

**Entry Findings Report**  
**Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District**



**Superintendent of Schools**  
**Paul S. Haughey, Ed.D.**

**January 2019**

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## Introduction

The process of entry and transition into the position of Superintendent of Schools provided me with the opportunity to see the Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District to listen and learn - so that I could better understand the strengths and challenges that the schools had faced in the past and their hopes for the district in the future. At the same time, faculty, staff and community members had the chance to better understand my purpose - and to establish working relationships that will prove so important in the months and years ahead. This process also provided the opportunity to take the time together - to lay a solid foundation, upon which the district's vision, missions and goals will be realized.

## Report Organization

The findings of this report are divided into two parts: Interview Findings and Thematic Findings. The Thematic Findings section is organized according to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) model rubric for Superintendents. This rubric is divided into four categories: Instructional Leadership, Management and Operations, Family and Community Engagement, and Professional Culture. For each category, there are a number of themes discussed.

## Purpose and Process

### A. Purpose

In July 2018, I set about to develop an entry and transition plan to assist me in formulating a comprehensive picture of the Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District through *seeing, hearing, and counting data*. The transition process that I planned gave me the chance to develop and maintain necessary relationships with those people who impact or may impact the success of our schools in the future. As of January 2019, I have been able to gather and partially analyze a wealth of data through seeing, hearing, and counting. With the completion of the entry plan work and the production of this findings report, I am in a better position to lead the district moving forward.

### B. Process

Between August and December 2018, I listened to groups and individuals, observed students and staff in classrooms and other settings, examined student achievement data, and paid close attention to the school physical and cultural environment. During this process, I worked to:

1. Assess the appropriateness, effectiveness and local support of the schools' and district's vision, mission and goals. These data points provided me with a solid foundation of understanding that will allow us to move forward in a "proceed oriented" and thoughtful manner.
2. Communicate my own core values (*respect, responsibility and readiness to learn*) and build commitment through consensus-building, on the part of stakeholders, in moving the district forward.

3. Gain a better understanding of the district's past performance related to student achievement, student discipline, drop-outs, choice students, and budget.
4. Use lessons learned from the past - to better map out a plan for moving forward – so that the needs of the district and the communities served are better aligned and met.

Specifically, I met with teachers, administrators, office personnel, custodians, all school committee members, parents and family members, boards of selectmen, the Exchange Club of Spencer, MA, and other community stakeholders. While I had developed a series of questions, interviews were not limited to the developed questions, and this lack of structure allowed groups and individuals so concentrate on areas that were important to them including such topics as vocational and/or technical education.

I reviewed students' MCAS scores from the 2013-2018 school years and met with senior teachers, curriculum leaders and administrators to discuss lower than desired literacy scores in grades three through eight during this time period. Together, we looked at the issue through root cause analysis. Related to this, I examined the newly-purchased elementary literacy series, "*Houghton-Mifflin-Harcourt's Journeys Program.*"

I observed classrooms, both alone and jointly with other administrators, spending five to ten minutes for each classroom visit. I circulated around the district to observe and hear how students interacted with each other, with teachers and with the environment, in hallways and cafeterias. I attended a variety of school events, including band performances, PBIS Student Recognition events at East Brookfield and Wire Village, all but one school assembly, and athletic practices and events throughout the fall and winter.

I met weekly on an individual basis to better understand procedures and "process maps the operations of the central office and district. In the summer, we held our first leadership team retreat to refine the district's Strategic Focus Areas (District Improvement Plan) and to develop administrators' individual goals.

I looked at the current and potential impact that central office personnel have on staff effectiveness and student learning. Specifically, I examined the roles of the Superintendent, Director of Academic Affairs, School Business Administrator, Supervisor of Buildings and Grounds, Director of Student Services, and other central office administrative staff.

