

Fayette County Public Schools Comprehensive District Review: Board Summary of the Final Report

May 2016



CROSS & JOFTUS



UPD CONSULTING

Introduction

In January 2016, Fayette County Public Schools (FCPS)—a district of approximately 41,000 students comprising Lexington, Kentucky—contracted with Cross & Jofus and UPD Consulting (C&J/UPD) to conduct a needs assessment of 11 district “domains”:

1. Vision, Strategy, and Culture
2. Organizational Structure and Policy
3. Human Resources
4. Finance
5. Operations
6. Central Services
7. School Management
8. Academics
9. Special Education
10. External Affairs
11. Data Accountability, Research, and Evaluation

The review of each domain was guided by a number of research questions developed by C&J/UPD and approved by FCPS leadership. To address the questions, the C&J/UPD review team used a number of methods:

- **Extant Data and Document Analysis.** C&J/UPD reviewed a variety of data (e.g., student outcomes, student and staff population data, budgets and expenditures, school performance, previous surveys, etc.) and documents (organizational charts, policy memos, procedural documents, media releases, etc.) provided by the district and the Kentucky Department of Education.
- **Online Teacher and Principal Surveys.** C&J/UPD conducted online surveys of all teachers and principals in the district. The surveys asked for feedback related to the needs assessment domains, including curriculum and instruction, school improvement, services for students with disabilities, instructional strategies, tiered interventions, human capital, professional development, and central services. The response rate for the teacher survey was 23 percent (626 teachers responding); the response rate for the principal survey was 59 percent (39 principals responding).
- **Site Visit.** Twelve C&J/UPD team members visited the district during the week of February 1, 2016. Over the course of that week, C&J/UPD interviewed and conducted focus groups with a total of approximately 250 stakeholders, including teachers, principals, district administrators and staff, board members, community leaders, and business leaders. In addition, two researchers conducted a total of 100 classroom observations across 16 schools using a rubric developed by Cross & Jofus. The observations explicitly supported the analysis of the academics and special education domains, assessing the extent to which research-based instructional strategies are used in the district. They also informed the analysis of the school management, operations, and central services domains as team

members were, for example, able to collect information about the quality of facilities and school culture at sites.

C&J/UPD developed the findings and recommendations detailed in this report using data and analysis from all of these sources. Due to the cross-cutting nature of the findings and recommendations and the challenges related to systemic coherence¹ in the district, this report is organized into several themes—outlined in the Executive Summary below and elaborated upon in the report that follows—rather than by specific domain area.

Findings

The mission of Fayette County Public Schools (FCPS) is to ensure that all students achieve at high levels and graduate from high school prepared to excel in a global society. Achieving this mission requires that the district deliver a “guaranteed and viable” curriculum. When a consistent, high-quality curriculum is in place, students across a district—regardless of their teacher or school—have the opportunity to learn the same standards-based content and skills by the end of the school year or course. Without a guaranteed and viable curriculum, student performance is typically uneven (by subgroup population, school, or teacher) and lower than it should be.

Overarching Finding 1: FCPS schools have varied approaches to curriculum and instruction, which leads to inconsistencies in teaching and learning practices.

Overarching Finding 2: Student achievement rates—especially for those with special needs, students with low socioeconomic status, and English language learners—are impacted by the inconsistencies in curriculum and instruction.

In an effort to deliver a guaranteed and viable curriculum, districts organize themselves along a continuum of school management approaches. At one end of the continuum—a “centrally managed” approach—the central office controls many inputs required for an excellent education, including hiring of staff, resource allocation, curriculum and assessment, and professional development. At the other end of the continuum—a “school-based management” approach—the central office empowers schools to make most decisions related to how and by whom an excellent education is delivered to students. Kentucky State law requires that districts administer a school-based management approach.

Research has found challenges and benefits to both the centrally managed and the school-based management approach, and, in reality, most districts fall somewhere between the two far ends of the school-management spectrum.

¹ Systemic coherence means that “the elements of a school district work together in an integrated way to implement an articulated strategy.” See Childress, S. R. Elmore, A. Grossman, and C. King (January 2007). *Note on the PELP Coherence Framework*. Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University.

