. 15). Kotter also sees this type of groundwork as imperative, calling for the creation of a strategic vision and accompanying initiatives before enlisting the *volunteer army* described above (Kotter, 1998). Within schools, researchers have found that having more individuals with formal authority, longer teaching tenure, or other traditional measures of power are less important predictors of the success of a change team than is the presence of shared goals and expectations across the team (Higgins, Weiner, Young, 2012).

Another of Kotter’s crucial steps, or *accelerators* as he refers to them, is the generation of short-term wins. Kotter argues that individuals and teams must experience small successes along their journey to show what is possible in terms of larger successes and to motivate the team to continue (Kotter, 2019). In the Worcester Public Schools’ effort to establish increased coherence, it appears that the development, maturation and refinement of *the Portrait of a Graduate* may present some of the greatest opportunities for *small wins* to date.

### ***Community-Involvement in Education/Coalition Building***

One of the primary goals of developing the *Portrait of a Graduate* beyond building coherence is to use the process as a mechanism to engage, or in some cases, re-engage, a variety of stakeholders across the city. A productive relationship between a school system and the larger community it serves is crucial on several levels. Local support for schools from the community can be a key lever for passing needed budget requests, creating and maintaining quality partnerships to benefit students and to producing a host of other benefits. In Worcester specifically, the business, civic and religious communities have all historically played vital roles in the success of the school system. Within the past year, fractures throughout the community have developed, largely along ethnic and racial lines. In addition to the inherent value in re-establishing a supportive, cohesive community around public education, gains in student achievement have been shown when community involvement is high (Bryk, 2000, Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

One contributing factor to the community fractures could be the racial and ethnic differences between the system's educators and its families. Approximately 90% of the Worcester teaching force is White while approximately 60% of the students in the system are Latino or Black (MA DESE District Profiles, retrieved 3/5/20 from [www.profiles.doe.ma.edu](http://www.profiles.doe.ma.edu)). The Worcester Public Schools have varying levels of success in engaging parents across schools and grade levels. Many principals report difficulty in engaging parents in forums such as school site councils or other formal avenues for participation. Schools in the more affluent sections of the city generally have higher levels of parental engagement and parent satisfaction as measured on surveys. These

differences also track along racial and ethnic lines, with White parents being more likely to feel engaged in their children's school than Black or Latino parents (personal correspondence, 1/7/20). Nationally, parental involvement in school varies greatly as well with families of students in urban schools—particularly students of color, those for whom English is a second language, those from low-income backgrounds, and those from single-parent households—reporting less positive and substantive interactions with their children's schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018, Jeynes, 2003). Strong parental involvement with schools has appreciable positive impacts on student achievement, attendance, behavior and long-term outcomes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Efforts to increase parental and community engagement are most effective when individuals and groups are viewed as important partners in education and when their individual and collective strengths and unique identities are valued (Henderson & Mapp, 2016). It is our hope that the *Portrait* project will engage parents as more equal partners as their aspirations and dreams for their children will be an integral part of our data collection. In addition to parents, it is our intent that the project will strengthen current partnerships with community organizations and will start partnerships with groups that have not been substantive partners with the school district in the past. When school systems actively engage community partners in common goals, student outcomes directly benefit (Little, Wimer & Weiss, 2008). Community partners being substantively connected to the work of the school district has many indirect benefits as well, including greater consistency of messaging to students, increased financial support of school programs and greater capacity for out-of-school learning opportunities among others (Little, 2011).

We are developing a *Worcester Public Schools Portrait of a Graduate* to achieve the three main objectives laid out above. It is our hope that it will serve as a mechanism for achieving greater coherence within and between schools while respecting and celebrating school and individual autonomy so central to Worcester and crucial to long-term success. It is also hoped that it will provide a means for a shift in central office staff toward a more coherent approach to supporting schools, and one more centered on teaching and learning. Finally, it is hoped that this effort will be a catalyst for parents, community members and other stakeholders to engage more fully with the school system moving forward.

## **Theory of Action**

### ***If I:***

- Build a sense of urgency within the central office team and create a guiding coalition of key stakeholders to support the development and implementation of a *Portrait of a Graduate*
- Form and articulate a strategic vision for the development of the *Portrait* that voluntarily engages a significant number of teachers and leaders
- Use my positional and relational authority to remove barriers to this project
- Facilitate short-term wins for those participating at various levels
- Regularly engage the superintendent and other key leaders in conversations about the *Portrait* and its implications for the system at large
- Set up the structures and mechanisms for the project to continue forward after my departure

### ***Then:***

- This project will be prioritized by the central office team, schools, and the community
- A group of educators will feel ownership of The *Portrait of a WPS Graduate* and will take the lead in spreading it throughout the system
- The *Portrait of the WPS Graduate* will be completed by the close of this residency

- Participating teachers and administrators will report increased levels of reflection on their own practice as a result of engaging with the *Portrait of a WPS Graduate* project
- A written plan for increased vertical and horizontal curriculum alignment based on the *Portrait* will be prepared and endorsed by the superintendent

***So That:***

- Adults and students throughout the system will be better able to focus efforts toward clear, coherent goals
- Greater coherence and shared purpose will exist between the central office and each school
- Parents and other community members will feel a greater sense of involvement as true partners in their children's education

## Description, Evidence and Analysis

### *Description and Evidence to Date*

My strategic project was centered on the development of a *Worcester Public Schools Portrait of a Graduate*. This project included two significant components: enlisting as many stakeholders as possible to authentically share their unique perspectives on what skills, attributes and attitudes our graduates most need to succeed in life and empowering a large and diverse group of educators to explore the ever-changing world our students are entering to determine what educational shifts are necessary to best prepare them.

I approached the work of leading the development of the *Worcester Public School Portrait of a Graduate* largely through John Kotter's 8-step change management framework (2009).

Kotter's first step involves creating a sense of urgency. I viewed the need for this step on several levels: first,

creating a sense of urgency with the

superintendent, then doing the same with her senior team, building principals and

teachers. While many additional stakeholders were vital to this work, I saw these initial groups as most important to getting the work started. I attempted to build urgency among senior officials while also engaging in Kotter's second step: building a guiding coalition.

