

Central Office Structure in the Weymouth Public Schools: Analysis, Observations, Recommendations

December 28, 2017

I. Introduction

Purpose

Dr. Jennifer Curtis-Whipple, Superintendent of Schools, determined that a review of the central office leadership positions was needed to strengthen the administration of the school district. It is the intent of this report to shed light on the issues related to the efficiency, workflow, and culture within the central office and to make recommendations to the Superintendent for further consideration. While this report does contain both analysis and recommendations, it is not exhaustive. Further discussions in the district will be needed before many of the changes recommended can be made.

It must be stated at the outset that the Superintendent has exercised thoughtful and courageous leadership in commissioning the study-change is very often met with resistance. Engaging a consultant to meet with staff to ask probing questions demonstrates her willingness to be open to the studies' findings. Dr. Whipple's experience in Weymouth as a principal before becoming superintendent gives her substantial credibility among staff. As one principal indicated in the interviews, "People would walk through a wall for Jen."

It must also be acknowledged that Weymouth's administrators and support staff involved with this project were simply terrific! They were forthcoming in the interviews and sincere in their effort to provide the superintendent with useful feedback. In the spirit of their candor, it is also the case that they represented Weymouth very well.

Consultant

Anthony Bent (Ed.D. in administration from Boston College) was engaged to do this study. Dr. Bent was a high school teacher (Wellesley), a high school department head (Newton), a system-wide world language coordinator and interim assistant superintendent (Lexington), a director of personnel and professional development (Watertown), and a superintendent of schools (Shrewsbury- 15 years).

He currently co-teaches the Assistant Superintendent Leadership Seminars under the auspices of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS). He is also a member of the Wellesley School Committee.

II. Methodology and Data

Interactions with Superintendent

The study began with telephone and in-person conversations with the Superintendent. The discussions centered around the need for greater clarity of job functions, the hope to improve services to the schools, and the importance of providing leadership positions in central office to meet the challenges of the school district.

Thirty Nine Interviews (central office, principals, others)

Dr. Bent conducted interviews with 39 administrators and support staff from the central office and the schools over a four-day period in September. There were two interview formats: individual meetings (central office administrators) and group discussions (e.g. curriculum leaders, building principals, central office support staff). All participants signed confidentiality statements to preclude discussions among staff about the study and provide each person with the best possible opportunity to speak openly. *The consultant assured each participant that his interview notes and individual survey responses would not be shared with anyone.* Those conversations (generalized), in addition to the survey data and information from other school districts, are included in each section of this report.

Each interview unfolded based upon the positions held by the interviewees and whether the format was individual or in a group setting. Many of the interviews included the following questions:

1. What is your sense of why these interviews are being conducted?
2. How would you describe the workflow in central office? Is it smooth and efficient?
3. How would you describe the culture in the central office?
4. As you look at the organizational chart, what suggestions might you make to improve the operation of the central office?

Thirty Surveys Returned (central office, principals, others)

Each of the interviewees was asked to complete an anonymous survey to provide narrative and quantitative information for the study. Each survey question included a 10-point rating scale with 1 indicating a very weak assessment, and 10 a very strong one. Each question included space for narrative comments. The questions and the overall ratings from the surveys are below: (1=very weak, 10=very strong)

The ratings speak for themselves, but are also discussed in the narrative that follows later in this report. The survey results should serve Weymouth as an opportunity to reflect upon perceptions and

morale from school-based administrators and central office staff. By and large, the viewpoints were similar from group to group. Given the positive comments in the interviews regarding the efforts of the staff to do their job to the best of their ability, the low ratings presented here were surprising. It is possible that the very low rating on the culture question inhibited more positive assessments on the other questions.

1. What is your view of the efficiency of central office operations based upon the daily flow of the work?

1 2 3 4 5.4 6 7 8 9 10

2. What is your view of the clarity of the job responsibilities in central office (e.g., who is responsible for what- administrators, support staff)?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. What is your view of the overall staffing in central office (e.g., enough to get the job done, not enough, changes needed)?

1 2 3 4 5.5 6 7 8 9 10

4. What is your view of how well and efficiently the central office serves the needs of the schools?

1 2 3 4 5 6.2 7 8 9 10

5. What is your view of the level of trust among the people who work in the central office (e.g., administrators, support positions)?

