

# Capacity and Coherence Review

## Thompson Public Schools



Connecticut Center  
for School Change

System Success = Student Success

December 10, 2018

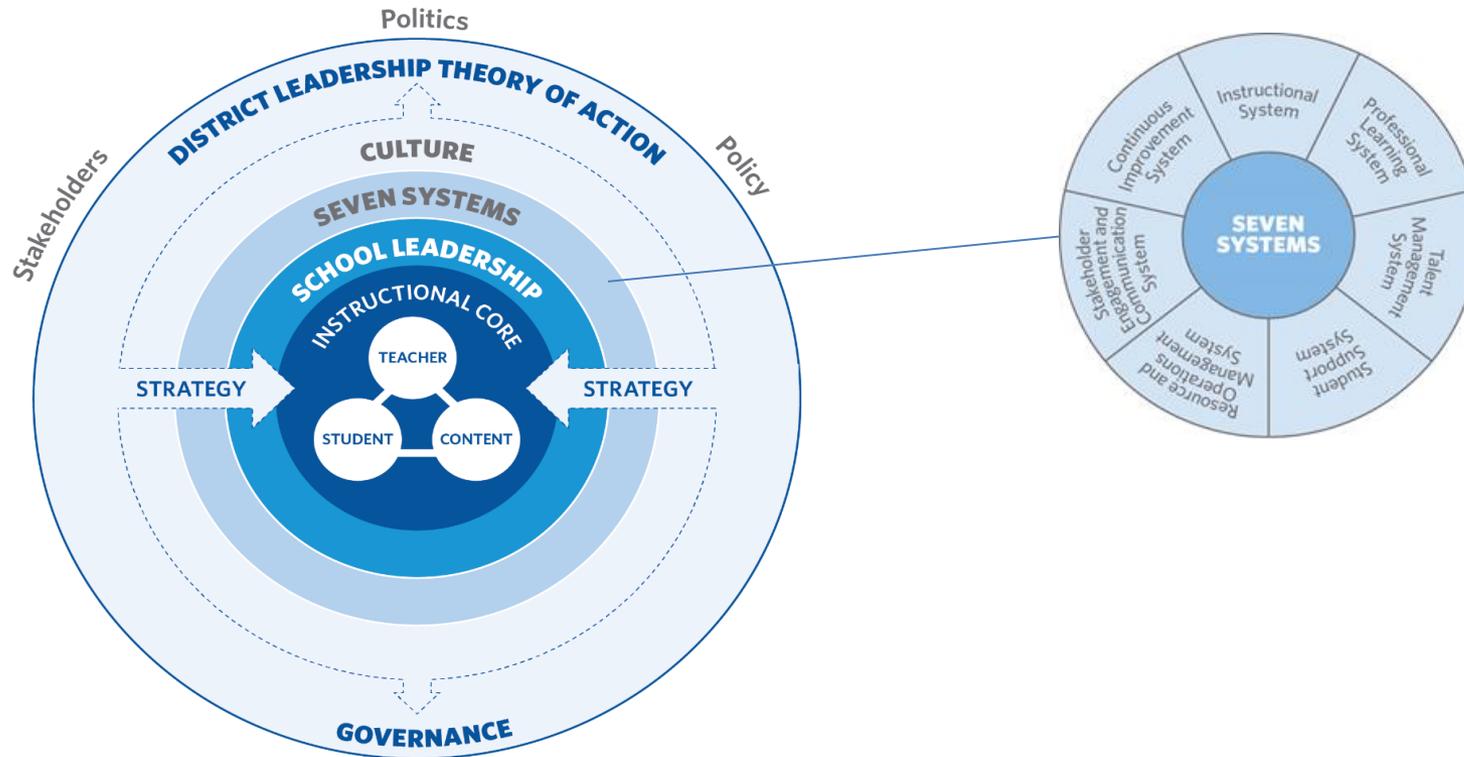
# Capacity and Coherence Review

The Capacity and Coherence Review is a process whereby a small team of external advisors work closely with central office leadership to (1) identify evidence to gather, (2) collect data and evidence, (3) analyze the data and evidence, and (4) present descriptive and objective findings of trends and patterns. The initial Capacity and Coherence Review results will not include suggested solutions, but the team is open to debriefing with district leaders about possible next steps.