## **Core Values**

While each individual school has its own culture, it is clear that there is a strong set of positive and effective, though not yet formally articulated, district core values. In listening to and observing faculty and staff, it is clear that public education in the Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District is driven by values established in 1962:

1. Progress
2. Unity
3. Knowledge

Last year, John Perricone provided an opening day workshop to faculty on the Japanese concept of *ShoShin*, which refers to the idea of letting go of your preconceptions and having an attitude of openness when studying a subject. When you are a true beginner, your mind is empty and open. To begin this year, Mr. Perricone returned to our regional schools and presented on

opening day about Kaizen or the concept of, “continuous improvement!” The concept of continuous improvement has been a fundamental core belief in my personal and professional life as an instructional leader because in public education, our work is never done or complete.

## **District Mission Statement**

...We believe in the importance of a regional school district where the district is an integral part of the community and that community support is necessary for the district's operation and achievement of excellence. We are confident that through our collaboration, we will build a common purpose for the future of our schools. The Spencer East Brookfield Regional School District Goals are as follows:

- To engage all students in challenging programs that will meet their individual needs;
- To create and sustain an atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation within the entire school community;
- To develop and nurture dynamic partnerships with the greater community;
- To build organizational structures which support effective teaching and learning at all developmental levels while maintaining fiscal responsibility.

## **District Vision Statement**

All students can and will learn when supported by a committed community, parents and highly qualified educators. SEBRSD students will develop intellectually, socially, physically, and creatively. They will graduate “college and career-ready” fully prepared to become contributing members of the global society.

## **Interview Findings**

### **Overview**

The district’s staff, parents and community stakeholders appear, overall, to have positive feelings about the district, its small size, positive school culture, connection with the community, and its direction with a new superintendent. In looking at district strengths and challenges, interviewees tended to concentrate on the strengths, convinced that the district is on the right path overall, while acknowledging the existence of some challenges. Respondents concentrated time and again on the positive cultural aspects of the district’s schools, stepping away from the issues related to academic rigor in the early grades or the importance of relevance in daily teaching and learning practices. Secondarily, in the years 2013-2017, students graduating did not aspire to pursue tier one college acceptances with one parent even writing to this Superintendent in an email correspondence in July of 2018, “our family has chosen to have our child educated in a neighboring district where there is a priority on tier one rigor and relevance for a college education” (paraphrased). And finally, as a result of multiple interviews with local business leaders and civic leaders, there was a clear and evident disconnect between chapter 74 pathway offerings and application of such vocational/technical education within the district as it relates to real-world application and a real “college and career” focus despite the visible statement

articulated to the contrary. In simplest terms, there was a disconnect between the stated vision, mission and goals and what had transpired over the past seven or eight years. Subsequently, there is an exceptional opportunity to fill these gaps with this entry work and the subsequent rollout of future Chapter 74 program research, development and implementation possibilities in the areas of environmental science (horticulture), early childhood education, criminal justice and a revamping of our current marketing/business program offerings.

### **District Strengths**

- 1. School and Class Size:** Interviews that I conducted confirmed the belief that the small school and small class learning environment is popular with faculty, staff and parents. Almost all agree that teachers are able to provide small group instruction and attention to all of the students with average enrollments of 20 students or thereabout. Students have the opportunity to establish long-lasting and valuable relationships with faculty, staff and peers in an environment in which “everyone knows everyone.”
- 2. Dedicated faculty and staff:** Interview results and my personal observations agree that the district’s highly experienced staff provides a caring and supportive learning environment for the children. Parents and staff recognize that our teachers continue to attend conferences, workshops, graduate courses, and targeted training classes to further improve their skills.
- 3. Sense of Community:** There is a strong sense of community in not only Spencer and East Brookfield, MA but within the Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District. For the most part, interviews culled out in detail the fact that the district had become fractured and lost its way with so much turnover within the Central Office leadership. The communities became divided when two school building were forced to close due to inability to keep maintenance in place for the Lake Street School and Maple Street School in Spencer, MA. Subsequently, the fifth and six grade student s of Spencer moved into Knox Trail Middle School, while East Brookfield Elementary took on Preschool students for both communities of Spencer and East Brookfield, MA during this time. The fifth and sixth grade student never left East Brookfield Elementary and remain within the elementary school to this day; yet are always afforded the opportunity to join their peers should the community deem it appropriate to do so... On every occasion, trust was mentioned as needing to be rebuilt. Additionally, the administration, faculty, staff, parents and students interviewed also expressed “Hope” for the future of the district.
- 4. School and District Culture:** The Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District has an opportunity to define itself anyway it chooses moving forward; and is proud of the way it has weathered the turbulence and strife it has endured due to school closures,