I began by informally probing which central office leaders might be most interested in



Adapted from Kotter, J.P. (2012). *Leading Change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

participating in this work. I was granted informal meetings with several district leaders to learn more about the district and their respective roles. These meetings were invaluable in terms of gaining a deeper understanding of the district context and also determining which leaders saw a greater need for coherence and common purpose as pressing issues for the departments they led or for themselves. I was sure to reference the context that I knew to be true: a senior leadership team that had only been together for three years and that had been forced to deal with several significant and urgent matters immediately upon entry. I indicated to each leader how it seemed logical that a lack of coherence would exist but also posited that perhaps the timing was right to make increased coherence a priority now. Without exception, these conversations seemed to resonate with the leaders with whom I spoke. Each seemed genuinely excited by the prospect of me leading the work of the *Portrait* and aiding them in feeling “more on the same page” with their colleagues, as one individual put it, or “less on an island,” as another phrased it. I used these meetings to identify individuals best suited to serve on a small *Portrait of a Graduate* steering committee, and determined that two central office managers and a high school principal would be important to include. We agreed that the superintendent, her chief of staff, the deputy superintendent and an outside consultant leading related work around high school re-design would serve as ex-officio members of the steering committee in the sense that they would attend meetings when their schedules allowed and be kept updated on our progress.

Ensuring the participation of these high-level officials allowed me the opportunity to directly and continuously stress the urgency of this work with them. I also relied to some degree on the deadlines and requirements of this capstone to push various

components of the work at certain times when otherwise they may have been put off in favor of other pressing work, and also leveraged my relationship with the superintendent to create urgency with others. I did this in very technical ways—such as having her send certain emails instead of sending them myself—to more subtle ways, like suggesting she ground other initiatives in this work when explaining the district’s key initiatives to various groups and individuals.

In addition to the steering committee, this work was supported by a group of approximately 40 high school students, including representatives from all seven of the system’s high schools. These students were identified by each of their building principals as students with an interest in community and school involvement. At the onset of the project, I met with each group of students at their respective schools to explain the general parameters of the project and to inquire about their interest in participating. Students were given several options for engagement: co-facilitating stakeholder focus groups, survey development and analysis, research, or design. Student ambassadors served as co-facilitators at some stakeholder meetings throughout the process with myself or another member of the steering committee. I also attempted to engage students from the start of this project so that adults throughout the system would develop increased urgency around this work when they saw the efforts embodied in actual students a mere one, two or three years from graduation. The level of student engagement has been far more limited than I intended, largely because the majority of the groups requested meeting times during the regular school day and it has been impractical to release the students from their own school work. It was also difficult to engage the students across all seven schools without designating adult liaisons in each school to assist with

communication. In my attempt to empower students by communicating directly to them, I minimized the crucial role that adult liaisons play in facilitating student participation and the logistics required for students to fully engage.

I worked with the superintendent and the steering committee to undertake Kotter's third step: forming strategic vision and initiatives. This step was approached on two levels, as the *Portrait of the Graduate* was undertaken to provide strategic vision to the district as a whole while we also needed to form a strategic vision and lay out initiatives and goals specific to completing this project. I began this process in a very technical way by creating a year-long calendar with the key components of the project laid out by month and then soliciting input from the superintendent and others about the feasibility of the timeline or what might be missing. I was clear from the onset that soliciting as much input as possible from all stakeholders across the city while empowering a group of educators to investigate the changing nature of the world our graduates are entering needed to be the two major components of this work. It was important to me throughout that the work was framed as the gathering of both of these pieces of data and that they were each given equal weight.

To accomplish the goal of investigating the changing world our students are entering and to meet Kotter's fourth step of enlisting a volunteer army, I recruited an educator working group. This group consisted of teachers from across schools, grade levels and subjects. The members of this group actively applied to be a part of this effort and the opportunity was open to all teaching staff throughout the system. I coordinated an application process with the human resources department and teachers applied through the district's regular after-school stipend process. We were fortunate to receive a

quantity of applications that was not too large for a common space or for the amount of grant funding we had available, but that was large enough to be representative across the system. A total of 67 teachers ultimately participated, ranging in grade taught from second to twelfth and representing every major subject area including art, music, physical education, special education and school counseling. Twenty-two of the system's 44 schools were represented in the group. I convened this working group in person six times between November and February while leading them in additional work and research between meetings. I launched the group by sharing with them a small amount of compelling data around the changing nature of the economy and the world of work and then engaging them in a rich conversation about the needs they were seeing in their classrooms. Subsequent meetings involved the team diving into the texts Most Likely to Succeed by Ted Dintersmith & Tony Wagner and Linchpin by Seth Godin, both provocative books based on the authors' beliefs that a marked shift in skills and mindsets is necessary for individual success in the modern world. I chose these books less for their content but more for their charge to the reader to self-reflect. I felt that this type of text would open teachers up to the types of insightful discussions needed to move this project forward. I believed that stressing a need for increased coherence would not build urgency or a *felt need* as Cohen and Mehta (2017) call it, in the teachers while providing compelling data that the needs of our students are changing would be more likely do so. I also believed that framing the need for change around the evolving nature of society and the economy was much more likely to engage this group positively than implying that our current methods were either not working or were so varied across classrooms and schools that we could not tell if they were working.

Throughout the entire process, the 44 building principals in the system were also continually involved in the work, engaging in various ways at each of their monthly leadership meetings. This was done, in large part, to accomplish Kotter's fifth step: enabling action by removing barriers. Throughout all of the rich discussion and excitement that was being generated in the teacher working group around markedly changing their classrooms to focus more explicitly on crucial skills and efforts to generally make their instruction more engaging and relevant, the concern that constraints imposed by principals could prohibit these shifts was expressed repeatedly. I felt strongly that engaging a group of teachers in a new way of thinking without deliberately engaging their building leaders would create a disconnect and could lead to principals inhibiting teachers' efforts as opposed to supporting them. Empowering those teachers closest to the work is only possible if the administrators who serve as their immediate supervisors understand and are supportive of the work they are undertaking (Wagner & Kegan, 2006). I leveraged my relationship with the superintendent and her belief in this project to engage the entirety of the principal group regularly through their monthly meetings. Although time at these monthly meetings is in high demand, the superintendent regularly and continually ensured that this work received time on agendas. At some meetings, I would simply provide a brief update on our work, at others I engaged them as a full focus group and also engaged them in the research being conducted by the teacher working group. I took every opportunity possible to present aspects of the project to the principal group, with all central office leaders in attendance, as a way to bring increased legitimacy to this work. All principals were given the two texts that the teacher working group was centering their work on and a brief overview of each as well.

