

# Developing a Strategic Plan for Academic Success for Seattle Public Schools

MCKINSEY AND COMPANY

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# Developing a Strategic Plan for Academic Success

Seattle Public Schools (SPS) has embarked on a strategic planning process to help support students, parents and educators by identifying potential priority initiatives to improve academic achievement and attainment over the next five years. McKinsey & Company is pleased to have served SPS as a strategic advisor in this process—collecting and analyzing information that will serve as the foundation for initiatives SPS pursues as it develops its strategic plan. Throughout this process, we have worked closely with SPS to diagnose the situation, examine best practices, develop potential strategic initiatives, determine potential priorities, and lay out an implementation timeline for the next five years that will increase student achievement while addressing the diverse needs of the District.

This report recaps the diagnostic and initiative planning effort from November 2007 through February 2008. It begins by describing the broad strengths and challenges facing SPS and the need for a strategic plan, followed by a brief overview of the project approach. The bulk of the report covers diagnostic findings in five focus areas that identified through internal and external stakeholder interviews prior to project commencement (September and October 2007):

- A. Improve quality and consistency of learning and teaching (Learning and Teaching)
- B. Increase and better support District talent (Talent)
- C. Drive efficiency and effectiveness in Central Office operations (Central Office)
- D. Introduce effective performance management (Performance Management)
- E. Improve stakeholder engagement (Stakeholder Engagement)

Together, these findings in these focus areas form the fact base upon which SPS will build its strategic plan. Following the diagnostic section are specific potential priority initiatives designed to address the challenges identified in each of the five areas.

Readers should consider this report in its entirety, including the four appendices. Even so, this material does not represent the full scope of the diagnostic and strategic planning effort, capability building, or other contributions, nor does it reflect the ongoing development and initial implementation of the SPS strategic plan that will be completed by SPS over the next few months.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Additional work included three presentations to the Seattle School Board on January 30<sup>th</sup>, February 25<sup>th</sup>, and March 7<sup>th</sup> 2008. The presentations used in those presentations can be found online at [www.seattleschools.org/area/strategicplan/information.xml](http://www.seattleschools.org/area/strategicplan/information.xml)

## **INTRODUCTION**

This report synthesizes the joint effort between McKinsey and SPS over the past four months to create a strategic framework to inform the development of SPS' strategic plan. It is divided into the following sections:

- ¶ Need for a Strategic Plan
- ¶ Project Approach
- ¶ Findings from the Diagnostic
- ¶ Five-Year Strategic Vision and Goals
- ¶ Potential Strategic Initiatives for the Next 15 Months
- ¶ Longer-Range Potential Strategic Initiatives
- ¶ Overall Next Steps
- ¶ Appendices A-D

## **NEED FOR A STRATEGIC PLAN**

SPS seeks to advance the academic achievement of every student. The largest school district in the state of Washington, SPS operates 93 schools, serves nearly 46,000 students, and is one of the largest employers in King County. Like many urban school districts, SPS faces a host of challenges, including the need to address a large disparity in achievement levels between students of different races and incomes, serve the various needs of an extremely diverse community, and overcome significant resource and operational constraints.

At all grade levels, there is a significant achievement gap between white and non-white students in both reading and math: up to 34 percent in reading and 51 percent in math. There is a similarly large achievement gap between students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches (FRL) and those who do not: up to 31 percent in reading and 43 percent in math.<sup>2</sup>

While Seattle is among the most educated<sup>3</sup> of the urban districts in the United States<sup>4</sup>—and is in the first quartile for wealth among these districts—it has one of the widest variances in affluence. The FRL percentage in Seattle schools varies from 0 to 95 percent<sup>5</sup>, which,

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A-8

<sup>3</sup> Percent of adult population with bachelors degree or higher, [www.schooldatadirect.org](http://www.schooldatadirect.org) (member districts of Council of Great City Schools)

<sup>4</sup> Member districts of Council of Great City Schools

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix A-6

in addition to other demographic differences, is a strong indicator of the wide-range of needs that must be addressed.

The District is resource constrained and has limited monetary and personnel capacity in key functions. In addition, poor project planning and execution has placed significant stress on the system. To further complicate matters, the District has experienced high leadership turnover (five superintendents in the past 12 years) and has developed a poor reputation among local residents.

In light of these challenges, SPS leaders decided in the summer of 2007 to embark on a comprehensive strategic planning process to help the District better serve the needs of its diverse students and address stakeholder concerns.

## **PROJECT APPROACH**

SPS, with the support of local foundations, retained McKinsey to serve as an independent advisor on the strategic plan. McKinsey's work covered two phases: (1) a detailed diagnostic of SPS today and (2) the development of potential initiatives to address the needs identified in the diagnostic and initial prioritization of these initiatives, including planning and preliminary resource requirements for implementation in the near and longer term.

### **1. Diagnostic work**

The fact base for the Diagnostic included interviews of internal and external stakeholders and recognized education experts, surveys of instructors and instructional leadership, existing SPS data and research, observations of SPS processes, and published research.

More than 1,500 people were surveyed or interviewed over the course of the project, including the following<sup>6</sup>:

- ¶ 79 principals who completed a qualitative and quantitative survey examining practices and improvement opportunities in the District
- ¶ 54 individuals from the SPS management and executive leadership
- ¶ 1, 385 instructional staff participated in the Instructional Staff (IS) survey completed by Pyramid Communications
- ¶ SPS students and their families, members of Principal Association of Seattle Schools (PASS), International Union of Operating Engineers (Local 609), education faculty from the University of Washington and Western Washington University, the Parent Teachers and Student Association (PTSA), the City of

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendices A-1, A-2, all interviews were confidential to encourage openness

Seattle, the State Office of Education, and the State Legislature, as well as representatives from other community organizations, foundations, and government groups

¶ 28 education experts to round out perspectives on best practices in education

A working team comprising the Superintendent and seven managers from the District contributed significantly to this review. Representatives from the District provided insights and analysis on critical processes and issues as well as perspectives on SPS culture and the educational expectations of stakeholders in Seattle.