economic shortfalls, and shrinking enrollments. The district has actually become closer knit as a result of their challenges and now speak with pride that they were together through the difficult times and are excited for the future of the district; and where we are going with a clear focus on teaching and learning for ALL students.

- 5. Student Services:** The changing needs of our student body of the past five to ten years has our student service department taking a number of new challenges, especially in the areas of addressing the needs of diverse learners and exceptional children. Eight years ago, to make the budget work, the then Superintendent cut a number of programs and services and had students serviced outside the district. What remained in SEBRSD program and service offerings became taxed as a result. Yet, despite shifts in our demographic makeup and social mobility rates sitting around ten percent annually, the district has finally seen a recent turnaround in School Choice out numbers returning to levels not seen since 2015. And as a result, SEBRSD has been able to provide effective programming in-district for most students, instead of sending children to residential or out-of-district placements, allowing children to remain at home. This turnaround process has not been easy and has been a slow go - but has begun and is a credit to our administration, faculty and staff and their dedication and commitment to all students.

Moreover, the fact that school choice is leveling off and even decreasing at this time is a sign of the confidence that Spencer-East Brookfield has begun to turn things programmatically and from a service delivery manner around in the areas of special education, English Language Education, Education of Homeless Youth, and the like...Increasingly, the district utilizes sheltered-English immersion and inclusive practice - to provide a free and appropriate public education while keeping all students in the least restrictive environment.

Finally, a serious amount of time, energy and focus needs to be dedicated in the years ahead around reviewing our procedures surrounding our Child Study Team processes on the part of all educators within the district so that the needs of students are clearly articulated, defined and addressed in a timely manner.

- 6. Secondary Academic Program:** Graduates of David Prouty High School regularly report that they had been well prepared for college, yet after only two years, many of the graduates step away from their formal learning for a variety of reasons. The secondary academic program's ability to deliver Advanced Placement (AP) courses has increased each year. In the 2018-19 school year, the program of studies should include AP courses in History, English, Math, and Sciences. Other AP courses have been made available through Virtual High School, BYU Online and TEC Academy.

## **District Challenges and Opportunities**

- 1. Improved Public Relations:** The district suffered from ineffective or nonexistent public relations until recently. The campaign to close the two Spencer elementary schools two years ago, for example, stirred up a great deal of negative feelings in the two communities of the regional school district that was exacerbated by newspaper articles, letters to the editor, and Facebook postings. In order to compete and remain viable, interviewees agreed that it was important for our district to publicize the wonderful things that happen in our schools. Upon my arrival, the creation of a communications plan for the regional school district and a complete revision to the school district website have proven paramount, for example, in the area of reinvestment and improvement of our operations, maintenance effort and facilities.
- 2. Superintendent Presence:** As the head of the district, it is important for the Superintendent to be visible, not only at school events such as concerts and games, but also in the community, at town meetings, civic organization meetings, and other community gatherings. Those interviewed indicated that the Superintendent should be working to gather community support for the district's programs and budget, and seek alternative funding where possible. Since September 2018, I have heard positive comments from parents, students, staff and community members related to increased Superintendent presence at school and community events.
- 3. Communication:** In the past, the district's stakeholders, including families, staff and others, indicated that they felt that the district did not effectively communicate with its stakeholders. Inclusion in the "happenings occurring within our schools" has been paramount since the start of this school year and an area of focus and purpose for all of us within the regional school district. Our goal is to establish meaningful two-way communication with our parents, families and students so they know that they are valued and that teaching and learning is important. Finally, stakeholders should feel that they are included - and respected - and that everyone knows what is going on in the schools.
- 4. Elementary and Middle School Academic Rigor and Achievement:** Between 2013 and 2018, MCAS scores in grades three through eight have remained relatively flat. In 2013, Wire Elementary School and Knox Trail Middle School were designated as a Level Three schools by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) in 2013 because Reading scores did not meet state-stipulated improvement goals. This, in turn, led to the district's designation as a Level Three district, in spite of the fact that East Brookfield Elementary School and David Prouty High School earned a Level One designation. English Language Arts MCAS scores appear to be in the lower half of the state. In general, students have struggled with early literacy prior to their arrival to the