As the second major component of this project, I convened focus groups from across the city, meeting with business leaders, higher education officials, parent groups, out-of-school service providers, additional teachers beyond those in the working group and recent graduates, among others. Each of these focus groups was asked for their input regarding which skills, aptitudes and attitudes they felt most necessary for graduates to possess. These conversations were centered on role-specific needs; we made it clear that we wanted to know what specific skills CEOs throughout Worcester viewed as most important in entry-level employees, which skills college admissions officers believed most vital to the success of their incoming students, what parents want most for their children, and so forth. Each of these focus groups was similar in design. First, I opened each meeting with a short presentation on the project and its connection to the district strategic plan and other key initiatives and then shared a short video and some compelling statistics about the changing nature of work and society. Then, I used an interactive platform to solicit in-the-moment anonymous responses from each participant to a short survey. Each group was asked the same set of questions, ranging from what skill or attribute acquired in their own education they each found most crucial today to what they saw as the most significant changes in society over the past several decades to what skill or attribute they believed most crucial to current graduates' post-secondary success. Collecting the data in the moment and visually displaying it anonymously on a screen allowed us to then discuss themes within the responses. I chose to begin each survey with a grounding in one's own education and current expertise as a means to ensure that answers were centered in individuals' own lived experiences and no one felt unqualified to participate.

These conversations were meant to raise up the voices of various stakeholders while also providing valuable data about the specific context of Worcester. This work furthered Kotter's fifth step: enabling action by removing barriers while also serving to accomplish his sixth step: generating short-term wins. Whereas many of the groups I engaged had felt some level of disconnect with the district previously, the simple act of engaging them in positive work was in and of itself a short-term win. Stating emphatically that their input, based solely on their unique perspectives and lived experiences, was crucial to our efforts to best serve all students was a win with many of the groups. We engaged them as true partners and experts in the shared task of best educating all Worcester students. Based on surveys and informal feedback, participants found the focus groups positive and productive.

With input from the other members of the steering committee and the district instructional technology department, I prepared and distributed a survey to all 4,000+ staff members as well. Although the teacher working group and principals were providing valuable input, I used the survey to ensure that all staff felt included in this work. Again, my hope was to remove barriers while also, simply through the act of engagement, generating short term wins and momentum for this work.

Information from the teacher working group, the various focus groups and from the surveys was synthesized by the teacher working group under my facilitation. They began by identifying the traits or skills they felt most important based on their own experience and our shared research. They then worked to analyze the results of our various focus groups and survey, identifying common themes. This group is now combining all of this into the final *Portrait of a Graduate*. This work would have been

completed face-to-face in mid-March but our final group meeting was canceled as the coronavirus crisis began. The group is now meeting virtually but we have delayed final approval of the *Portrait* in hopes that the group is able to come back together in person one final time. We will then work with students in the visual arts department to create a visual depiction of the *Portrait of the Graduate*. This work would have been completed by mid-April but is now scheduled to be completed prior to the start of school in September. The entire process of synthesizing all of our data, and the teachers' excitement in it, was a prime example of Kotter's seventh step: sustaining acceleration. While the initial research and information gathering could have been completed and then the work stalled, the teacher working group's ability and excitement around immediately turning this data into actionable student-level outcomes enabled the effort to gain momentum and for excitement around it to begin to spread within schools and across the district.

The entire teacher working group, along with several school and district leaders, is scheduled to re-convene multiple times over the summer months to use the *Portrait* as a guiding document to re-analyze first the district strategic plan and then individual initiatives, programs and goals across the district. I worked collaboratively with the superintendent and a central office staff member who has been tasked with leading the work moving forward to devise this plan. The teacher group will map a PreK-12 scope and sequence to begin the process of ensuring all students have what they need to personify the *Portrait of the Graduate* upon their high school graduation. This group will then continue to meet throughout the 2020-2021 school-year to further this work. Although I will no longer be in the district when this work occurs, I have ensured that

there is adequate grant funding allocated for it and have worked to ensure that the necessary logistical support will be in place for this work to occur. It is my belief that only after this work is completed will Kotter's eighth and final step be realized: instituting change. While I believe that this entire process has led to substantial changes in ways of thinking among participating teachers and others, meaningful district-wide change and improved coherence will only come when this work is embedded in the K-12 curriculum and throughout school and classroom structures across the system.

Survey results of our teacher working group indicate that all respondents found at least moderate value in the work while over 80% of respondents indicated that they found great value in the work. Over 75% of teaching working group members have registered to continue on with the next phase of this project. It is our intention that this group will approximately double in size during this next phase and that many of our current members will take on a co-facilitator role of a grade-alike or subject-alike subgroup. The teacher's union has also engaged in this work as an entity of its own. Members of the union leadership team has begun an internal book study based on Most Likely to Succeed at the urging of an executive board member who was a member of the teacher working group. He and I engaged in a discussion of the most productive way to enlist the union in this work and decided jointly that a book study would be a logical starting place.

Even with the abrupt halt to work caused by the coronavirus crisis, a full draft of the Worcester Public Schools *Portrait of a Graduate* is near completion and will be presented publicly before the start of the 2020-21 school-year. I anticipate the final *Portrait* will be endorsed by the superintendent's office, the deputy superintendent's office, the local education foundation board, the teacher's union, the district-wide regular

education, special education and English language learner parent groups and the consortium of local higher education institutions among others. It is now expected that the Worcester School Committee will officially adopt the *Portrait of the Graduate* over the summer.