Although there is no “correct” position, research finds that districts must be purposeful in identifying their placement on the school-management continuum and then make decisions related to central-office organizational structure and staffing, systems, use of resources, and school-improvement strategies that are consistent with their selected approach.

Overarching Finding 3: FCPS is implementing a school-based management approach but is not reaping the full benefits of this strategy. FCPS could centralize more aspects of district operations to ensure academic excellence and equity.

High-performing school districts are clear about their goals and how they are going to prioritize their work to achieve them. Given its school-based management approach, for Fayette County Public Schools, these strategies should target performance management, capacity building, and operational supports to schools.

Overarching Finding 4: A commonly held vision or strategy for improvement must be established to guide the work of FCPS central office and school staff.

The organizational structure of a district’s central office should be consistent with the degree of school autonomy and the district’s strategy for supporting school improvement.² For example, a central office supporting a school-based management approach is typically smaller and more focused on performance management than a central office managing such elements as principal hiring and curriculum (which requires more staff to assist and monitor schools).

Overarching Finding 5: The FCPS central office must be reorganized to support efficient operations, accountability for staff, and an effective school-based management approach.

Overarching Finding 6: FCPS should establish a performance management system for schools and central office departments.

Overarching Finding 7: Central office departments need to create standard operating procedures and to provide supports that clearly align with the needs of principals, teachers, students, and families.

When a district’s central office does not have a clear strategy for school improvement, is not organized to support school improvement, and lacks clear systems and processes, making strategic decisions becomes difficult. As a result, equity—ensuring that students and schools have what they need to be successful—is frequently impacted, resulting in community concerns about fairness and poor academic performance among students at the greatest risk of school failure.

Overarching Finding 8: FCPS benefits from a strong financial picture, but resource allocation to schools needs to be studied further.

² Childress, et al. (January 2007).

Those same community concerns, however, can serve as a lever for positive change and improved outcomes for all students when channeled productively and addressed sincerely.

Overarching Finding 9: The community is supportive of the district—and of its new Superintendent—and emphasizes the importance of ensuring equity across FCPS.

Recommendations

Based on the findings outlined above, C&J/UPD has six overarching recommendations for FCPS:

- 1) Develop a strategic plan for the district and equitably allocate resources to achieve its goals.
- 2) Reorganize the central office and redefine central office job responsibilities so that they are aligned with the district’s theory of action and strategy for school improvement.
- 3) Establish systems across all departments for improved service delivery to schools and the community.
- 4) Promote academic excellence by ensuring implementation of a guaranteed and viable curriculum to all students.
- 5) Implement a performance management system for ensuring continuous improvement among schools, staff, and central office departments.
- 6) Improve communication and trust between the central office and schools and the community.

In the following pages, C&J/UPD expand upon these recommendations by providing more detailed strategies and—in some cases—action steps or suggested resources to support implementation.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Develop a strategic plan for the district and equitably allocate resources to achieve its goals.

To achieve this recommendation, FCPS should:

- 1a) Develop a strategic plan prior to the start of the 2016-17 school year.
- 1b) Require that central office departments create action plans aligned to the strategic plan.
- 1c) Align budget development processes and resource allocation to fund the plan.
- 1d) Conduct further analysis to better understand how resources are being used across schools and what may be driving differences in spending. Analyses might include:
 - 1e) Increase funding for ELL students and set targets for ELL teacher caseloads using lessons learned from the ELL district review.
 - 1f) Ensure that school board and SBDM councils' policies are updated to reflect the new strategic plan.