The diagnostic identified organizational strengths and ongoing initiatives that SPS can build upon, as well as weaknesses in the current organization to address through initiatives in the strategic plan. The diagnostic results, summarized later in this report, were discussed with the Superintendent and her management team, other Central Office managers, the SPS School Board, and other internal and external stakeholders at a series of meetings held between January and March 2008.

## **2. Development and prioritization of initiatives**

The second stage of the effort focused on developing a list of potential initiatives to address the needs identified in the diagnostic. The potential initiatives consider SPS' unique situation and are based upon practices in other districts that have contributed to improvement when addressing similar challenges.

Through conversations with the Superintendent, her management team, and the SPS School Board, the current list of initiatives under consideration for implementation in the first 15 months of the plan has narrowed to 22. An additional 19 potential initiatives have been identified for reconsideration in subsequent annual planning cycles and may be implemented over the next five years. In addition, it is expected that some of the current 22 initiatives will also be deferred beyond the next 15 months prior to completion of the final Strategic Plan. Identifying the current list of 22 initiatives was based upon an assessment of the potential impact and feasibility of each initiative. Further, an implementation plan for each initiative was created in order to consider dependencies, sequencing, timing, and resourcing. The District will continue to evaluate these initiatives and identify a manageable final set of initiatives to begin over the next 15 months prior to completion of the Strategic Plan.

SPS recognizes that the long-term success of any effort to improve the District must be rooted in the organization itself and not rely on ongoing outside assistance. In recognition of this challenge, McKinsey and District leadership actively collaborated as a working team throughout the diagnostic, initiative identification, and prioritization process.

## FINDINGS FROM THE DIAGNOSTIC

The diagnostic paints a picture of both strength and opportunity. Identified strengths provide a sturdy foundation upon which to build as SPS seeks to address the improvement opportunities identified by the diagnostic in each of the five areas. These opportunities are summarized below and detailed in Appendix A.

### Strengths to build upon

- ¶ **Clear examples of a strong instructional core.** Currently SPS has four Golden Apple recognized instructors since 2005, 57 National Board Certified Teachers, one NCLB Blue Ribbon School, and two International Baccalaureate High Schools, and SPS has received the Academic Improvement Award from the State of Washington.<sup>7</sup>
- ¶ **Committed stakeholders who are passionate about improving public education in Seattle.** The interview and survey findings, as well as recent school levy voting results, support observations that stakeholders have a strong desire for high-quality public education in Seattle and a strong willingness to help SPS accomplish its goals.
- ¶ **Hard-working, committed District personnel.** Throughout the study, we observed numerous examples of professional dedication at the Central Office, including people working 60-80 hours per week, foregoing weekends off, and in some cases accepting below-market compensation, in order to accomplish their goals.
- ¶ **Committed leadership team focused on accountability.** Throughout the diagnostic, senior leadership demonstrated a proactive, problem-solving approach to decision-making, and showed a clear willingness to establish priorities in line with District objectives and to set goals for themselves to which they are held accountable.
- ¶ **SPS Board focused on prioritizing initiatives and implementing them with fidelity.** The diagnostic found that the SPS Board is determined to focus District goals and initiatives by emphasizing *quality* of implementation over *quantity* of initiatives.
- ¶ **Examples of best-practice processes.** The diagnostic found a number of best-practice processes, such as procurement and the Building Excellence III (BEX) Oversight Committee, which provide opportunities to model transformative behaviors and structures upon which the rest of the organization can build.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.seattleschools.org/area/awards/districthonors.html>

¶ **A window of opportunity to act and galvanize change.** SPS has many stakeholders – both external (philanthropists, community groups, business leaders) and internal (SPS Board, SEA, PASS, IUOE (Local 609), teachers, principals, staff) – who are united in their desire and willingness to support the District in achieving its mission and vision.

## **A. Learning and Teaching**

Learning and teaching (L&T) is the area of primary focus for SPS. As measured through the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), district elementary schools outperform state averages by three to six percentage points (in math, reading, writing, and science), but middle and high schools underperform by up to five percentage points<sup>8</sup>. In addition, there are wide variances in school performance and a significant achievement gap within the district.

The review of L&T examined its two core components: *consistency*, which refers to student achievement levels and the degree to which they vary across the district (both among and within schools); and *quality*, which encompasses the strategies employed and to what degree of effectiveness.

**Consistency.** To understand specific L&T needs, the diagnostic examined three dimensions of consistency: variations in school performance within SPS; the size and nature of the achievement gap; and how student achievement in SPS compares with achievement outside the District.

SPS—as in other urban school districts—has a high correlation between affluence and achievement<sup>9</sup>. Generally, wealthy schools perform better than schools with a higher percentage of FRL recipients. At SPS, this affluence and performance gap manifests itself geographically. Schools in the north of the city, particularly those north of the Ship Canal, tend to have more affluent students and are, in general, higher performing than many schools to the south<sup>10</sup>.

This variance in performance is pronounced and occurs both among schools and demographic groups. Of the 93 schools in Seattle, only 26 have academic proficiency (based on WASL reading and math scores) of 80 percent or more, while 40 range between 50 percent and 80 percent, and 27 fall below 50 percent. The gap between the highest- and lowest-performing quintiles of schools is greatest in math (62 percent, versus 40 percent in reading).<sup>11</sup> This pattern is repeated across demographic groups in reading and math at all levels, as measured by the WASL (4th, 7th, and 10th grades). Consistently, white students

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix A-4

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix A-5

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A-6

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix A-7

outperform African-American, Asian, Latino, and Native American students, while non-FRL students score higher than FRL students on the WASL.<sup>12</sup>

Although SPS has begun to address differences in student and school needs through an initiative aimed at improving schools in Southeast Seattle (the Southeast Education Initiative), High School Reform initiative, and the Flight School initiative to provide additional support to certain schools identified as being in need, more work remains. The challenge will be to expand these programs and continue to determine how best to meet the needs of diverse student and school segments.

**Quality.** SPS has already begun to address the L&T quality issues suggested by the district-wide gap in math by developing and rolling out an aligned math curriculum<sup>13</sup> to elementary and middle schools. In addition, the District has initiated a number of peer review audits on L&T issues, including reviews of curriculum, Special Education, Bilingual, Academic Safety Net, and the Accelerated Progress Program. However, the diagnostic revealed that additional work must be done to address the challenges and unique L&T needs of the District.