Work that was underway to share the *Portrait of the Graduate* and what we see as the inherent value in it as widely as possible has been put on pause but planning efforts are still underway. Members of the teacher working and all building principals will share the finished product with all staff members when it is feasible to do so.

The teacher working group has identified five draft elements to be included in the *WPS Portrait*. These elements are *collaboration, critical-thinking, effective communication, empathy and perseverance*. The group will convene virtually over the remainder of the 2019-20 school year to finalize these elements and to determine how best to visually represent the *WPS Portrait of a Graduate*. The group will then meet over the summer to begin next steps of defining and further elaborating upon the elements. This work will happen in-person or virtually, depending on the evolving public health situation. This group is committed to continuing with the next portion of this work and moving the next phase of the project forward. The superintendent and her team are committed to the work as well and grant funding has been allocated to continue and expand the work in accordance with our plan.

### ***Analysis***

When analyzed against the intended outcomes articulated in my theory of action (see page 26), this strategic project has been highly successful and is only incomplete

because of unforeseen delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. I believe that I effectively accomplished each of the “If” statements in my theory of action and that in turn each of my “Then” statements are on track to be realized as well. I am less certain, however, that this process has or will lead to the larger goal of increased coherence between schools and within the central office. I believe that the goal of rebuilding trust and positive relationships throughout the community has been achieved in part, but am increasingly convinced that full reconciliation is too large a goal for the scope of this project.

My first goal in this project was to build a sense of urgency around increased coherence with the superintendent and her senior team. I believe that I have accomplished this to a significant degree with the superintendent and some members of her senior team but not with others. The superintendent has begun to reference the *Portrait* as the centering document for our collective work and for the operationalization of the district strategic plan. At a convening about student discipline in Worcester with local, state and federal legislators, the superintendent told the assembled group that we needed to reframe the conversation from only measuring inputs or specific individual outcome metrics, to looking at our ultimate goals of preparing every student for post-secondary success. She specifically referenced the *Portrait of the Graduate* as the north star of what we actually want for all children and reminded the assembled group that all of our other efforts must be in service of this ultimate goal. This was the first time that I had heard the superintendent reframe the conversation in this manner and to publicly state that our efforts need to be more aligned as a result. She has also contracted with an outside firm to “tell the Worcester Public Schools story” with the *Portrait* and the district strategic plan

being the center-pieces of this work. I believe this shows that the superintendent is beginning to look at the totality of the work her team is doing collectively, not simply as a series of good, but perhaps unrelated efforts. This mindset shift will be an asset to her leadership and to the district. It appears that multiple department heads are each already incorporating the *Portrait* into their work and using it as a mechanism to connect various initiatives as well.

It is far less clear that some other members of the senior leadership are embracing the *Portrait*, or the idea of increased coherence that it represents. One senior member of the team shared with me that although she thought the effort was valuable, she did not see it lasting beyond my residency. Another indicated an apprehension to continue with the work under different leadership after my departure.

It appears that Kotter's description of a "guiding coalition", or my interpretation of it in regard to this project, is not sufficient. Perhaps, my guiding coalition was simply not large enough for the size of the district or the task at hand. It is possible that had I enlisted a steering committee that included more central office leaders, support would have naturally been greater. It is interesting that by Kotter's definition my guiding coalition was perhaps too skewed toward central office personnel and only included one school-based individual, yet it was the central office team whom I was least successful in engaging.

I believe that my problem engaging more central office leaders was most likely two-fold. First, I focused intently to ensure that this work was presented to teachers, and to a somewhat lesser extent to principals, as a response to a *felt need* as Cohen and Mehta (2017) put it, but neglected this altogether with central office staff. I made them aware of

the project and what it was intended to do for teachers and showed them that it was a priority of the superintendent. What I failed to do was to provide any compelling reason why this work would directly and substantively benefit them. On the contrary, it is quite possible that the message was inadvertently sent to at least some of these individuals that this work could be a threat to them. Even my framing of the *Portrait* ultimately becoming a tool for the superintendent to use to “vet”, “analyze” and “align” various efforts, initiatives and programs could have easily been interpreted as a threat to the current efforts of individuals and the departments they lead. Interestingly, those leaders who have most readily embraced the project are also those who had independently expressed a need for their work to better dovetail with that of other departments and initiatives.

In hindsight, it is easy to see why the effort may not have been as readily embraced by some members of the central office team. The same autonomy and empowerment that I was so cognizant of protecting for teachers and principals, is also in jeopardy for central office department heads if the *Portrait*, or increased coherence, means comprising on some of their favorite projects or ways of working. Perhaps there is an element of the central office transformation Meredith Honig advocates for that is necessary prior to Kotter’s step of building a guiding coalition. A mindset shift of central office leaders from dictating to schools what is needed to providing principals the instructional support they request is perhaps the clearest way to establish the necessary conditions for all central office staff to support an initiative like this. However, this process is itself complex and time-consuming and requires significant internal or external leadership capacity to accomplish.

It is likely that engaging the central office team would have been more successful if I had taken more time to promote ownership of the project by the superintendent before beginning the work in earnest. In large part, she was being introduced to this work and the concepts it represented at the same time others were. As a result, she was not in a position from the start to emphatically state why and how this work was important to her and to the district.

My role as resident, and the way I chose to interpret that role, may have also made me less effective in fully engaging all central office staff. I was welcomed by the superintendent and others in nearly every room and brought into the conversation about nearly every type of issue including those that were sensitive or highly confidential. I was cognizant, especially when I did not have a formal role in particular conversations, not to assert myself beyond the bounds of my role. . I believe my lack of positional authority actually aided the work with the teacher working group and with various focus groups, a point which I will expound upon further in the implications section. Specifically in relation to central office staff, however, it is possible that the project was seen by some as “just” the resident’s project, not a major priority of the superintendent and of the district.