district in kindergarten and have to play catch up in many instances due to a lack of preparedness for the standards expected in kindergarten through grade six. The district has, as a result, made a significant investment into a literacy initiative for grade k-12 and has spent many professional development days investigating current research-based teaching practices to address the needs of our students.

- 5. High School Rigor and School Reputation:** While high school MCAS scores indicate a strong academic program, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores are sometimes inconsistent. There are some inconsistencies as well between SAT scores and report card grades. Several parents of high-achieving students reported in their interviews that top students are not confronted with an academic program that is rigorous enough to effectively prepare them for admission to or success in challenging “first tier” college or university programs. In addition, one parent reported that since David Prouty students seldom attend Ivy League and other top tier universities, those institutions lack the successful “track record” to make acceptance of David Prouty students more likely.

## Thematic Findings

### Instructional Leadership Findings

*Reference: Standard I: Instructional Leadership. The education leader promotes the learning and growth of all students and the success of all staff by cultivating a shared vision that makes powerful teaching and learning the central focus of schooling.*

**Curriculum and Instruction Theme:** Teachers in the district, with few exceptions, are highly experienced, masters-level professionals. Less experienced teachers are highly motivated and well-trained, with some even taking on curriculum leader positions within their faculty teams. The district's formal and informal teacher mentoring helps newly-hired teachers to quickly reach a high level of effectiveness. With the vast majority of classes numbering around 20 students, teachers are able to provide small group and differentiated instruction to students on a regular and ongoing basis.

Teachers throughout the district indicate that they feel that they provide instruction based on a sound curriculum. The vast majority of David Prouty curricula exist within a database, having been initially entered in preparation for the last NEASC reaccreditation process last year. Many, however, have yet to be updated to show the Massachusetts Frameworks Curriculum Frameworks/ standards. In the elementary school, almost no curricula have been entered into the database system. The elementary school administration has a two-year plan to populate the database/software system with up-to-date curricula, tied to the Massachusetts Frameworks. Some teachers are not convinced that curricula in the system produces better results in student learning.

Over the last three years, faculty members have trained, through graduate courses and workshops, to better utilize data in their short-term and long-term planning. Most faculty members are comfortable with using data to improve or enhance their instruction. Faculty graduate courses offered, including Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), stressed the importance of the collection, tracking, and utilization of data to improve instruction and other interventions. Clearly-articulated district focus areas and school priorities provide guidance and direction to the faculty.

### Strengths

- The district provides graduate education courses through French River Education Collaborative and Worcester State University that directly target methods of improving instruction. Past courses included Response to Intervention, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Sheltered English Immersion Coursework, and Methods of Teaching Math and Literacy at the Elementary Level and will be expanding

offering into next year and beyond within the Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District.