Guided by the LEAD Connecticut Capacity and Coherence Framework, the purpose of the review is to understand the degree to which the district (1) is approaching improvement in a coherent and aligned fashion and (2) possesses the necessary capacity to achieve its improvement aims.

Ultimately, the review team's intent is to provide helpful, relevant, evidenced-based information for local improvement planning. This is not a system "evaluation"; it is a diagnostic process to guide district improvement planning.

# LEAD Connecticut Capacity and Coherence Framework



Drawn from research on effective districts, the Capacity and Coherence Framework suggests that there are multiple, nested forces that interact to influence a district's relative coherence. Moreover, the more coherent a district, the more likely it will have the organizational capacity to pursue improvement strategies in ways that will benefit the learning of students.

# Core Ideas of Capacity and Coherence Framework

In addition, the Capacity and Coherence Framework suggests certain actions that districts can take to enhance their ability to pursue improvement strategies and improve student outcomes:

- Place your bets (strategically select your improvement investments)
- Focus on “how we do things around here” (culture)
- Connect the dots (alignment)
- Build leadership capacity

# CT Center for School Change

The Connecticut Center for School Change (the Center) is a statewide, non-profit organization with a mission to improve teaching and learning, to reduce achievement gaps, and to promote equity in Connecticut schools. The Center supports comprehensive preK-12 educational reform through a system-wide, integrated approach focused on improving instructional practice and developing leadership at all levels, from parents to superintendents.

# Methodology

- Team
  - Jerome Belair
  - Robert Henry
  - Richard Lemons
  - Elizabeth Osga
  - John Ramos

# Data-gathering Strategies

- Artifact Review
- Interviews—Superintendent, Director of Pupil Personnel Services, principals, assistant principals, Technology Director, Business, Facilities and Food Service Managers
- Focus Groups—Board of Education, teachers, students, parents, paraprofessionals, union leaders
- Surveys—62 total (4 central office leaders; 3 building administrators; 45 teachers; 10 “other”)
- Observations—Board of Education meeting, school and classroom visits

# Data-Analysis Strategies

- Careful note taking that captured rich stories, perspectives and explanations without sacrificing anonymity
- Individual note analysis and memo writing
- Team vetting of possible findings
- Triangulation across interview, focus group, survey, and artifact data sources to identify verifiable findings and eliminate unverified or outlier perspectives

# Preliminary Findings, By Category of LEAD Connecticut Framework

# Category 1: Place Your Bets

*In effective districts, superintendents, leadership teams, and school boards have a shared theory of action, which they use to shape and pursue a small number of strategies to improve teaching and learning. These districts focus on strategies that will have the biggest impact. They then ensure the whole district is organized to support successful implementation of those strategies.*

Leading for Capacity and Coherence

# Place Your Bets Headlines

- ◆ Although not stated as a theory of action, the District's Strategic Plan 2017-20 is the basis for district improvement theory.
- ◆ The Board established its vision and mission in preparation for a superintendent search; the Strategic Plan was developed after the new Superintendent was seated.

# Place Your Bets Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **Thompson educators provided a wide variety of responses when asked to name the major improvement strategies of the district. Some have direct or indirect connections to the district improvement plan, while others can be traced to school-based needs.**

- Among the responses (partial list):

*social and emotional learning; learning targets; enrichment activities; student-centered learning; increasing high school enrollment; Chromebooks; purposeful play; test scores; Tools of the Mind; technology; Restorative Practice; PBIS; RULER; expanding AP course offerings; Portrait of a Graduate; ALICE; renovation; NAEYC accreditation; etc.*

- When asked to rate this statement:

*There is agreement among educators in the district concerning what are the improvement priorities.*

Teachers responded with a weighted mean of 3.89 on a 1-7 Likert scale. This is a low-average rating when compared to the question responses of other districts.