Where I believe the project was highly successful was in engaging a significant number of classroom teachers in reflective, collaborative work and showing them a compelling reason for increased consistency and coherence. Kotter’s concept of a *volunteer army* worked exactly as intended in this case. I believe that the teacher working group was highly successful first and foremost because they willingly engaged in the work. Inherent in any voluntary group is a heightened willingness to engage. I also believe that framing the problem that we were attempting to address as something caused

by external factors, changes in society and the economy in this case, helped create the conditions for success. The grant supporting this work was titled “re-imagining high school” and much of the initial promotion of the need for this work was sub-par student assessment data. I chose to frame the opportunity or need for urgency around the external changes our graduates will face as an attempt to mitigate the defensiveness, deflection or generalized frustration that often accompanies data analysis in urban school districts. The implication, intentional or not, that our current practices are the problem is not motivating to most individuals who spend each and every day doing their best to support their students. Making a compelling case that we need to re-examine how we operate to best prepare our students for a changing world is far more exciting for most. Personally, I do not find the “future of work” research or the arguments made by individuals like Dintersmith and Wagner or Godin particularly compelling. I believe that the skills that they lay out as necessary to success in the future economy are not dissimilar to the skills most crucial now or in previous generations. But, as mentioned previously, I do find this type of research to be thought-provoking and engaging for teachers and a compelling reason for many individuals to reflect on how we generally *do school*.

One belief I held throughout all aspects of this project was that the mere act of thinking about what attributes may be most important for our graduates was valuable on its own. Not only did this begin to align all of our thinking around a shared idea of necessary skills and attitudes, but it also forced us to begin, consciously or not, to examine what connections or disconnects there were between our daily practice and what

we hoped for in terms of student outcomes. I believe that this exercise was important for all stakeholders throughout the city with a vested interest in the future of our graduates.

The teachers in our working group were not codifying the skills and attitudes our students need out of compliance or mandate, rather they were doing so out of a shared desire to improve outcomes. Likewise, they did not view the input of stakeholders across the city through an adversarial or defensive lens, but rather with an excitement for better understanding what parents and the community want and need for our graduates. They were not being told what they were doing was *wrong*, rather they were being assisted in determining how we could ensure our students are best prepared for a rapidly changing world.

The project had mixed success in terms of principals' direct support of the *Portrait of a Graduate* and in terms of the broader goal of engaging them in more coherence throughout the district. The vast majority of principals willingly engaged in the focus group I conducted with them and passed pertinent information about the project on to teachers and parents as requested. However, only a small handful were actively engaged with the teacher working group while all were invited and fewer still expressed interest in engaging with the curriculum planning process that will begin this summer. Part of this lack of participation can simply be attributed to how busy principals are. But, I think their restrained engagement with the process can be attributed to a number of additional factors as well. First, based on their past experience, it is likely that many seasoned principals in the district believe *this too shall pass* when it comes to *any* new initiative and that their guarded reaction to this particular work was no different than it would have been to anything else. This lack of true engagement grounded in previous

experiences in the district, spanning several superintendents for some of the individuals in question, can best be overcome simply with time and consistency of message. However, it is unclear to me if the political will is present for the *Portrait of the Graduate* and the concept of increased coherence that it represents to take root enough to fully engage these principals next year. Secondly, I believe that although principals and teachers had a shared understanding of the problems associated with too many divergent initiatives being thrust upon them, it is unclear that increased coherence would be the solution of choice for some principals. I believe that the vast majority of teachers in the system realize that full classroom level autonomy is not an option and therefore efforts to synthesize and combine initiatives would actually be a preferred solution to their *felt need* for less things to be constantly thrown at them. Principals could see this similarly in response to central office bombarding them with requirements, mandates and initiatives. But, principals could prefer a different solution: *less* coherence and *more* building level autonomy. As the system has a long history of building based autonomy, it is quite possible that many principals do not want the vast number of “asks” coming out of central office to be more aligned and coordinated, they simply want less “asks” and more freedom to run their schools as they see fit. Had I attempted to re-center the role of central office to function more as direct support to principals as Honig advocates, then perhaps the principals would have been more open to the *Portrait* and the increased coherence it represented. It is highly unlikely that this could have been substantively accomplished during the residency period, but at least introducing this type of shift and the logic behind it may have been helpful to this project and to the district overall. I also could have spent more time framing the context with the superintendent before beginning

the project as I referenced earlier and could have encouraged her to articulate to the principal corps that a return to complete building-level autonomy was not an option. This type of framing may have been helpful in showing the principals that increased coherence might actually be the best option available to them to support their need for less disparate mandates from the central office.

Some of the groups we engaged as focus groups and some individuals within them have had limited or negative relationships with the school system in the past. Using the positive and inclusive framing of the *Portrait* to re-engage these individuals has already led to improved dialogue. One step that I believe was important in this effort was to engage all as valued partners with unique perspectives. While some on my steering committee felt that we should spend considerable time sharing with stakeholder groups our *future of work* research, I pushed back on this idea and ultimately won. I believed that it was far more important to ensure that individuals and groups had their perspectives, knowledge and experiences captured in our final product than to have them simply parrot back to us our dubious projections about changes in the future economy. The value was not in us *telling* community members what our students needed, but in *asking* them. Our larger goal of improving relationships between the school system and various members of the community was served by unequivocally stating that *their* perspectives were important to us and that our ultimate goal of best preparing all students must encapsulate the hopes and dreams of parents, community members and others, not simply be a reflection of our ideas as professional educators. This framing was very well received across focus groups with several individuals thanking us for simply asking them what they believed. My only apprehension with this open-ended approach was that I was

not certain how much variance there would be across groups and was therefore not certain that we could design a final product in which all would believe their voices had been captured. It was clear after a few focus groups, however, that there was far more commonality across groups than we had anticipated. Not only did this reassure me that the final product could be representative of all but it also allowed me to begin conversations within groups about these commonalities. For example, a community group that has been somewhat disconnected from the administration over the past year selected “empathy” as their collective top attribute all graduates should possess and I then shared, to their surprise, that “empathy” had been the top choice of the principal group as well (see Appendix C).