1 2 3.2 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Peer Review

The specific central office positions in any school district vary according student enrollment, budget, local conditions and needs, and history. While there are common patterns among districts, there is no clear “right way” to staff the central office.

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2016 DART comparisons) lists 10 districts that it considers “most similar” to Weymouth in terms of “grade span, total enrollment and special populations.” They include Attleboro, Methuen, Peabody, and Waltham. Those districts are closest to Weymouth in student enrollment and are included here. The Brookline Public Schools is also included because it recently reorganized its central office.

This report includes the positions of particular interest to the study: assistant superintendents, business managers, student services administrators, and human resource administrators. The information below derives from conversations with central office administrators in each of the districts.

The organizational chart for the Weymouth Public Schools is enclosed as a frame of reference. The student enrollments below are from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website (2016 numbers). Weymouth's enrollment was listed as 6,289 for 2016.

Attleboro (5,908 students)

- The **Superintendent's** reports include the following: the central office administrators below and all 9 principals.
- **Assistant Superintendent.** This person is primarily responsible for curriculum and instruction. Non-evaluating coordinators (humanities, stem, educational technology, etc.) are under this position.
- **Director of Finance and Controller.** This person, in addition to the business function, is also responsible for maintenance, transportation, food services, and information technology (He has administrators for each function.)
- **Director of Special Education.** For the first time this year, there is an Assistant Special Education Director who evaluates staff. The Coordinator of Nursing also reports to this position. (Guidance is a high school department only).
- **Director of Human Resources.** (No reports to this position)

Methuen (6,896 students)

- The **Superintendent's** reports include the 5 principals and the central office administrators listed below.
- **Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and Grants.** This person also supervises the K-12 Supervisor of Physical Education and Health, the K-12 Supervisor of Fine Arts, the Director of Career and Technical Education, and the Supervisor of Title I. There are high school department heads who report to the high school principal.
- **Business Administrator.** This person, in addition to fiscal operations, is also responsible for maintenance, food service, and transportation.
- **Director of Student Services.** This person supervises the K-12 Special Education Administrator, The K-12 Director of Guidance, and the nursing department.
- **Director Human Resources.** This person also coordinates the transportation program, but there is no other administrator.

Peabody (5,956 students)

- The **Superintendent's** direct reports include the following: 4 central office administrators and all 10 principals.
- **Assistant Superintendent of Schools.** This individual is responsible for curriculum and instruction.
- **School Business Manager.** This person is also responsible for transportation and food service. Maintenance in Peabody will soon be shifted to the municipal side of town government.
- **Administrator of Special Education.** There is no assistant administrator, but there is a high school special education director.
- **Administrator of Human Resources.** (No reports)

Waltham (5,461 students)

- The **Superintendent** has the following reports: the central office positions below, all 10 principals, the Network Administrator, the Director of ELL, the Director of Facilities, the Administrator of Educational Technology Integration.
- **Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction.** This person supervises a number of 6-12 and K-12 Unit B curriculum directors.
- **Administrator of Pupil Personnel Services.** This individual supervises 2 assistant directors, one for K-5, the other for 6-12. In addition, the Director of Guidance and the Director of Nursing both report to this person as well.
- **Business Administrator.** This person also supervises the supervisor of registration, translation, and transportation. He also supervises the director of food services.
- **Administrator of Human Resources.** (No administrator reports)

Brookline (7,695 students)

Brookline reorganized its central office in FY 2016 in order to bring greater efficiency to the leadership functions and reduce the number of reports to the two deputy superintendents (There are now 3 deputies). Brookline is larger than Weymouth and is more substantially funded. At the same time, the issue of the number of direct reports in central office, particularly to the deputy for teaching and learning, is relevant to this study. Brookline changed the title and reporting of the position in human resources. The position changed from assistant superintendent to director of human resources, and now reports to a deputy superintendent.

The most significant changes in Brookline are as follows:

- The **Superintendent** now has the following reports: the three deputies below and all 10 principals.
- **Three Deputy Superintendents** (1. Teaching and Learning, 2. Administration and Finance, 3. Student Services).
 - The **Director of Human Resources** now reports to the Deputy Superintendent for Administration and Finance.