The diagnostic examined the quality of L&T along four dimensions, based largely on the SchoolWorks framework used to determine winners of the Broad Prize for Urban Education.<sup>14</sup> In best-practice districts, the *curriculum* effectively supports student learning, *instruction* provides extensive opportunities for student learning, frequent *assessments* are used to inform instructional decisions and promote student learning, and the *cultural climate* appropriately supports learning for all.

Despite some progress in these areas, SPS must still make improvements in creating effective and aligned curricula, instruction, assessments, and cultural climates in its schools. Based on the school leader survey conducted as part of the diagnostic, principals believe these are among the most valuable supports that the Central Office can provide to schools. Indeed, when asked to rank the top five needs of schools, respondents identified an aligned curriculum as the greatest need, closely followed by assessments of student performance that could be used to shape instruction.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix A-8

<sup>13</sup> Aligned curriculum: System in which outcomes for student learning are clearly established and aligned to the state standards, and where those standards are reflected in the materials that are used throughout the District

<sup>14</sup> For more information, see <http://www.broadprize.org/TBPSchoolWorksQualityCriteria.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix A-9

## **B. Supporting District Talent**

The diagnostic found that SPS can improve its ability to attract and support teachers, principals, and staff by modifying its hiring, support, professional development, and evaluation processes.<sup>16</sup>

**Hiring process.** Overall, SPS does not have a well-defined hiring timeline or process for teachers and principals; as a result, up to 40 to 50 percent of open positions may remain vacant by the beginning of the school year and therefore must be filled by substitutes. While substitute teachers may be as accomplished as contracted instructional staff, the nature of the substitute role is temporary and results in inconsistent teaching relationships with students. SPS should revise its hiring process to ensure a full roster of high-quality teachers on the first day of school.

Much of the inefficiency in the hiring process is driven by the lack of stringent deadlines for advertising positions and accepting applications. Initial advertisement of open positions occurs later than in surrounding districts, some of which is caused by teachers and principals who do not notify the District of their intended departures in a timely manner, often providing notification as late as a few weeks prior to the start of the school year. Finally, most aspects of the instructional hiring process occur at the site level, adding to the length and complexity of the process; candidates are required to submit a separate application to each school.

In the Central Office, recruiting and hiring has also been a challenge. The lack of a dedicated recruiting function has left departments with inadequate support. The result has been long delays to fill vacancies and inconsistent hiring practices across departments, as well as the incurrence of supplemental expenses (e.g., for external recruiting services).

Other long-standing SPS practices and policies pose obstacles to attracting new talent. Although the District has recently revised its salary structure for certificated staff, Seattle salaries, both starting and maximum, historically have been lower than those offered by surrounding districts. For Central Office staff, compensation has not kept pace with the local market and recruiting for specialized functions (e.g., finance and IT) has been challenging.

**Retention.** While attrition rates of teachers and principals in SPS are in line with those in other urban districts around the country and neighboring districts in the Puget Sound area, surveys of instructional staff and instructional leaders indicated several drivers of departures from the District that should be addressed by SPS.<sup>17</sup> Exit interviews of certificated SPS staff indicate a high level of satisfaction with their schools, but less satisfaction with the District as a whole. In one survey, only 38 percent of respondents

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<sup>16</sup> See Appendix A-10

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix A-11

said they would recommend SPS to a friend, and only 29 percent believed that SPS leadership could lead the District to success.

Attrition of instructional staff is driven largely by stressful working conditions. Of those surveyed upon departure, 64 percent indicated that stress was their primary reason for leaving SPS. The Instructional Staff Survey investigated this topic further and found that, of the 1,385 respondents, almost all indicated that this stress was driven by insufficient time to meet instructional goals, the complexity of students' academic and nonacademic needs, lack of time to collaborate with other instructional staff, student classroom behavior, and the need to prepare students for standardized tests.<sup>18</sup> Additional significant drivers of attrition were workload, salary, and quality of supervision received.

The diagnostic found that SPS could benefit from reviewing its workload, support, and compensation policies to better meet the needs of its instructional staff and leaders as well as Central Office staff, and to be more competitive with surrounding districts and private-sector jobs.

**Professional development and mentoring.** SPS teachers and principals do not receive sufficient support and professional development due to a lack of time, resources, and focus. For Central Office staff, professional development is even more lacking.<sup>19</sup>

A 2004 study by the University of Texas at Dallas indicated that although teachers and principals can improve throughout their careers, generally most gains are made in their first year. Programs in best-practice districts throughout the country take advantage of this by providing significant mentoring and coaching for the first few years of a teacher or principal's career; many also offer intense, focused induction programs to increase effectiveness in the first days and weeks.

SPS provides some – but limited – support to teachers and principals early in their tenure. The District runs orientation programs but does not offer focused induction programs or academies. The Staff Training, Assistance, and Review (STAR) mentor program provides mentors to observe, support, and provide feedback to new teachers; however, demand for this program far outstrips supply. Of the roughly 200-400 new teachers who enter SPS annually, only 72 were provided with a mentor for the 2007-08 academic year and 18 were waitlisted, leaving large numbers of entering teachers without a mentor or coach.<sup>20</sup> Bringing the orientation and STAR programs to scale would help to alleviate some of the pressures and concerns that new teachers and principals experience early in their careers.

Likewise, SPS professional development programs do not adequately address the needs of teachers and principals over the course of their careers. A survey of instructional leaders

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<sup>18</sup> Analysis of survey results completed by Pyramid Communications

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix A-12

<sup>20</sup> Data unavailable on number of teachers hired in 2007-08; however, across the years, number of teachers with STAR mentors remains relatively constant, while numbers of new hires fluctuates from 200-400, leaving many new teachers without mentors annually

indicated that they currently spend five to seven percent of their time annually on professional development, but they would like to increase that amount to nine to eleven percent. Moreover, the professional development programs that are available are not as effective as they could be. The diagnostic found that professional development is not aligned with District goals, there is no clear schedule across the year, teacher and principal participation in such programs is tracked manually (limiting analysis or systematic follow-up), and there are few options for teachers and principals who need or want additional support beyond the standard program.