# Place Your Bets Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **The district has an abundance of priorities.**
  - The list identified by educators is long.
  - Teachers express concern about the number of initiatives. One teacher said, “*Student-centered learning was the focus but now we have RULER, Tools of the Mind, science kits, social and emotional learning. . .we are so stretched*”.
  - Administrators confirm, “*There are a lot of demands on teachers.*”

# Place Your Bets Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **The implementation of priorities is evident in some schools and classrooms, but contrary practices exist in others.**
- Evidence of PBIS in action was prevalent in one school with tickets being awarded for positive behavior, posted behavior targets for days of the week etc. In another school, teachers stated, “PBIS doesn’t work”. That school’s discipline code had been rewritten to mandate “eviction” from class for the entire period if they were sent out of class for unacceptable behaviors.
- Learning targets are posted or referenced in some classrooms but not in others.

# Place Your Bets Headlines (Continued):

## ◆ **Clear and consistent messaging about district priorities is not readily apparent.**

- The District's promotional brochure reflects the District's Strategic Plan priorities.
- District priorities are marginally addressed, if at all, in individual school brochures.
- District priorities are not well represented in environmental print around the campus.
- Minimal reference to district priorities can be noted in newsletters.

# Category 2: Focus on “how we do things around here” (culture)

*Culture can and must be a positive and powerful driver for system-wide improvement. Too often, district leaders take culture for granted. Consequently, their strategies have limited impact and traction, especially as leadership changes. In contrast, effective superintendents and leadership teams know that positive cultural practices and values — such as reminding central office staff that they are there to serve schools or reiterating that “all means all” when it comes to expecting students to succeed — have the power to infuse strategies with purpose and motivate behavior. So, they are attentive to “how we do things around here.”*

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# How We Do Things Headlines

- ◆ **Interviews, discussions, observations and survey data show variation of professional cultures from school to school.**

# How We Do Things Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **TMHS enjoys a positive professional culture.**
- Teachers affirm a trusting relationship with their building administrators. *“Although we don’t always agree with the decisions our administrators make, we know that they care about the kids and us.”*
- Teachers willingly stepped up to take on the 9<sup>th</sup> grade Summit initiative and to teach an expanded menu of AP courses.
- Teachers refer to the faculty/staff as *“a community, family, close bunch—so much support”*.
- 95% of the responding staff agreed with this statement, *I enjoy going to work each day.*
- 79% of the teachers indicated that they *regularly collaborate with teaching peers* on the survey.

# How We Do Things Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **The professional culture at TMS does not offer a supportive context for building capacity and coherence.**
- TMS teachers do not feel supported by administrators (building and central office). They point to problems with discipline and a lack of follow through on a variety of matters.
- Teachers described themselves as “*exhausted*”. One teacher shared, “*I get up in the morning and don’t want to go to work*”.
- 75% of the staff responding to the survey disagreed with this statement: *I enjoy going to work each day.*
- TMS Teacher response to this statement: *I feel a sense of urgency for the district to improve student achievement*, registered a weighted average of 6.0 on 1-7 Likert scale, the highest rating of any survey response. At the same time, 63% of the MS respondents disagreed with this statement: *All students are capable of meeting our district achievement goals.*

# How We Do Things Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **The professional culture at TMS does not offer a supportive context for building capacity and coherence. (Continued)**
- A total of 6 different parents voiced concerns about student discipline and its impact on climate at a Board of Education meeting.
- 17 parents attended a focus group on the C & C review. Although some also expressed concerns about student discipline, the greater voice was on the quality of teaching and lack of adequate communication. One parent stated, *“I can’t believe how many middle school teachers are not invested”*. Another said, *“They have lost their sparkle and passion”*.
- Persons responsible for supporting operational and program changes in the District identify the middle school as the most challenging.

# How We Do Things Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **The professional culture at MFES provides a supportive context for ongoing improvement.**
  - The professional culture has been described as having “*high teacher to principal trust—they know, love and respect her*”.
  - In the teacher focus group, teachers spoke of the value of collaboration and clearly ranked more collaboration time on top of their wish lists.
  - One teacher referenced the hours she puts into the work as evidence of her strong sense of urgency.
  - None of the responding staff disagreed with this statement on the survey: *I enjoy going to work each day.*
  - One teacher, who had worked in three districts, said, “*This by far is my favorite climate*”.

