

Developing a Strategic Plan for Academic Success Summary of McKinsey & Company Analysis

The Seattle Public Schools recently commissioned a comprehensive assessment of our performance by reviewers from McKinsey & Company. The reviewers collected and analyzed information about all aspects of district operations.

The information collected by McKinsey will guide our strategic planning process and help us realize our vision for the future by providing us with key information on how we are doing and what steps we can take to improve.

The Subject

Developing a Strategic Plan for Academic Success

SPS is developing a strategic plan to focus our efforts on improving the academic achievement of every student in every school. This strategic plan must help us address a number of challenges, including a plan to address the achievement gap while also accelerating growth for all students.

To begin work on the strategic plan, SPS staff and a team of reviewers from McKinsey & Company spent several months studying strengths and challenges and identifying potential priority initiatives. Although SPS faces challenges, our work also identified strengths we can build on as we move forward:

- Clear examples of a strong instructional core and examples of best practices in our operations
- Stakeholders who are committed to improving public education
- Hardworking, committed district staff
- A leadership team that is focused on accountability
- A school board willing to prioritize initiatives and implement them fully
- Partners who are willing to collaborate for change and action

The Reviewers

The strategic planning analysis was conducted by a team of researchers from **McKinsey & Company**. McKinsey is a global management consulting firm that works with businesses, government agencies and nonprofit organizations to improve their effectiveness and efficiency and help them better meet the needs of the people they serve. The McKinsey team included both local and national experts, to combine firsthand knowledge of conditions in Seattle with expertise about national research and trends. McKinsey's work for SPS was conducted between December 2007 and March 2008.

Summary

McKinsey recommended that SPS's strategic planning effort focus on developing initiatives for action in five key areas:

- A. Learning and teaching:** Improve the quality and consistency of learning and teaching.
- B. Talent:** Increase and better support district teachers, principals and other school staff.
- C. Central office:** Drive efficiency and effectiveness in central office operations.
- D. Performance management:** Introduce effective performance management.
- E. Stakeholder engagement:** Improve stakeholder engagement.

Study Methods

The reviewers carried out their study in two parts.

First, they completed **diagnostic research** on district operations. This research was based on *interviews* with more than 1,500 people, including district staff, community members and education experts; *observation* of SPS processes; and *review* of nationally published reports and SPS documents.

After completing their diagnostic research on the district, the reviewers developed and prioritized **potential initiatives** in each of the five key areas (learning and teaching, talent, central office, performance management and stakeholder engagement).

Findings and Recommendations

The reviewers focused their work on five key areas. They identified strengths, challenges and potential initiatives for SPS in each area:

Learning and teaching: The reviewers focused on two aspects of learning and teaching: **consistency**, which measures how student achievement differs between schools and by race or income, and **quality**, which measures the effectiveness of teaching strategies.

In the area of consistency, the reviewers praised SPS programs and plans for initiatives (such as the Southeast Education Initiative Flight School Initiative and High School Reform Initiative) that provide extra support to students in need. They noted that these types of programs may need to be expanded or strengthened to meet the needs of a diverse student body. In terms of quality, the reviewers noted

that all students at all schools must have the same opportunities—and meet the same expectations—at each grade level.

The reviewers suggested that the curriculum (what is taught in each subject) be coordinated so that the content upon which it is based is consistent across the district and gives every student the same opportunities to succeed. They suggested that SPS support all students based on their individual—and different—needs. And they suggested that SPS offer easily accessible, high-quality early learning opportunities for at-risk students.

Talent: The reviewers noted that SPS could do more to attract and support teachers, principals and other school staff by streamlining hiring processes, strengthening professional development and training opportunities, and improving evaluations. The reviewers suggested in particular that SPS offer more training and mentoring to new teachers to support them in the classroom and help them grow as educators.

Central office: The reviewers noted that budget cutbacks and staff turnover have affected the central office's ability to support teachers, principals and students. The reviewers expressed particular concern about the SPS budget process, which they noted is complex and time-consuming and is not aligned with district goals and initiatives. They suggested that the budget process be reshaped to ensure that district funds are spent in support of district goals. They noted that technology has been a concern for SPS and that several large technology systems must be moved to more modern equipment to avoid problems in the future.

The reviewers suggested that SPS must strengthen financial and budgeting processes, coordinate technology with the district's priorities, and improve human resources functions.

Performance management: A key SPS goal is that everyone in the district is accountable for student achievement. The reviewers noted that this goal will be difficult to achieve unless the district can develop performance targets for schools and then identify how performance will be measured. The reviewers noted that SPS has many existing mechanisms to track and measure performance but that these mechanisms are not always used. They suggested that SPS should establish individual accountability through measurement that is tied to district-wide goals.

Stakeholder engagement: SPS needs the support and involvement of families, community members and other stakeholders. To learn more about stakeholder engagement, the reviewers interviewed more than 1,500 people inside the district and throughout the city.

District staff identified a number of concerns about their interactions with community members:

- There are multiple new initiatives with little prioritization.
- SPS is not responsive to the needs of large stakeholders.
- Customer service training and support are inadequate.

- Communication is indirect, and schools and the central office are not always aligned with each other.

Community members who were interviewed also identified a number of concerns:

- The overall image of the district is poor due to past budget problems and negative media coverage.
- Community members often do not get enough information about district actions.
- Many feel SPS decision-making is not transparent.
- Information flows out—from the district—but there are not good mechanisms for the district to get information from the community.
- Many do not understand how they can influence or help SPS.

SPS is currently conducting a more thorough review of its communication and engagement practices. An updated peer review with findings and recommendations will inform a Stakeholder Engagement portion of the final plan that will include strategies for better engaging internal stakeholders as well as families and other community members.

Next Steps

The research that has been conducted on SPS operations and the potential initiatives the McKinsey researchers identified will be shared with community members during spring 2008. Comments and suggestions from this public engagement process will help shape our next steps as we move forward with the **Seattle Public Schools' strategic planning process**.

The strategic plan will help SPS strengthen academic achievement for all students by allowing us to assess where we are now, develop a list of priorities for improvement and then take action. The strategic plan will be adopted by the school board in June 2008 and will be carried out over the next several years.