The review suggests there is a significant opportunity to strengthen professional development and mentoring programs, both to enhance and support talent in the District as well as to meet the demands of teachers and principals.

**Promotion and performance support.** Unlike many districts, SPS is well positioned to provide good promotion and performance support to both teachers and principals. Mechanisms for doing so exist and are specified in their respective collective bargaining agreements. The challenge, however, is implementing and adhering to the programs as defined.<sup>21</sup>

The diagnostic review suggests that SPS would benefit from more consistent and standard evaluation processes for all District staff. While SPS does have processes in place and is conducting evaluations, these reviews tend to occur on an ad-hoc basis, rather than on a regular schedule. In addition, the rigor behind the goals and targets defined in the evaluations varies by situation. Some metrics may be measurable and tracked appropriately, while others are simply boxes to be checked off. Furthermore, review conversations are standard neither in length, content nor frequency.

Similarly, SPS has mechanisms for linking review outcomes to promotion and performance support, but these are rarely utilized. Three professional evaluative tracks have been defined for teachers. New instructional staff begin on the Performance Cycle (PC), in which they receive moderate supervision and support, have limited control over goal setting, and participate in regular conversations with their supervisor. After four years of satisfactory reviews on this track, individuals may be moved to the Professional Growth Cycle (PGC), in which they receive increased autonomy and may set their own goals with the input of a supervisor. Should a teacher on the PGC receive an unsatisfactory review, he or she may be shifted back to the PC for additional support. Finally, should a teacher continue to struggle and require additional support, he or she may be placed on Probation, during which he or she will have significant oversight and frequent meetings with an evaluator. Probation allows for contract nonrenewal should performance not improve with additional support. While these programs exist to support and develop teachers, they are used infrequently for their intended purpose: three of 2,212 teachers on PGC were switched to PC in 2006-07, and eight of 3,220 teachers were placed on probation that year.

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendix A-13

The effect of this lack of adherence to the contractual evaluative mechanisms is insufficient support for teachers and principals when they need it most, a reduction in the usefulness of the PGC as a promotional mechanism, and an inability to pursue contract non-renewal when it would be the best policy for both staff and students. Finally, a lack of understanding of the evaluation processes and steps required to move teachers and principals from track-to-track may ultimately result in dissatisfaction among instructional staff and leaders due to the lack of transparency and expectation setting.

### **C. Central Office**

The SPS Central Office faces significant challenges. Several years of budget cutbacks have reduced capacity in several critical skills and capabilities, Central Office staff currently faces a large number of projects, and high leadership turnover has impacted progress.<sup>22</sup> In particular, the Human Resources (HR), Finance, Enrollment, and Information Technology (IT) functions have been burdened with major initiatives, including the WSS funding formula change, the WISE (SAP) HR system implementation, the student assignment policy revision, and the IT legacy system (VAX) migration – all of which have affected responsiveness to normal operational issues. These projects have hampered the Central Office’s ability to handle day-to-day operations and have increased response time to employee questions/concerns, as well as decreased principals’ time for instructional leadership.<sup>23</sup>

**Finance.** Although SPS has built up cash reserves over the past few years and has stabilized its financial condition through successive budget cuts<sup>24</sup>, the outlook is less secure. The budget development process for 2008-09 is behind schedule, and approximately \$21 million of the current \$58 million in reserves (as of the end of FY2006-07) will likely be used in the next fiscal year. Furthermore, the inability of the financial systems to fully track spending against budget in real time exacerbates the risk of overspending and a subsequent deterioration of financial condition.

The SPS budget process is complex, takes longer than peer districts, and budget allocations are not clearly aligned with District goals and initiatives. Financial planning in the current cycle has been primarily based on preserving the organizational status quo; for that reason, many programs have not been re-evaluated for their effectiveness or fit with the District’s strategic direction. Furthermore, the lack of a tracking system in the Central Office makes it difficult to identify overspending and hold budget owners accountable to their projections. Recommendations include revisions that would shorten and simplify the

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<sup>22</sup> See Appendices A-14, A-15

<sup>23</sup> See Appendices A-16, A-17

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix A-14

budget process, enable budget allocations more consistent with the strategic plan, and track spending against projections (improvements that school leaders identify as important<sup>25</sup>).

**Technology Services.** The Department of Technology Services (DoTS) has experienced significant leadership and staff attrition in recent years and has not been involved in the planning process for the large projects it is expected to support. As a result, the department has become isolated from the rest of the Central Office and strategic planning does not adequately account for technology implications. IT planning has not been linked with District planning because it is tied to a six-year cycle based on the Building and Technology Assessment capital levy. This has resulted in large IT projects initiated by District leaders that don't fit with the DoTS technology plan (e.g., the WISE implementation). In addition, senior SPS leaders rarely conceive of or sponsor IT initiatives and projects, leaving these to be owned and managed by DoTS without additional collaboration or oversight.<sup>26</sup>

Two of the biggest challenges to DoTS, as well as to SPS in general, are the high reliance on customized software programs and the remaining ties to a VAX legacy IT platform. Due to the size of the District and the unique demands of several processes, including the choice enrollment model and individualized transportation services, DoTS supports custom-built or highly customized software programs that require increased Central Office expertise. The VAX platform is neither cost-effective nor suitable for new functions, and supporting it poses an increasing operational burden for DoTS staff, hindering long-term system improvements. Further, the need to synchronize the VAX and other systems prevents already-constrained staff from taking on additional IT projects or responding to customer needs in a timely manner. Although much progress has been made to migrate many District systems off the VAX platform over the past several years, short-term demands have diverted focus from perhaps most difficult system still remaining on VAX—the student assignment system. Committing the resources required to fully transition from the VAX system would drive significant process improvements throughout the Central Office and increase flexibility for DoTS to address long-term system enhancements.<sup>27</sup>

**Human Resources.** The pace and magnitude of changes over the past year have affected the responsiveness of the HR department, and have had a significant impact on SPS, both within the Central Office and in the schools. Most recently, HR staff have had to address the simultaneous reorganization of the department and conversion of HR software systems from PeopleSoft to SAP.