- The incorporation of the PBIS Program into the teachers' everyday programs, now in its third year, appears to have resulted in an increasingly positive school culture.
- Secondary departmental teams have largely realigned their instruction content to consistently match the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.
- Following coursework and other professional development programs, teachers developed and employed innovative instructional techniques.
- The district has hired a new Director of Academic Affairs with a strong background in curriculum development and assessment analysis back in 2016.
- The high school core subjects' curricula appear to have produced positive results, based on MCAS scores in the last few years.
- Elementary instructional teams have developed standards-based assessments for most academic areas over the last two years.
- A large percentage of the district's faculty have completed graduate work in RtI and PBIS, and have experience in tracking student data and using that data to improve or refine instruction.

### **District Challenges and Opportunities**

- There is district-wide lack of consistency in overall academic expectations and the level of instructional program rigor.
- Some elementary grade-level instructional programs have not been fully realigned to match changes in curriculum brought about by the implementation of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks/Common Core.
- A significant number of teachers are not convinced of the value of curricula in helping students to learn and grow. Many are highly experienced teachers who have redone their curricula multiple times in the last few decades.
- The development of elementary school grade-based, team-developed and agreed-upon curricula requires increased coordination between teachers.
- Mapping of all elementary curricula into our database/software system over a two-year period is needed to identify areas of overlap and gaps in curricula.
- As well, a newly revised Standards-Based Report Card for the Elementary Grades (k-6) is needed.

## Management and Operations Findings

**Teaching and Learning Environment Theme:** The four schools in the district provide learning environments for the district's children and young adults that are predictable, orderly, warm, supportive, and conducive to learning. Inappropriate student behaviors are the rare exception throughout the district, and the levels of negative behaviors that do occur are relatively benign. The district maintains updated and effective safety protocols.

The district's population decreases annually, but at varying rates. Periodic eliminations or recoding of teacher positions creates challenges for scheduling, including common planning time, but also provides opportunities for innovation and improved efficiency.

The relative small size of classes within the district allows the staff to identify each student's individual needs (academic, social, emotional and behavioral) and to develop plans to help each student to reach his or her potential. Through the work of the district's School Adjustment Counselors, the positive district culture and the PBIS program, students often make dramatic growth and improvements.

Staff absenteeism is a concern. On average on any given day, a total of 8 Faculty and Staff are absent, which impacts negatively on the overall learning and teaching environment, and places a financial stress on the district. Absent staff people fall into four main categories: self-sick, sick family, professional development and school business.

### Strengths

- Students with disabilities and English Language Learners have traditionally been active participants in the school's athletic program.
- Students who had failed in other schools have consistently found success in the district, due, in part, to the effective staff and student peer support systems.
- Clear expectations, reinforced through the various PBIS programs, provide recognition and incentives for positive behavior. Elementary and secondary PBIS programs conduct periodic recognition assemblies to honor students who have been nominated by peers or staff for their good works.
- School administrators routinely create and execute individualized behavioral or academic programs for students who need additional support.
- Schools in the district, with their small sizes, are agile and flexible enough to be able to alter schedules to best meet the needs of students and staff.
- Teachers in the elementary and middle schools have ample time to communicate, either through common planning times or common lunch times.
- The district has a newly revised and adopted policy manual that drives effective procedures and professional dialogue on how best to meet the needs of the students and communities we serve.

- Teachers and administrators meet busses in the morning and oversee bus dismissal in the afternoon.
- The physical plants of our schools are well-maintained overall, providing a clean, attractive, welcoming and safe environment for students and staff. Every school vacation provides time for repainting, repairs, and overall refinishing.
- The high school has been accepted into the Core Program’s “Eligibility Period” with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) and has recently had the locker rooms, boiler room, and tennis replaced.
- High school teachers have scheduled grade-level or curriculum area common planning time during the school day thanks to a revised master schedule.

### **District Challenges and Opportunities**

- Staff absenteeism along with a lack of qualified substitute teachers is a concern and poses a challenge to the management and operation.
- While team and departmental meetings are run in a professional manner, most faculty groups appear to operate without formalized meeting norms.
- Emergency dismissals are practiced each year, but some innovations, such as the designation of emergency busses for early or emergency dismissals, proved to be ineffective and time-consuming.
- Knox Trail Middle School and both elementary schools will require boiler replacements next year and in 2021 and 2022 as the 25-year life expectancy of the heating units is coming of age.