# How We Do Things Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **The District-wide professional culture in relation to central office leadership is varied.**
  - Several individuals described the superintendent as “*visionary*”, “*energizing*” and “*a mover and shaker*”.
  - One person said, “*Not everybody is on board*”.
  - Still another said, “*I don’t hear negatives*”.
  - Survey ratings on questions relating to district culture ranged from 3.9 to 5.6 on a 1-7 scale, which are within typical response ranges when compared to other districts.

# Category 3: Connect the Dots

*Superintendents and their teams must align and focus systems and structures so everyone knows how their work fits into the district's improvement theory of action.*

*Districts are complex organizations and it is no small task to ensure that each part coordinates effectively with the whole in service of schools and students. Effective districts connect the dots, making collaboration the norm so that departments can align and coordinate their work.*

Leading for Capacity and Coherence

# Connect the Dots Headlines

- ◆ **Although we heard repeatedly that time and money are scarce, efforts have been made to align resources with at least some priorities.**
- Support staff was added or restored to schools to assist with social and emotional learning.
- TMS Assistant Principal's responsibilities have shifted to full time discipline.
- The technology staff was deployed to assist in the unexpected opportunity to add Chromebooks to TMHS and TMS.
- Much of the PD schedule is aligned with priority topics.

# Connect the Dots Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **The Instructional System is at the center of the District's priorities, yet it remains largely in the queue for sufficient resources. There is a recognized need for an aligned/articulated curriculum and system-wide focus on high quality instruction**
  - Teachers report many different ways that curriculum is developed; sometimes by department, sometimes by individuals, and sometimes it has defaulted to purchased products. However, it does not have a history of comprehensive K-12 articulation and alignment. One teacher shared, *"It's like build your own curriculum"*.
  - A plan exists to develop curriculum, and the Curriculum Director is a highly regarded administrator. However, he estimates that only 30% of his time is available for curriculum responsibilities.
  - Teachers report that there are no department leaders or instructional coaches to assist with implementation of curriculum.
  - When asked what would have the greatest impact on improving teaching and learning, *"collaboration time"* and *"relevant professional development"* were most frequently mentioned.
  - One school leader emphasized that *"discussions around what high quality teaching is have yet to take place"*. Another said, *"An inquiry approach is trickling in"*.

# Connect the Dots Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **The talent management system is not supporting the priorities of the District as well as it might.**
- Survey response to this statement netted an average weighted mean of 3.90: *The recruitment, screening, selection, and exit (human capital) systems of this district have created a highly effective educator corps.* Administrator interviews confirm that this data accurately reflects the status.
- We repeatedly heard that “three new staff members at the middle school have already left this year”.
- Educators expressed concern that late budget passage often resulted in poor candidate pools.
- The evaluation system was not deemed to be effective in exiting personnel who were not performing to standards.
- It was positively mentioned that the Superintendent was open to considering “best hires” even when they weren’t the lowest salary level candidates.

# Connect the Dots Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **The District still has challenges in connecting operational systems and non certified staff in service to its initiatives.**
  - Paraprofessionals experience a marginalized status as they report they are not included in meetings and trainings that are important in the execution of their duties.
  - Integration of the universal breakfast and lunch programs still has challenges.
  - The development of a long range facilities plan that supports the District's vision has been stalled by low levels of staffing.
  - While the District has launched into Chromebook integration for its middle and high school, the staffing level remains flat.
  - One Director observed, "There is tremendous potential to connect resources here where all schools share a campus".

# Connect the Dots Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **The family and community engagement system appears to be a strengthening system, although there is still work to be done.**
  - A specific improvement plan has been written into the District's strategic plan and identifiable actions have been noted.
  - Although a rare occurrence in the budget history of Thompson, the most recent budget passed on the first try. Community and family engagement have been credited.
  - Parents reported that *"more has happened under the current superintendent's year on board than in all of the years before"*. Multiple parents praised her for *"vision and visibility"*.
  - The expectations of many teachers for parent involvement are not met. Responses to survey questions related to family and community engagement were moderately low. *There is a system wide approach to engaging families and the community. 4.1-weighted average mean ; Efforts in this district to engage families and the community are effective. 4.0-weighted average mean.*

# Connect the Dots Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **There is at least some alignment of improvement plans.**
  - The Curriculum Director and PPS Director have improvement plans that align with the District's plan.
  - (School improvement plans were not reviewed.)