These changes have reduced capacity in the department and created an environment of constant “firefighting.” For example, payroll process challenges have required the entire HR department to spend all their time to overcome, which means they cannot respond to

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<sup>25</sup> See Appendix A-18

<sup>26</sup> See Appendix A-19

<sup>27</sup> See Appendix A-20

other inquiries or take on new projects. As a result, e-mails and voicemails remain unreturned, many Central Office departments must make hiring decisions without HR support, and the process of hiring teachers and principals has become even more difficult.

**Support Services.** Transportation services are high cost and a high priority for instructional leaders.<sup>28</sup> Despite recent improvements to transportation services, including a new IT system for bus scheduling and cost efficiency gains by shifting high school students to public transportation routes, challenges remain. The current student assignment system is the root cause of these challenges because it requires complicated administrative processes and complex routing systems that collectively lead to high transportation related costs. Simplifying or revising the student assignment system could reduce complications in both transportation and student assignment processes, leading to system-wide improvements.

**Facilities.** Compared with the other functions under review, maintenance issues are not an immediate priority.<sup>29</sup> However, should resource and time constraints allow the number of facilities and maintenance procedures currently utilized warrant additional review. A backlog of deferred maintenance to older buildings was cited by a 2002 report and has been the focus of recent local media coverage. The backlog is the result of a decrease in student enrollment since the 1960's that as not precipitated a commensurate reduction in buildings. Hence, over this period average maintenance to all buildings has been reduced to compensate for the budgetary shortfall.

#### **D. Performance Management**

In order to establish and implement a performance management system SPS must set overarching goals at the District level, create robust performance targets for schools, develop a sound process for measuring performance, and hold individuals and departments accountable for results.

**Overarching goals.** In the past, SPS has set performance management goals and created a five-year plan, but these were neither fully conceived nor sufficiently concrete and therefore have been difficult to implement. Currently District-wide staff lacks knowledge and/or clarity of overall District vision and goals.

The key challenges for SPS will be in consolidating, articulating, and communicating its vision and goals. There are multiple versions of the SPS vision – the version on the website differs from the academic vision, which differs from the board's vision– they are not well defined, broadly understood, or explicitly translated into a small set of concrete, long-term goals. In addition, the goals that do exist are neither clearly linked to performance measures nor well understood by most District staff members. Developing a

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<sup>28</sup> See Appendix A-18

<sup>29</sup> See Appendix A-18

clear vision linked to goals will be the first step in creating a viable performance management system.

**Performance targets.** Targets form the basis for tracking the health of a system and allow revisions to its processes. Although SPS has set some targets at the District, school, and individual level, these targets are not robust enough to serve as a foundation for effective performance management. Progress against targets are rarely measured (e.g., a checkmark may indicate completion), are vague, and are typically focused on one-dimensional performance measures such as WASL scores. Moreover, they do not link to the strategic vision for the District, are not set for the Central Office, and are largely unknown within and outside SPS. Two factors drive much of this problem: (1) a fundamental lack of clear roles and responsibilities, and (2) the division of accountability between individuals in the Central Office and the schools. Before it can begin to set targets, SPS must first define employee roles and responsibilities.

**Performance measurement.** In some cases SPS does measure performance; however, the process could not handle the burden of a larger set of targets. The District lacks the measurement tools (e.g., performance summaries, 360-degree feedback) and IT systems needed to facilitate accurate data/target tracking and to support process improvements. In addition, progress against targets is measured infrequently, and review meetings, which typically focus on goal setting rather than performance measurement against those goals, tend to be ad hoc. To improve measurement practices, SPS should develop supporting tools and a process management system.

**Performance accountability and support.** Holding individuals and departments accountable for results is critical to improve District performance. Accountability mechanisms exist at SPS but aren't often utilized due to challenges in goal-setting, targets, and measurement described above; lack of clarity on how to use them (e.g., professional track switching as specified in the SEA contract); and circumvention (e.g., teachers who leave while on probation can return to the District on their original evaluation track). Additionally, SPS has not established mechanisms to drive adherence and responsibility, upward feedback mechanisms are not formalized, nor has the District created differentiated support programs (e.g., coaching in specific areas of need). There are no incentives for meeting targets or completing tasks, responsibilities for outcomes are not broadly assigned, and support (e.g. professional development) for those who struggle is limited or nonexistent. Few groups, if any, are held accountable for District results. Ultimately, the process for driving accountability must be modeled at the top of the organization, leading to the definition and acceptance of accountability at all levels.

## E. Stakeholder Engagement

SPS, in conjunction with Pyramid Communications, is developing a stakeholder engagement plan with detailed recommendations based upon the key themes that emerged from McKinsey's diagnostic of the District's stakeholder relationships.<sup>30</sup>

**Internal stakeholders.** Communicating effectively with families, students and District employees is central to enabling high academic performance. Key themes that emerged from interviews and surveys of internal stakeholders include the following:

- **There are multiple new initiatives with little prioritization.** Stakeholders have observed the District creating numerous new programs without a clear framework as to how actions link to the SPS vision and goals or student achievement.
- **SPS is not responsive to needs of largest stakeholders.** Individuals within the District (including those in the Central Office and the schools) expressed disappointment about the lack of response to inquiries, and are confused about whom to contact on which matters.
- **Customer service training and support is inadequate.** Internal stakeholders have noted a lack of customer service mentality at all levels within the District, long wait times and insufficient support.
- **Communication is indirect and results in lack of alignment between the Central Office and school leadership.** Information dissemination in SPS is limited due to resource constraints within the Central Office, an outward versus iterative communication focus, and an outdated technology platform. Also, internal stakeholders expressed a strong desire to be better informed of District policy changes and news.

**External stakeholders.** Communicating effectively with the unions, general public, philanthropists, businesses, and government agencies is critical to building and sustaining the partnerships and support mechanisms required to meet District-wide needs. Key themes that emerged from interviews and surveys of external stakeholders include the following:

- **The overall image of the District is poor.** Over the past few years, the majority of the media stories about the District have been negative, and SPS has not been proactive enough about advertising positive results.
- **Information and decision-making transparency are lacking.** Many of those interviewed express the belief that the District does not provide adequate information or explain the process by which it makes decisions. They would like to

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<sup>30</sup> See Appendix A-21

see a better communication and feedback process, and be better informed about decision-making within SPS and the results of District-wide initiatives.