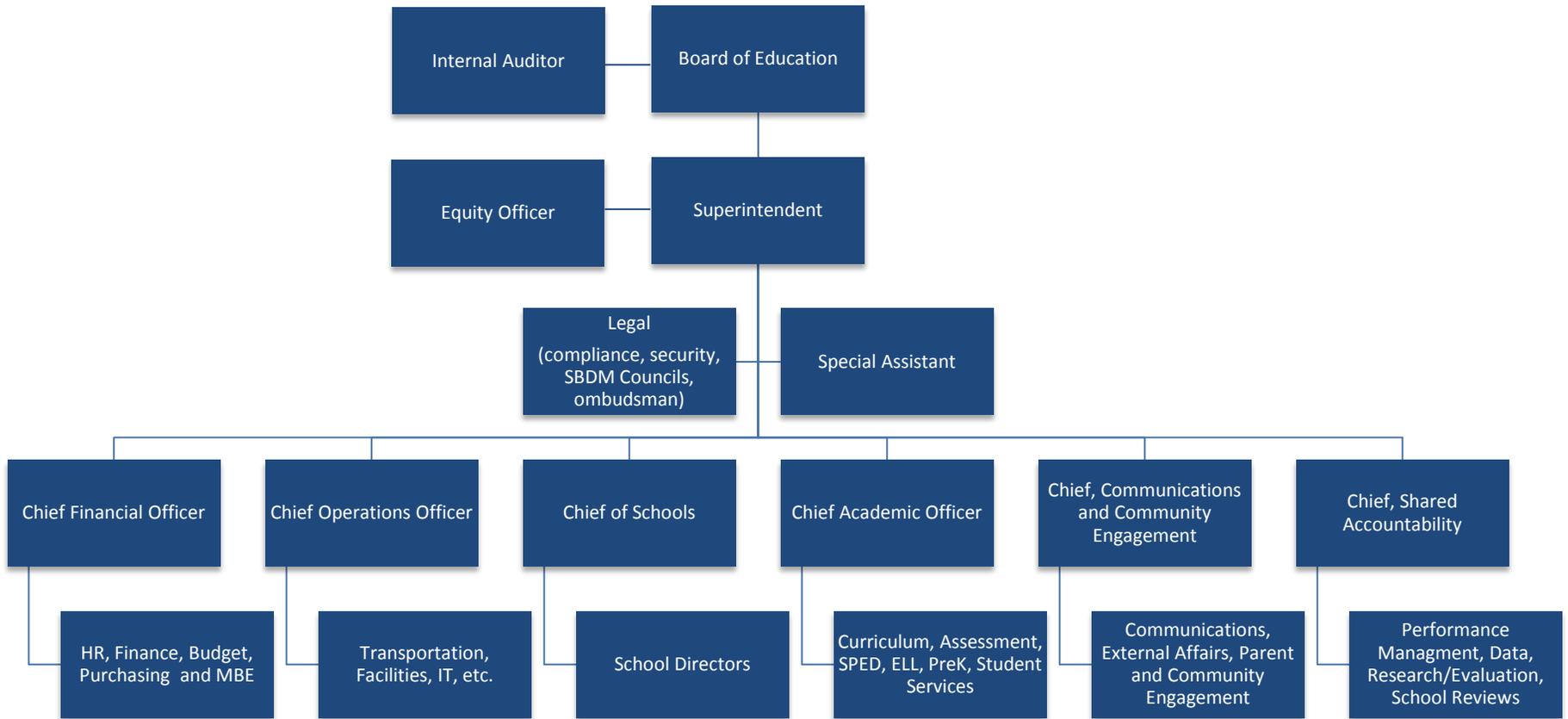
RECOMMENDATION 2

Reorganize the central office and redefine central office job responsibilities to be aligned with the district's theory of action and strategy for school improvement.

To achieve this recommendation, FCPS should:

- 2a) Redesign the central office (see Figure R1 for a proposed structure).

Figure R1. Proposed FCPS Organizational Structure



- 2b) Reconfigure the CFO's office
- 2c) Create a new a cabinet-level Chief of Talent position after process re-engineering has begun in earnest.
- 2d) Create a Chief of Schools position to supervise School Directors and clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the School Directors as evaluating principals and supporting them in being outstanding instructional leaders.
- 2e) Redefine the roll of the CAO to oversee voluntary curriculum, professional development, mandatory summative and formative assessments, preK, student services, special education, ELL, gifted and talented, and Title I.
- 2f) Create a cabinet-level Office of Communications and Community Engagement, responsible for media and stakeholder relations and family and community engagement.
- 2g) Reorganize and expand the capacity of the current Department of Data Management, Planning, Program Evaluation, and Assessment to become an Office of Shared Accountability.
- 2h) Reconfigure the Legal Counsel's responsibility to include oversight of compliance, security, SBDM councils, and a new ombudsman position.
- 2i) Redefine the roll of the Equity Officer to report directly to the Superintendent and to work collaboratively across all Offices to ensure that equity is infused throughout the work of the district.
- 2j) Create a new cabinet-level Special Assistant to the Superintendent who works on projects of strategic importance to the district and the Superintendent.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Establish systems and processes across all departments for improved service delivery to schools and the community.