It was also imperative that I balance the very real feelings of the superintendent, who continues to believe that she was unfairly attacked by some in the community over the past year about racial disparities in discipline, and the real and pressing need to rebuild community trust and involvement. It was important that the *Portrait*, and the solicitation of input for it, be presented to community members and to the superintendent as a new, separate and unique effort, not a continuation of past efforts that were seen as less than productive by parties on both sides. The effort needed to represent a reset for the superintendent and also be open to all, even those who had been highly critical of her in the past. I attempted to leverage my position as insider/outsider: trusted confidant and short-term visitor to the system, to assist the superintendent in accomplishing this goal. While I believe that the project has been highly successful in bridging this gap in the short-term, the continuation plan I have devised for next school year and beyond does not include substantive ways to continue to build and rebuild relationships in the community.

While I do not think that engaging in this work will be seen as a waste of time or a detriment by community members, I could have, and perhaps should have, been far more intentional about ways for this particular piece of work to continue to engage the community moving forward. I fear that community members may view the positive but limited participation they had with this project in isolation and not as step towards a more productive and collaborative overall relationship with the district.

## Implications for Self

Leading this strategic project, and the residency experience overall, have provided several implications for my leadership moving forward. The opportunity to participate with the superintendent in nearly all facets of the role without the responsibility of being the final decision-maker was an extremely valuable learning opportunity for me as I prepare for my own superintendency in the coming months. This dynamic allowed me to deliberately process situations and scenarios while contributing as I felt able. It also allowed me, in some cases, to move work forward in ways that would not have been possible were I the superintendent.

In my facilitation of both the teacher working group and of the various focus groups, my lack of positional authority was an asset. Working with the teachers, I believe there was a greater level of vulnerability and openness because I was not a formal supervisor to anyone in the group. With the various focus groups, I was able to engage a range of individuals in honest dialogue without them fearing that I would take anything personally or that their honesty would cost them any political capital. While in both cases it was known that I worked closely with the superintendent, the fact that I was *not* the superintendent was beneficial to the work, and therefore to her as well.

As I soon enter the superintendency myself, it will be imperative to remember that I will not always be the best person to lead a specific body of work simply because of my role. While some initiatives may benefit from the gravitas of the superintendent himself leading and others may need my leadership for reasons of practicality in a small system, some work streams will be better led by others. Recognizing when positional authority may be an asset in leading work and when it may be a hindrance is not always

clear but I believe should be considered at every turn. As the leader, I must deliberately empower others to lead whenever this is best for the organization and not allow my own ego or natural inclination toward leadership to stand in the way. Whenever there is a concern that positional authority, of myself or others on my team, might limit individuals' willingness and ability to be fully honest and vulnerable in their participation in an initiative, the system will be well served by me instead empowering others to lead. If there is uncertainty around this power dynamic, I believe that erring on the side of empowering others to lead will be of greater benefit to the organization than would be insisting on leading a body of work directly.

Another implication for my leadership centers on when coherence-building is best attempted. Specifically, I increasingly believe that structural work necessary to increase coherence is best undertaken immediately upon the leader's entry. As I enter my new role, particularly under the cloud of the current public health crisis, there may be a natural desire for me to forgo the hard work of coherence building with my team and instead jump directly into urgent work. Witnessing first-hand that coherence building appears more difficult as time progresses for any leader or team, it is important that I enter with a deliberate focus on the structures and systems most likely to move my team toward increased coherence.

As urgent as the initial work may be, being deliberate and explicit about a shared purpose and *why* of the work from the onset may be beneficial in the short-term and even more so over the long-term. It appears that in the short-term, a clearer shared vision will be a valuable tool for those on the central office team to help prioritize the seemingly endless tasks present in many entry scenarios. It may actually lead to more short-term

efficiency as it enables individuals and teams to better focus on those items that are not most urgent but perhaps most important. I intend, through numerous entry conversations, to capture as much data as possible around desired student outcomes from as many stakeholders as possible. This process will allow me to engage a variety of individuals from within and outside the district from the start as true partners with valuable input while also grounding my team's work in common goals around student outcomes.

Developing the structures and systems necessary for coherence building represent further implications for my own leadership. Analyzing the central office structure and the relationship between the central office and school principals are key to improvement efforts in any school. While the importance of teacher-level empowerment and leadership cannot be overstated, schools remain organizations in which the school principal is the key conduit between the district office and school or classroom level improvement. Re-defining the central office in such a way that instructional support and guidance are provided directly in response to principal needs is a crucial step toward individual school improvement. Developing a culture and the related structures in which all principals willingly rely on instructional leaders at the central office to best support their efforts and in which central office staff see this as their primary role is paramount. Central to my entry must be assessing to what degree this type of dynamic currently exists, to what degree a clarity in expectations is sufficient to improve it and to what degree increased capacity through training, reorganization or additional personnel is necessary.

A final important implication for my own leadership is the idea that process is often more important than the product. When I began this project, I was constantly projecting ahead to what I thought the elements of the *Portrait* should or would

ultimately be and what the implications to the learning process of these *things* would be. I was very concerned that we needed to *get it right* in regard to exactly which skills, attitudes and mindsets our graduates needed for post-secondary success. I found myself on several occasions lamenting the laborious process that we were undertaking and wishing that we could get to the end more efficiently. However, over time it became increasingly clear to me that the actual elements that we will ultimately include in our *Portrait* are less important than the process we used to get there. While each of draft elements was carefully chosen, I honestly believe that we could substitute any number of equally compelling other elements for any of ours and the *Portrait* would be as strong a product. The real value in the product lies in two places relative to process. First, the conversations and thoughts that those involved put forth as part of the process will change their thinking and teaching far more than the final product. Secondly, simply framing our work around everything we do being in service of intended outcomes for graduates is a momentous shift in and of itself. But, the shift is in our collective and individual thinking, not in whether or not we actually ended up with the five *right* elements. This belief that process is often more important than product and that empowering those closest to the work to formulate solutions can and should be applied to a variety of processes in my new district. Teacher teams are currently planning a pilot of multiple math curricula for the fall. I see my role in this work being to ensure that the process is thorough and that the decision-making process is clear, logical and transparent — and then step aside and empower the teacher teams to lead the actual work and make the final decision. Both of the curricula in the final pilot are acceptable to my leadership team. I have already made it clear that whichever program is chosen by the teachers will

be what we adopt. Allowing teachers to lead this work and decision-making process will take longer than my team deciding ourselves but should ultimately lead to far greater engagement of those responsible for implementation.