- **Communication methods are outdated and insufficient to reach all groups.** In the past, SPS has focused on traditional methods of communication with the community (e.g. town halls, website, articles), but these fail to reach all groups. The District therefore needs to broaden its channels so that it can contact and gain input from a broader range of stakeholders.
- **Information flows largely in one direction – out – and the District lacks easy mechanisms for gathering feedback from stakeholders.** External stakeholders express frustration with their inability to provide feedback to the District. Currently, most communication processes are manual, and those resources designed to solicit feedback (e.g., website, customer service lines) tend to be cumbersome, confusing, and slow.
- **Stakeholders lack faith in (or knowledge of) the District’s strategy, vision, and leadership.** Inconsistent messages (including multiple vision statements) from key SPS leaders have created significant distrust among the broader community. This has been exacerbated by the lack of alignment between the Board and the Superintendent, and the District and SEA.
- **The community is unclear on how organizations and individuals can help SPS.** External stakeholders want to support and improve the District; however, many do not understand how to be helpful. Insufficient measurement and communication of results and performance measures further frustrate stakeholders.

SPS is committed to addressing the concerns and input of stakeholders. Over the course of the strategic planning process, it has laid out goals for the improvement of stakeholder engagement over the next five years. These goals are:

- Create positive opinions of the District and confidence in its future direction
- Clearly define communication processes and build integrated feedback mechanisms for both internal and external stakeholders
- Improve transparency of the decision-making processes
- Automate communication processes (where appropriate)
- Develop partnerships with external stakeholders that improve academic outcomes.

## **FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC VISION AND GOALS**

Over the next five years, SPS seeks to see progress towards “Every student achieving, everyone accountable,” and “Every student a reader, writer, mathematician, and ready for

college and work.” To support these visions, the team developed five-year goals in each of the areas covered in the diagnostic and strategic initiatives designed to achieve these goals in the near and longer term in four of the five areas (excludes stakeholder engagement).<sup>31</sup> The following section lays out the goals; the subsequent two sections describe the near- and longer-term initiatives, respectively.

### **A. Learning and Teaching.**

The Learning and Teaching initiatives center on two goals: providing a rigorous core curriculum, assessments, and instructional resources aligned to standards; and effectively serving all student populations, including those with special needs. To meet these goals, SPS seeks to do the following over the next five years:

- Align curriculum for all students in all subjects
- Provide world-class support services for all students based on their individual needs
- Supply differentiated support, and intervention to all schools based on their needs and performance to date, and hold schools accountable for improvement
- Offer easily accessible, high-quality early learning to at-risk students
- Institute and adopt District-wide student performance assessments to inform all instructional activities
- Establish high quality K-12 system of pedagogically unique schools.

### **B. Supporting District Talent**

High-quality teachers and principals are among the most powerful drivers of student achievement, and SPS intends to hire and retain highly qualified and effective teachers for every student in every classroom throughout the District under the leadership of high-quality, performance-oriented principals, who are supported by efficient and customer service oriented Central Office and support staff

To do so, it will:

- Improve the recruitment, hiring, and placement processes for teachers and principals to become best-in-class among peer districts
- Build support mechanisms to bolster a culture of individual responsibility and accountability for all staff
- Establish best-practice professional development programs for all teachers and principals

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<sup>31</sup> See Appendix B-2

### **C. Central Office**

An effective and well-organized Central Office is key to a high-functioning and high-performing school district. Simple and efficient processes free time for instructional and Central Office staff to focus on programs that drive student achievement and attainment. As part of its effort to support SPS and its vision, the Central Office will focus on two goals: becoming efficient, effective, and customer friendly; and implementing a rigorous program evaluation to determine what works. The Central Office strategies for the next five years support attainment of these goals:

- Establish and implement tight financial and resource planning processes
- Build clear, coherent interfaces between IT and District decision-making processes
- Build an HR function that is best-in-class among peer districts

### **D. Performance Management**

Performance management seeks to unite all individuals in the schools and Central Office in pursuit of a common vision and goals, and share with them an understanding of how their work links to the aims and vision of the District as a whole. To institute a rigorous performance management system, SPS should establish individual accountability through metrics and measurement tied to District-wide goals.

### **E. Stakeholder Engagement**

SPS is currently working with Pyramid Communications to develop a full set of aspirations and recommendations, and a stakeholder engagement plan based on the outcome of the McKinsey diagnostic, and Pyramid's own diagnostic work. These strategies will be integrated into the completed strategic plan.

## **POTENTIAL STRATEGIC INITIATIVES FOR THE NEXT 15 MONTHS**

Based on the diagnostic results and the strategic vision and goals described above, the following describes 22 potential strategic initiatives that may begin over the next 15 months. It should be noted that SPS plans to reduce this list further prior to completion of the Strategic Plan. Details on the potential initiatives can be found in Appendix B.

### **A. Learning and Teaching<sup>32</sup>**

- A1. **Aligned math and science curricula.** SPS has already begun to roll out an aligned math curriculum in elementary and middle schools, and it will continue to do so over the next 15 months, ensuring that the curriculum takes into

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<sup>32</sup> For initiatives A1-A3, see Appendix C-1; for initiatives A4-A9, see Appendix C-2

account the needs of all students, including special education, bilingual and advanced learners. In addition, the District will begin to develop an aligned science curriculum. In both cases, this work includes aligning the curriculum to the State standards, defining scope and sequencing across all grade levels, developing pacing, resource and parent guides, selecting textbooks, and adopting the new materials, followed by initial and ongoing professional development, and tracking the fidelity of implementation.