To achieve this recommendation, FCPS should:

- 3a) Require each district Office to document key standard operating procedures (SOPs) and share them with appropriate staff and stakeholders.
- 3b) Revise financial reporting processes.

- 3c) Review the district’s policy for staffing allocations to schools to minimize the amount of firing and re-hiring of staff.
- 3d) As part of the budgeting process for new buildings or renovations, provide for a routine, formal budget conversation with Maintenance, Plant Operations, and Technology staff to ensure that appropriate levels of staff and equipment are available.
- 3e) Improve central office departments’ supports to and communication with schools and ensure that principals know who to call for questions, concerns, and requests for assistance by documenting and communicating protocols.
- 3f) Improve principal supports for recruiting and hiring highly effective teachers.
- 3g) Improve principal supports for evaluating teachers, retaining highly effective teachers, and exiting underperforming teachers.
- 3h) Improve the principal hiring process.
- 3i) Invest in an induction program to help new principals transition to building leadership roles.
- 3j) Improve communication within and between district Offices.
- 3k) Improve transportation for students by investing in drivers, bus monitors, and GPS technology.
- 3l) In collaboration with school staff and general counsel, phase out the Continuation Plan and develop an Out-of-Area plan that aligns with the new Rezoning Implementation Plan.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Promote academic excellence by ensuring implementation of a guaranteed and viable curriculum to all students.

To achieve this recommendation, FCPS should:

- 4a) Establish six academic priorities³ for all FCPS schools that can be supported and monitored by the central office.
- 4b) Implement a district-wide balanced assessment system.

³ Other central office academic supports should be significantly reduced or eliminated with remaining resources being shifted to the schools.

- 4c) Convene a District Curriculum Steering Committee chaired by the CAO and with representation from teachers, principals, special education, and ELL.
- 4d) Provide schools with improved support in implementing PBIS and MTSS to reduce suspensions, improve teachers' classroom management, and provide high-quality academic supports for students who need additional help.
- 4e) Provide schools with improved support in implementing special education models.
- 4f) Revise the special education staffing model to improve services for and evaluation of students and to increase schools' ownership of outcomes for students with disabilities.
- 4g) Establish a continuous feeder pattern of special education to ensure consistent supports for students with disabilities across their educational experience.
- 4h) Ensure that School Directors and special education Associate Directors are visiting their schools and meeting with principals at least 60 percent of their time.
- 4i) Increase the rigor and breadth of school reviews.
- 4j) Based on formative and summative assessments, school reviews, and ratings by School Directors, identify Partnership Zone Schools.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Implement a performance management system for ensuring continuous improvement among schools, staff, and central office departments.

To achieve this recommendation, FCPS should:

- 5a) Conduct a data diagnostic to better understand data access and system needs across the district.
- 5b) Require each central office department to track progress against a number of indicators.
- 5c) Create a central office dashboard that summarizes the indicators across all schools and all departments.
- 5d) Convene groups of administrators (e.g., principals, staff from operations and support, staff from finance administration, etc.) using the following basic steps of a performance management routine.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Improve communication and trust between the central office and schools and the community.

Many of the previous recommendations have implications for how the district communicates with and engages its stakeholders. Several are reiterated here to emphasize their importance in building trust between central office, schools, and the community. To achieve this recommendation, FCPS should:

- 6a) Move with urgency to implement the recommendations in this report.
- 6b) Lay out a timeline and description of the proposed change process and discuss with all stakeholders in multiple venues.
- 6c) With community input, define equity both in terms of student outcomes and student opportunities.
- 6d) Create and meet regularly with an advisory council of principals.
- 6e) Create systems in all central office departments that improve service delivery to and communication with schools (see Recommendation 3).
- 6f) Create a department of communications and community engagement that reports directly to the superintendent (see Recommendation 2).
- 6g) Create an ombudsman position, supervised by legal counsel, to address anonymous concerns and complaints from stakeholders (see Recommendation 2).