# Connect the Dots Headlines (Continued)

- ◆ **The degree of system coherence perceived by teachers varies by level. When asked to rate the District's overall coherence from 1 to 7 in focus group settings, teacher responses varied as follows:**
  - TMHS=mean of 4.61 with individuals rating coherence between 3.5 and 5.
  - TMS=mean of 1.8 with individual ratings between 1 and 3.
  - MFES=mean of 5.1 with individual ratings between 3.5 and 5.

# Category 4: Build Leadership Capacity

*Articulating a strategy, fostering a culture, and aligning the work are critical . . . yet not enough.*

*Superintendents and their central office leadership teams must take actions that create the conditions and capacities for strong and effective school leadership.*

*Significantly improving teaching, learning, and outcomes for students will require talented and empowered building leadership.*

Leading for Capacity and Coherence

# Building Leadership Capacity Headlines

- ◆ **Thompson has unique opportunities and challenges in organizing and building its leadership capacity.**
- The District has only 2 full time and 1 part time central office administrators.
- There are 4 full time and 2 part time building based administrators.
- There is only one elementary, one middle and one high school.
- All leaders are stationed on a single campus in adjoining buildings.
- Some administrators have served in leadership roles in more than one Thompson school, giving them insight and experience at multiple levels.
- The administrators have varied backgrounds including experiences in and out of state, in private and charter schools and in public education.

# Building Leadership Capacity Headlines

- ◆ **The Thompson administrators do not have a long history of working as a leadership team.**
- The leadership structure under the previous superintendent leaned toward autonomy rather than team.
- Administrators seldom met under the previous leadership structure.
- The focus of the work was building based rather than system based.
- Some individual school successes were realized under the previous leadership structure.
- Success in uniting all schools in service to the District's mission of being a high performing district was not achieved.

# Building Leadership Capacity Headlines

- ◆ **Key capacities and conditions for effective school leadership are in development.**
  - Role clarification is underway (what decisions are building-based and what decisions are central office-based).
  - “Admin Council” is viewed as a primary source of leadership development.
  - Administrators report an increase in oversight from years past.
  - The Superintendent supervises and evaluates principals.

# Building Leadership Capacity Headlines

## ◆ Key capacities and conditions for effective school leadership are in development (continued)

- Given that only 4 administrators responded to the survey (out of a possible 7), it is difficult to draw conclusions from the results. That being said, those responding
  - Confirm that they were able to learn what they needed to know to execute their leadership roles
  - Receive necessary support from central office
  - Receive useful feedback on their performance
  - Are held accountable.

# Opportunities for Expansion of System Capacity and Coherence

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## Sharpen the Focus of District Priorities

- ✓ Revisit the “bets” and their origins.
- ✓ Narrow the focus to highest leverage strategies, staging them as necessary.
- ✓ Communicate the priorities through multiple messaging means throughout the schools, district and community.
- ✓ Ensure that district, school, and individual growth and improvement plans carry the through-line of district priorities.

# Opportunities for Expansion of System Capacity and Coherence

## Address the Culture Issues at TMS

*Connect the dots of Talent Management, Professional Learning, Student Support and Resource Management Systems in order to:*

- ✓ Ensure that building administrators have and exercise the skills, knowledge, dispositions and support for effective leadership.
- ✓ Ensure that TMS staff have and exercise the skills, knowledge, dispositions and support necessary to teach all students at TMS, including those who struggle with social and emotional challenges.
- ✓ Support the development of a “renaissance” plan so that all TMS staff members can restore their professional focus to students, teaching and learning.

# Opportunities for Expansion of System Capacity and Coherence

## Invest in the Development of a Strong Leadership Team

- ✓ Facilitate high impact leadership team meetings that exercise inquiry, problem solving, planning and collegial relationships.
- ✓ Guide the leadership team in developing its identity, norms and purposes.
- ✓ Promote team ownership of district priorities through shared analysis of progress and problems.

# Opportunities for Expansion of System Capacity and Coherence

## **Invest in the Development of Aligned and Articulated K-12 Curriculum and High Quality Instruction**

- ✓ Given that this priority is essential in meeting the District's mission, shift resources to advance plans.

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