Similarly, one of my first initiatives for next school year is to introduce a more formal model of data analysis and a continuous improvement framework that we will use throughout the system. Like with the math pilot, I will view my role in this work as facilitator and will work to ensure that the process is understood and carried out consistently. But, I will be clear from the onset that problems of practice and suggested solutions to those problems will be generated by teams of teachers and will not be vetoed or micromanaged by myself or others at the district level. In these examples and others, I will attempt whenever possible to provide the conditions and support necessary for success by empowering those closest to the work to carry out processes in ways that are authentic and that allow them to take ownership for the final product.

## Implications for Site

I believe that the Worcester Public Schools are better for having engaged with this strategic project. A group of passionate, enthusiastic educators from throughout the system have embraced the *Portrait of a Graduate* project as a means to better reach their students and to become more collaborative with colleagues across the system. This has inherent value for the students served by these educators and others throughout the system. It is, I believe, a proof-point that providing more opportunities for teacher-level leadership can and should be an effective mechanism for making positive change.

This project has also provided a mechanism for the district to re-center conversations with a variety of stakeholders throughout the city. Whereas some stakeholder groups have previously been critical of what the district was doing and how, this work has begun the process of re-establishing a shared set of goals and values throughout the city. Specifically, the Worcester Public Schools must continue to engage parents and other community members as true partners by asking them what they want and leveraging their unique expertise and lived experiences as invaluable resources to our students. This type of true partnership should be central to community building moving forward.

The system is now well positioned to build upon the work of building upon the *Portrait* to best support all students. Developing shared definitions of each of the components will be a crucial first step to this work. Then, the system will be able to determine metrics and methods for measuring what success might look like for each element. This work will be difficult and imperfect as the type of elements identified in our draft *Portrait* are not easily quantified or able to be readily measured in traditional

ways. Further, if the system begins working toward these goals across all grade levels and subjects, success must be defined incrementally as well. There will need to be shared understanding of what success toward each element looks like at each grade level and across a variety of subjects so that the entire system can start tracking progress toward ultimate graduate outcomes.

The Worcester Public Schools should then engage and support educators from across the system to undertake the work of determining how each element of the *Portrait* can best be embedded in instruction throughout the system. This work should involve deliberate analysis of current scope and sequence to determine where opportunities already exist to maximize student exposure to *Portrait* elements and where expansion or realignment are necessary. It is highly likely that professional development will be necessary throughout the system as the vast majority of teachers have not been explicitly trained in teaching the types of inter-personal skills core to our *Portrait*.

Once this work has begun, the system should ensure that this type of analysis and reflection become continuous and iterative, not simply an exercise to be done once. Not only should the system continuously interrogate the ways in which we working to ensure each student embodies the *Portrait* and our progress toward those goals, but it should also continuously and systematically interrogate the elements themselves. As the world around graduates is constantly evolving, so must our efforts to best prepare them for success in that world.

Finally, the Worcester Public Schools must work to determine if this process is, and will continue to be, an effective means to increase coherence. It is already apparent that the *Portrait of a Graduate* work will be an effective means to increase shared vision

and to engage the community. It is far less clear if this work will lead to increased coherence within the central office and across the district. If it is the impetus for a desire for increased coherence, it is likely that structural changes in the relationship between the central office and schools and between various central office departments will also be necessary. While the Portrait may very well provide the *why* and to some degree the *what* of increased coherence, structures and systems for better alignment, coordination and communication will be needed to provide a feasible *how* for this work.

## Implications for Sector

The sector at large may benefit from shifting our efforts from a focus on inputs and outputs to a focus on outcomes in young adulthood and beyond. This shift can and should be further considered not only in public school systems but also state departments, non-profit organizations within the sector and even those responsible for student assessments.

All measures of inputs or outputs we use are imperfect predictors of actual graduate success; we regularly neglect to define what true graduate success looks like. Our work showed that, at least in this context, many educators and other stakeholders do not regularly reflect on the connection between our daily efforts in schools and the actual adult outcomes we most want for our graduates. Developing a *Portrait of a Graduate* could represent a valuable first step toward accomplishing this shift to measurement of actual adult outcomes. However, it also appears that much work remains if our goal is to ultimately better map our K-12 efforts to actual adult successes. Whereas we can make logical guesses as to which attributes will most correlate to various aspects of perceived adult success, we currently lack the mechanisms to be certain. We can only surmise that certain attributes may lead to some set of desired outputs and can then attempt to map these outputs to specific successes or failures of adult graduates. Agreeing on what success actually does or should look like for adult graduates in a community is difficult work. One could argue that agreement on what constitutes *success* may even be inappropriate as every family and individual may define it differently. However, I believe that a community can and should collaboratively engage in conversations about desired outcomes for students. Making these conversations inclusive and community-led is

vitality important and any measure of *success* should be broad enough to allow for differences at the cultural, family and individual level. As real as this need to recognize and celebrate difference is, it should not prohibit efforts to better prepare all graduates for life-long success. Codifying, even very generally, ways to measure adult graduates' health, well-being and financial security is not impossible. A host of measures of adult outcomes already exist, albeit often not at the individual level. There is no reason why we as a sector should not be far more intentional in assessing our successes and needs for improvement against the metrics that already exist and determining ways to gather more adult outcome data where current measures are deemed insufficient.

If we are serious about this work, school systems, state departments of education and all others who are invested in PK-12 education must begin to actually track graduates into and throughout adulthood. Determining, at the individual level, to what degree graduates are experiencing adult success would be necessary work to undertake. Then, in addition to rigorous work to design the learning process to better prepare students to reach these outcomes, much work would be needed to re-examine our traditional methods of assessing student progress in the K-12 sector and beyond. Our most readily available and efficient modes such as standardized test scores, classroom grades and various markers of completion like graduation rates all seem ill-suited to assessing student progress toward desired adult outcomes. A shift toward more authentic assessments would not only provide a clearer picture of progress but would also be necessary if we were to ask educators to embrace a substantial change in their practice. Regardless of what we tell classroom teachers and building level leaders we value, it is that which we assess and ultimately hold them accountable for that we signify truly matters. Such a shift

would also need to be coordinated to a large degree with colleges and universities as traditional student readiness measures like standardized test scores and grade point averages are relied on heavily in admissions decisions.