**Fiscal Systems Theme:** The district’s budgets have reflected a significant amount of DESE oversight over the past eight years. However, the regional school district is now in position to pay off its outstanding debt and move forward without oversight in the next year. In the past few years, the district’s budgets have maintained nominal local increases above minimal contributions with increases totaling 0.24% and 0.25% to the total district operating budget in the past couple of years. Unfortunately, the Massachusetts formula for assessing towns resulted in some towns’ assessments increasing by much more and leaving others struggling to make ends meet.

### **Strengths**

- Traditionally, the district lives within its budget each year and complies with all aspects of DESE Financial Oversight and is now ready to proceed forward with the paying off of the debt.
- Policies and procedures and streamlining of the operation so that it is effective and efficient has been a team effort and a great deal of work on the part of everyone within the central office.

- The District utilizes “MySchoolBucks” Online BillPay for its point of sale system and school lunch program, making accounting much easier for everyone involved in the food service operation.
- The School Business Manager has responded to auditors’ reports with improvements to fiscal management procedures.

### **District Challenges and Opportunities**

- The district under-utilizes grants and other alternative funding sources, i.e. solar, wind, cellular towers, and the expansion of performance-based contracting efforts are just a few opportunities yet to be explored...
- An online bill pay system for all types of before/after-school, and student activities accounts would reduce time and improve resources within the district, thus making life easier for all involved in accounts payable and the school business office. At the time of this findings report, I am recommending we move to UniPay Online Banking as a means of paying for Before/After School programming, Preschool, activities and clubs, sports fees and the like so as to reduce the need for parents/families to have to pay in cash or come in to the Central Office but produce receipts online and at the push of a button.

## Family and Community Engagement Findings

Reference: *Standard III: Family and Community Engagement. Promotes the learning and growth of all students and the success of all staff through effective partnerships with families, community organizations, and other stakeholders that support the mission of the school and district.*

**Family Collaboration and Engagement Theme:** The district has a priority of increasing the quality and amount of engagement with families and the community. Although approximately 86% of our students and staff are white/Caucasian, the district strives to be a welcoming place for all families, regardless of race, ethnic group or sexual orientation. Specifically, schools in the district reach out to the individuals and groups in the surrounding communities, tying into opportunities for service learning opportunities. The district has established corporate partnerships/relationships with local businesses and organizations for financial and educational support. The community schools in East Brookfield and Spencer boast a large pool of community members who engage students in unique educational activities in the areas of farming, agriculture, horticulture, medicine, law, actuarial and technology fields of endeavor.

Teachers regularly interact and collaborate with families to support each child's growth in the schools' programs and at home.

### Strengths

- The district's small classes provide for a high level of teacher-family communication and interaction, especially in grades 7-12 where we are now using G-Suite/Google Classroom learning environments and classrooms.
- While the district's English Language Learners population is small, approximately 62 students at this time, the Director of Student Services ensures that families receive translated written school communications and even have access to phone translation services should they be needed with a call-in number anytime day or night.
- Teachers are strongly encouraged to establish strong ties to local and county resources, to include cultural, artistic, social, environmental, business and entrepreneurial resources.
- Derogatory behaviors or comments related to racial, ethnic, sexual orientation or other status are not tolerated, are dealt with immediately, and very rarely occur.
- Many teachers establish and maintain very powerful and positive relationships with families, working closely and individually to develop programs designed to enhance student growth.
- And the Spencer Fair each fall proves to be an event everyone looks forward to, especially our David Prouty Senior Classes, as everyone stops what they are doing and comes together within the region for the celebration of agriculture.

## **District Challenges and Opportunities**

- The percentage of white students and staff demands ongoing diligence and training on the part of administrators and staff to maintain sensitivity to all ethnic groups for all walks of life.
- Collaboration, while strongest in the primary grades, seems to diminish once students leave the self-contained environment of the elementary school.
- There is no district-wide model to ensure consistent and effective family collaboration.