- A2. **Short and long-term service goals for special education, ELL, at-risk, and advanced learners.** Closing the achievement gap and continuing to support academic excellence at SPS requires concentration on and effective service delivery to select groups of students. Based on the findings of peer review audits now under way, SPS will plan, build and pilot programs specifically tailored to these groups.
- A3. **Prevention, intervention, and support programs for students.** To better serve students who need additional help to reach their potential, SPS is giving priority to the creation of prevention, intervention, and support programs. These include counseling and alcohol prevention as well as other similar programs.
- A4. **School performance model.** To address the large variance in student achievement, SPS needs to determine what types of support will have the most impact on a school-by-school basis. To that end, SPS will work to develop a school performance model that creates a school identification standard by their needs and that provides differentiated support, accountability, and autonomy based on those needs.
- A5. **Southeast Education Initiative.** As part of its ongoing work to support and improve the neediest schools, SPS has developed a Southeast Education Initiative to address the specific needs of schools in Southeast Seattle. Over the next 15 months this will be rolled into the school performance model initiative and expanded. The current Southeast Education Initiative provides targeted District-level intervention to support three schools (Aki Kurose Middle School, Cleveland High School, and Rainier Beach High School) and enhances the range of quality programs they offer to students.
- A6. **Flight Schools Initiative.** Developed in partnership with SEA, and laid out in SEA's 2004 contract, the Flight School Initiative aims to help close the achievement gap. This initiative covers 16 schools for the 2007-08 school year but will be integrated into the school performance model in the Strategic Plan. It focuses on five themes: creation of professional learning communities; alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessments; family engagement; stabilizing staff and students; and addressing race and culture issues.

- A7. **High School Reform Initiative.** High school reform efforts are currently underway at the District level and within the schools, and these efforts will continue as the Strategic Plans is implemented. This initiative has created a High School Instructional Steering Committee to identify, make adjustments to, and align systems and structures, as well as ensure the replication of successful instructional programs throughout the District. In addition, each school has been required to review its operations and performance and create a school improvement plan, based on a framework of Rigor, Relevance, Relationships, and Results.
- A8. **High-quality early-learning opportunities for at-risk students.** Over the past few months SPS has been completing an internal audit of early-learning opportunities in the District, investigating program dimensions such as materials, curriculum, facilities, providers, and student enrollment. To ensure that all students are sufficiently prepared for kindergarten, SPS will continue to review these audit findings and partner with families, community organizations, and the city to provide improved access to early learning programs for those children most at risk.
- A9. **District-wide assessment tools.** This initiative aims to provide real-time feedback to instructors on the achievement and understanding of their students. Based on assessment outcomes, instructional practice can be tailored to meet the needs of each class and individual, and raise the achievement level for all. Best-practice districts use assessments not only as high-stakes tests (i.e., to determine grade promotion or graduation), but also to measure and monitor interim progress and learning in order to inform instruction and support the curriculum. SPS will build and pilot district-wide assessment tools that are consistent, user-friendly, and aligned to content standards, beginning with math, and subsequently expanding to other subject areas.

## **B. Supporting District Talent<sup>33</sup>**

- B1. **Comprehensive teacher and principal hiring and recruitment.** To enlarge its pool of high-quality applicants, SPS will undertake a broad reworking of its recruitment and hiring process. This initiative will have two components: reviewing and modifying the current process; and revising the notification process for intended departures.
- B2. **Collaborative alignment of teacher evaluation measures with strategic goals.** SPS already has a strong base for instructional staff evaluations and accountability. The SEA contract clearly lays out three paths to provide promotion and performance support. In addition, there is an evaluation process

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<sup>33</sup> See Appendix C-3

in place, as well as a review of this process already underway. SPS will undertake an initiative to formalize and refine these processes with the aim of better utilization.

- B3. **Collaborative alignment of evaluation measures for all non-instructional staff with strategic goals.** To ensure that review and accountability mechanisms are in place for all staff, SPS will review and revise the performance evaluation and support measures currently in place for non-instructional staff. In collaboration with Central Office staff, the District plans to create evaluations processes and tools by role and to pilot those processes.
- B4. **Development of differentiated professional development for all staff.** Given the importance of professional development, SPS will audit existing programs, collaborate with staff and the PD steering committee to create differentiated and relevant professional development that is aligned with District goals.

To ensure the successful implementation of these initiatives, it is essential that SPS proactively seek stakeholder collaboration and support and engage union partners early.

### C. Central Office<sup>34</sup>

- C1. **Shortened and simplified budget process.** To reduce the amount of time Central Office and school leaders spend on budgeting while improving the quality of output, SPS is undertaking an initiative to shorten and simplify the budget process by better defining roles, expectations, and accountability. This initiative will be implemented in three stages: investigating current data and system constraints, building processes and tools to remove these constraints; and refining the process.
- C2. **Spending effectiveness measures.** To enable better funding prioritization, in 2008-09 the Central Office will begin to develop spending effectiveness measurement processes. This task will include designing program effectiveness measures that will inform decision-making during the budget process.
- C3. **Formal roles and responsibilities to increase Central Office capacity.** Given the numerous interdepartmental initiatives currently underway and/or being developed, adding capacity in key functions, such as strategic analysis, project management, partnership development, and organizational redesign and development, will be critical to success. As a prerequisite for increasing capacity in these functions, SPS will launch an initiative to formalize roles and responsibilities in the Central Office.

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<sup>34</sup> For initiatives C1-C3, see Appendix C-4; for initiatives C4-C7, see Appendix C-5

- C4. **Resources to complete VAX migration.** SPS has already begun the process to transition all remaining applications off of the legacy VAX system onto a more flexible platform, and will dedicate the time and resources required to complete this migration.
- C5. **Filling critical Technology Services and Human Resources staff needs.** The day-to-day operations of the District place high demands on the HR and Technology Services departments. With the addition and implementation of new strategic initiatives (as well as completion of initiatives already in progress), these needs will be significantly higher than they are today. Hence, SPS must adjust its recruiting and hiring strategies to fill the open positions in these departments with appropriate talent. This will be critical both to better meet the operational support needs of customers and to complete capital projects.
- C6. **Definition of Technology Services and Human Resources roles.** It is imperative that SPS focus on clarifying roles and responsibilities to match its ongoing and future needs. Thus, SPS will undertake an initiative to design a long-term vision for DoTS and HR and update role definitions and department structures in line with the new vision.
- C7. **WISE improvement and stability project.** Challenges with the WISE implementation (i.e., switching from PeopleSoft to SAP) have made it difficult for HR Department staff to fulfill day-to-day operational responsibilities. To free resources in HR, and as a prerequisite to any initiative that involves HR, the WISE conversion must be completed successfully.
- C8. **Student assignment plan.** District staff have been working with the School Board to revise the student assignment policy in order to make the process more manageable for parents and staff alike. These policy changes will require close coordination with the project to migrate the supporting IT system off the VAX platform and should be completed prior to this undertaking in order to decrease costs and time requirements.