The sector at large must continue to analyze the true purpose of our work with students while being intentional about how to best assess our progress toward that purpose. The sector must assure that the support and accountability we are directing at schools and classrooms is aligned to those aims. This work is difficult and must be iterative and on-going. But, it is necessary if we truly aim to best prepare all students for life-long success.

## Conclusion

The Worcester Public Schools are poised to become a more coherent organization that is acutely focused on and better able to effectively prepare all graduates for post-secondary success. For this to happen, the organization must continue to articulate and be driven by a clear and compelling collective *why*. I believe that using a strong and inclusive *Portrait of a Graduate* to guide all work is just such a compelling *why*. I also believe that the district has a group of energized teachers who are ready and willing to take the lead in operationalizing this work to maximize its impact on all students.

There are several factors that the district must resolve if this work is to be a long-term success. First, the superintendent must continue the process of framing this work and way of thinking as central to the district's work and not just a single initiative. She and her team must continue to publicly state this as often as possible. More importantly, they must signify this through actions; by using desired outcomes for all graduates as the filter through which to judge, vet and analyze programs, initiatives and efforts of the district. The system must continue to work to ensure that this work and all other work that she views as invaluable is not *owned* by any single individual.

It is also imperative that the district continue to engage stakeholders and remain committed to rebuilding relationships and trust across the city. This is crucial to the school system being able to move work forward without having to continuously be on the defensive and is also crucial to ensuring that our graduates are supported in a comprehensive and aligned manner by individuals and groups inside and outside the school system from across the city.

It seems clear that an exercise like co-developing a *Portrait of a Graduate* could be an effective tool for a system to increase shared vision. However, to truly increase coherence in curriculum and instruction, it appears that significant work must then be undertaken to define and quantify the attributes we aspire for our students to have. A shared definition of a graduate characteristic such as *empathy* is difficult to create and any way of accurately assessing such an attribute is even more difficult. I believe that first, a system should continuously engage all of the stakeholders who contributed to the initial *Portrait* through the process of defining and quantifying outcome metrics. Without deep and substantive engagement of all throughout this process, disconnection, resentment and misalignment of expectations could actually be greater than if stakeholders were not engaged from the start. It is much easier to agree that we each want students who are *empathetic* than it is to jointly define the term for our students in our particular context and to co-create methods to measure such an attribute in our students. It appears that much effort is needed around this by systems who have undertaken various processes of defining graduate profiles or portraits as a second, and perhaps more difficult, phase of this work.

In terms of my own leadership, I am taking from this experience several major lessons. First, I am increasingly convinced that building coherence is best accomplished through shared expectations of outcomes or a collective *why* coupled with technical and strategic efforts to coordinate programs and initiatives. In my district, I need to ensure that all decisions are based on shared understanding and desired outcomes. It is also readily apparent to me that although difficult to do, the work of coherence building is best accomplished immediately upon entry and grows more difficult the longer the leadership

team has been in place. I will do everything I can in the urgency and chaos of transition to ensure that coherence-making is part of our initial design process as opposed to something we attempt to retrofit later in our tenure. Finally, I am increasingly aware that positional authority can be an asset or a hindrance in moving work forward and I need to continuously analyze who is best suited to lead work and when. As the superintendent, it will be incumbent upon me to empower others to lead work, not only for their own development and growth, but also because often the work will benefit from leadership by someone other than the superintendent.

This experience has reaffirmed my belief that empowering those closest to the work while providing them the tools and support to succeed is the most effective mechanism for change. Education is an exceptionally complicated and naturally incoherent endeavor. Providing a compelling reason for those closest to the work to want to make positive changes is far more effective than attempting to mandate change that they do not fully own. An effective system leader must nurture a shared vision, intentionally create the systems and structures necessary for such a shared vision to coherently drive the work of the system, and continuously empower those at all levels of the organization to best meet all students' needs.

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### Mission of Worcester Public Schools

Provide all students the opportunity to advance their scholarship with a rigorous core curriculum and high-quality instruction. This enables students to discover the expanse of their academic talents, shape the quality of their character, and develop the confidence to become conscientious, reflective citizens who are empowered to better our community and our world.

### Our Vision for 2023

Worcester Public Schools will be a national leader in education, offering high-quality learning experiences, ensuring that all young people are prepared to thrive, and equipping them to become engaged citizens in their community.

### Theory of Change

**IF** we embrace a student-centered approach that:

- fosters innovation in schools;
- provides vital supports for teaching and learning;
- ensures access to modern technology;
- develops the critical thinking and technical skills of all students; and
- leverages the input of families and community;

**THEN** we will build a system of diverse, high-performing schools that can equip all students with the academic, social, and technical skills necessary to thrive.

### Worcester Public Schools in 2023

The Worcester community will transform its public school system into one which ensures all students receive a high-quality education and are prepared for the challenges of tomorrow.

#### Where We're Headed

##### WPS STUDENTS WILL

Current      2023

31% → 47%

MEET/EXCEED EXPECTATIONS ON 3RD GRADE ELA MCAS

65% → 76%

ENROLL IN POSTSECONDARY OPPORTUNITIES<sup>8</sup>

17% → 14%

REDUCE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

1:4 → 1:1

ACCESS TECHNOLOGY (STUDENT TO DEVICE RATIO)

##### WPS WILL

INCREASE PER PUPIL EXPENDITURE BY

↑ 8%

INCREASE NUMBER OF HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOLS BY

↑ 20%

INCREASE DIVERSITY OF NEW HIRES BY

↑ 25%

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*Appendix B*



Adapted from Kotter, J.P. (2012). *Leading change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