**Family and Community Communication Theme:** The district maintains a website as well as a Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube page so that families and stakeholders are provided with key information about the district and school-based activities. During emergency or special situations (such as school cancellations or early dismissals), the school uses the “OneCallNow” telephone, text, and email notification system to quickly reach all families, including parents in divided families. School administrators communicate with families occasionally by letter as issues arise and are instructed to quickly respond to parents or stakeholders who contact the school with concerns or questions.

## **Strengths**

- Quarterly meetings are held of the SEBRSD Emergency Management Team in concert with state and local safety officials. Practice drills are held each quarter for lockdowns, fire drills safety, and the like.
- The OneCallNow system effectively reaches all district families in less than 15 minutes, once a message is launched.

## **District Challenges and Opportunities**

- The district’s on-line calendar and website, updating information about emergencies, special events, and general district information.
- Infrequently, stakeholders complain that calls or emails are not returned in a timely manner.
- With the email culture, the district must continually stress the importance of active two-way communication.

## Professional Culture Findings

*Reference: Standard IV: Professional Culture. Promotes success for all students by nurturing and sustaining a school culture of reflective practice, high expectations, and continuous learning for staff.*

**Commitment to High Standards Theme:** The district’s staff is a highly-motivated, professional, family-like group of caring adults who share a common culture and philosophy of education. From the administration down, all set high expectations for themselves in the way they teach and interact with students and families.

### Strengths.

- Faculty members are willing to learn and improve.
- Teachers understand the importance of modeling behaviors that display the district’s core values.
- Many faculty and staff are respectful, responsibility, and caring.

### District Challenges and Opportunities

- Due to the many changes in instructional leadership over the past eight years, consistent expectations surrounding the district core values have been splintered.
- Some teachers do not create a high level of academic rigor in the classroom, continuing to search for the balance between being caring and demanding.

**Continuous Staff Learning Theme:** The district encourages its faculty to learn new skills and methods to improve student learning in the area of literacy, grades K-12.

### Strengths

- Push toward improving literacy in our district: Elementary teachers have attended a summer institute with the Hill Group and “*Houghton-Mifflin-Harcourt's Journeys Program;*” as well as in grades 5-12, with *Keys to Literacy* with Joan Sedita, Sue Nichols, and their team of literacy experts.

### District Challenges and Opportunities

- School administrators have participated in PBIS coursework yet still struggle from time to time with best practices.
- Pockets of faculty members seldom participate in district-supported education programs.

## Assessment Data / MCAS Findings

To be succinct and direct, the faculty, staff, parents and students have all done what they are able to the best of their abilities – with the resources allocated. Over the past eight years, the Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District has experienced significant changes in leadership within the Superintendent’s office. As a result, expectations have changed as leadership has changed. The assessment data details a rather interesting story of a district that has recently produced flat achievement scores, especially in grades 4-8, yet positive growth scores on the MCAS, especially in the recent 2018 results.

**The strengths of the Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District** over the past eight years have been the faculty, staff, students and parents/families who remained with the district through good times and bad - and demonstrated high levels of pride in their hometown school district. The scores detail a story of many high and many lows but speak to perseverance.

**The district challenges and opportunities** that exist remain in establishing and maintaining consistent governance and operational leadership now and into the future for the Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District - so that a focus upon teaching and learning for all students is first and foremost for all involved with our district. This is a primary finding of this report.

**Summary:** I am not overly concerned with the scores on MCAS. After some thirty years of “high stakes” testing in Massachusetts, our Commonwealth now boasts that we “Lead the Nation” in student performance. Moreover, at present, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is taking the time needed to review and revise the assessment system; and while they do this important work, it is important for us locally to take the time to focus on knowledge and skills in numeracy, literacy, problem solving, critical thinking and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in the areas of science, technology, engineering and math as well as the arts. Our work now should be on looking at what it takes to produce SEBRSD students that are truly ready for college or career upon leaving our school district. The scores will come once our students have mastered their essential skills for life...no matter what life (or test) throws their way!