#### **D. Performance Management<sup>35</sup>**

- D1. **Effective District-wide performance management.** Implementing a successful performance management system is a significant hurdle in any organization, but SPS is poised to meet this challenge. The District already has many of the foundational elements necessary but must refine and strengthen these building blocks. This process involves creating roles and responsibility descriptions for all staff, defining performance measures for all staff, linking

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<sup>35</sup> See Appendix C-6

individual targets to group, department, and District goals, and developing and formalizing District-wide evaluation processes (or adjusting them as required).

### **E. Stakeholder Engagement**

SPS is currently working with Pyramid Communications to develop a full set of aspirations, recommendations, and a stakeholder engagement plan based on the outcome of the diagnostic (as described above), and Pyramid's diagnostic work. These strategies will be integrated into the completed strategic plan.

## **LONGER-RANGE POTENTIAL STRATEGIC INITIATIVES**

In addition to the initiatives described above, SPS will pursue additional initiatives over the course of its five-year strategic plan. These initiatives will be vital to continuing the momentum gained in the first 15 months and supporting the goals that SPS has laid out in each focus area. It should be noted that the following is not a comprehensive list of potential initiatives and should be supplemented as required based upon future iterations of the strategic planning process.

### **A. Learning and Teaching**

- Align curriculum for all students in remaining subjects
- Identify technology platform for web-based curriculum content management system
- Evaluate and develop differentiated K-12 system of pedagogically unique schools within SPS (e.g., international schools, Montessori schools, IB schools)

### **B. Supporting District Talent**

- Collaboratively adjust hiring process to decrease school leader workload in early phases of teacher hiring by shifting mechanical responsibilities to the Central Office (e.g., resume collection, background checks, initial principal interviews)
- Scale up STAR mentor program to address needs of all new teachers; create formal mentoring program like STAR for new assistant principals and principals
- Design orientation programs for teachers and principals who are new to profession and to SPS
- Clearly define roles, expectations, and evaluation processes for all staff
- Develop early identification, support programs, and tools for struggling teachers and principals

- Create criteria for potential incentives (e.g., professional development, compensation, reduced class sizes, leadership opportunities), to attract teachers to the highest-needs schools and subjects

### **C. Central Office**

- Form IT and HR steering committees (e.g., BEX Oversight Committee) to improve strategic planning and operational effectiveness by leveraging expertise of HR and IT executives in the public and private sectors
- Revise approach to government, corporate, and philanthropic partnerships and funding (i.e., increase use of external expertise) in coordination with strategic planning
- Update and address recommendations from SPS facilities maintenance reviews
- Further refine budget system tools and fully integrate with other information systems
- Hold end-of-cycle budget process reviews to improve the process
- Adhere to monthly expenditure tracking
- Include revisions to technology roadmap in future planning cycles
- Separate capital project staff from operations staff and balance capacity
- Build formal training and development program for Central Office staff to strengthen leadership capabilities, develop project management capacity within departments, and provide function-specific training

### **D. Performance Management**

- Adjust performance management system annually to fit District needs

## **OVERALL NEXT STEPS**

Diagnosing improvement opportunities and defining strategic initiatives is a large first step in the development of the SPS Strategic Plan, however, significant work remains. The District must still incorporate the findings from the audits and reviews currently underway or recently completed; finalize, resource and plan the specific next steps for each initiative; and ensure that each initiative has an owner who is accountable for implementation.

As a whole, these strategic initiatives will demand significant resources, both in terms of personnel and funding (to be finalized by SPS), which the District may not be able to support based on its current budget constraints. To supplement funding, it will likely be necessary to partner with foundations, educational programs, and local businesses, as well

as investigate government grants. One note of caution is that SPS should consider long-term funding requirements for the strategic initiatives carefully and fully evaluate the sustainability of the funding sources when considering whether or not to pursue any initiative.

Preliminary resourcing requirements have been developed and were presented to the School Board on March 7, but will be further refined by the District.<sup>36</sup> In most cases these resourcing needs were developed with the SPS staff who will be implementing the potential initiative; however, it should be noted that these estimates are preliminary and meant to estimate relative magnitudes and should not be used for detailed initiative planning. Rather, as SPS further prioritizes the current set of initiatives, special consideration should be given to identifying the timeline and specific financial, personnel and capacity requirements of each initiative.

SPS cannot successfully complete the strategic planning process on its own. While the District bears significant responsibility and should be held accountable for developing a strategic plan, success in improving student achievement and attainment will require close collaboration with and support from the SEA, PASS, International Union of Operating Engineers, families, the community, the city, the state government, and other internal and external stakeholders. The issues are as complex as they are critical – and they demand significant collaboration.

To gather community input and ensure incorporation into the final strategic plan, SPS will embark on feedback and testing with stakeholders. SPS will complete the final strategic plan in May and, subsequent to School Board approval, will begin implementation in June and throughout the summer. Going forward, the District will measure progress on the initiatives laid out in the strategic plan against the Readiness, Planning, Training, Implementation, and Maintenance (RPTIM) framework. There are different resource requirements for each phase of the RPTIM process, therefore clearly specifying the stage of each initiative will help focus resource requirements. Further, the District should review and revise initiatives at least annually according to the Strategic Planning Process.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, the District must consider a number of potential risks to successful implementation. Appendix C-8 contains a list of these risks by content area, as well as potential mitigation strategies.

The strategic planning process that SPS has worked through over the past months has been both rigorous and informative. It is our hope that this will set the stage for SPS to make significant gains in student achievement and attainment and ultimately to become a national leader in education.

*March 17, 2008*

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<sup>36</sup> See Appendix C-7

<sup>37</sup> See Appendix B-3