## Next Steps

**Overview:** The findings in this report lead to continued research to answer questions that have arisen. The in-depth investigations into these questions should provide information leading to meaningful steps to address issues.

**Core Values:** While the vast majority of the Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District stakeholders appear to support the hypothesis that the district's core values, articulated in this report, have a positive impact on student learning and student future college or career success. Further study, to include surveys of current and past students and possibly parents, is needed to determine what impact the district's core values actually have. This study could uncover additional values that have not yet been recognized as district core values.

**School and District Culture: Academic Achievement and Rigor:** Historically flat Reading MCAS scores and concerns brought forward by some parents raised the issue of the level of rigor in the district's culture and academic programs. This could tie into the public perception that the district's seniors seek colleges and universities that provide a certain comfort level, avoiding Ivy League universities and other tier one institutions with demanding academic programs. Although the guidance counselors encourage our students to apply to "stretch" or "reach" colleges, students, in the end, often choose universities that are a good "fit." The district should study this issue, possibly by bringing in other outside resources to assist in this research while also pursuing advanced study of Chapter 74 programming in areas of high demand careers, i.e. marketing and business; criminal justice; environmental science/horticulture; and early childhood education.

**School and District Culture: Curriculum and Instruction:** The link between flat state Reading assessment scores and the lack of consistent, high-quality curricula that are tied to the common core, especially in the elementary schools, has not yet been established. This year, the district's leaders participated in root cause analysis to uncover the possible causes for flat Reading MCAS scores in grades three through eight. This broad-based process should be continued in order to address academic rigor in general throughout the district. Further, the district's administration and department/grade level leaders should further examine the relative impacts of the three legs of the academic program (students, teachers and curriculum) and administrative style on student achievement in order to chart a course for future improvement.

**Faculty Culture and Staff Absence:** Higher than expected levels of staff absence impact the district budget and reduce the effectiveness of the instructional program on all levels. Further study must be completed to determine if the district's level of staff absence is actually higher than that of other Southern Worcester County schools. If the district absence rate is actually significantly elevated, district staff and leaders should join in a root cause analysis process to better understand the causes for this level of absence. Areas to explore include morale, overall health levels, staff culture, contracts, working conditions, and district policies.

**Early Childhood Education:** To address the concerns in early literacy upon arrival to the district, SEBRSD should consider establishing an Early Childhood Education Study Subcommittee, made up of educators, and parents with the mission of exploring the feasibility of bringing tuition-free, universal 4-year old education to the district. The Policy Subcommittee should develop a policy, based on the Sub-Committee's recommendations. The administration

will need to develop procedures, based on the district's policies, to implement the Early Childhood Education program simultaneously while working to bring to fruition a Chapter 74 endorsed Early Childhood Education program that is free to the communities we serve.

**Alternative Funding Sources to enhance the District's Programs:** The district should develop procedures and a culture that encourages teachers and administrators to seek out grants to enhance the district's programs while lowering the financial burden on the taxpayers. Further, the district needs to establish and maintain strong relationships with alumni, local businesses, governmental agencies and public officials in order to find and realize alternative funding resources for the district's programs in the areas of solar, wind, cellular service and expansion of current performance-based contracting efficiency initiatives...

## References

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*Note: I would like to acknowledge Dave Hastings, former Superintendent of Schools in Southern Berkshire Regional School District. His Entry Plan Findings Report provided the template/format for this work. What was most striking about his report in 2014 is how similar the “challenges and opportunities” were to ours here in Spencer-East Brookfield Regional Schools District in 2018-2019. Further, I’d like to thank my NSIP coach, Dr. Patti Grenier, for pushing me to produce a high quality document anchored in the “root cause analysis” data and needs of our regional school district.*