III. Themes/Observations

Resources and Administrative Structure

The Weymouth organizational chart describes the Superintendent's and the School Committee's efforts to provide quality education to students while dealing with below state average spending. Five comparison districts were contacted for this study but Weymouth is alone in having an assistant superintendent for human resources and in having a part-time business manager. It is also not common to see special education reporting to an assistant superintendent. Additionally, Weymouth has consolidated functions and created several district-wide positions in curriculum. With the exception of comments about special education administration, most participants in the interviews did not express that more staffing was needed. The need for an additional special education assistant director was mentioned several times as a priority since compliance with regulations, procedures, and timelines is non-negotiable. There was also consistent comment from interviewees that frequent changes in senior level administrators at central office over time have created workplace confusion.

Change/Clarity of Roles/Communication

Weymouth has experienced many leadership changes since the untimely passing of Superintendent Livingstone in 2011: superintendents, assistant superintendents, special education administrators, and business managers. In the 2017-2018 school year, there are at least 8 interim positions at the district and building level, not all of which are shown on the organizational chart. This writer's experience in several school districts is that school and central office culture, trust, and efficiency are all seriously hampered by lack of longevity (5+ years) in the leadership positions. Concerns from building administrators, curriculum leaders, central office administrators, and central office support staff echoed this concern. The following comments were frequent in the interviews: I am not sure who is responsible for what; I am not sure to whom I report; there are too many cooks in the kitchen; if all three "superintendents" are not involved [on an issue] one tends to get differing directives.

Trust

The written survey (rating 3.2 of 10 on the trust question) and consistent comments in the interviews revealed that lack of trust is a high-priority area for the district: the substantial majority of participants indicated that trust in the central office is a significant problem and needs to be addressed. The professional literature on this topic emphasizes the importance of trust (e.g., quality relationships) to the smooth, satisfying, and successful operation of any organization.

Comments from various people in central office included: people are careful about what they say and to whom they say it; people are not helpful to each other; please provide clear lines of authority and responsibility. The principals expressed similar sentiments: there are rifts in central leadership; I try not to get too involved personally; It appears that the team is fragmented; I don't think central administration works well together.

Municipal/School Relationship

Several interviewees, including central office staff, administrators, and support personnel, commented that municipal government does not trust "the numbers" from the schools and has increased oversight on the district's fiscal affairs. This concern appears to relate back to the particular focus of Superintendent Livingstone who worked closely on fiscal affairs and needed less capacity around her in that area. The comment was made that since 2011, the district "has not fully recovered." The turnover in business managers and the current interim business manager position (part time) further complicate a functional and political problem. Dr. Curtis-Whipple, herself, has worked with three business managers since she became superintendent. It should also be noted that this observation stems solely from the perceptions of school personnel since no one from the municipal side was interviewed.

Special Education

As indicated earlier, several participants commented on the need for additional supervisory staffing in special education. The high school, traditionally a place for a dedicated administrator for special education, assigns responsibility in that area to a dean who also has school-wide tasks. Specific comments suggested that additional supervisory capacity was needed at the district level.

Finally, several respondents, including three principals, specifically indicated that the new administrator of special education has made a positive entry into the district. A central office respondent felt that the two assistant superintendents are no longer compelled to provide as much support as in the past regarding the department's activities.

IV. Recommendations

1. Central Office Culture

It is impossible to achieve the goals of a collegial and effective central office if the culture and the relationships among the people are not healthy. The written survey results indicate that the level of trust among people who work in the central office is very low. Members of all groups shared this view. The problem of professional culture in the central office is, in part, related to the lack of stability in those leadership positions over the years. While there was general agreement that the central office administrators work long hours, it is also true that collaboration is not seen as the hallmark of central office. This issue seems to include the senior leaders and the support staff who report to them. Comments from the interviews and surveys included the following: overlapping and unclear responsibilities, the propensity to micro-manage their reports, and even interpersonal issues among the leaders. One interviewee commented that their “hearts are in the right place but there is not much collaboration.”

The first recommendation is for the superintendent to make relationship building a very high priority going forward. Without improvements in this area, it will be difficult to reach the achievement levels that are desired to serve students. Open and candid conversations, the formation of a task force, and perhaps, the assistance of a consultant skilled in this particular area (e.g., Research for Better Teaching or Teachers21) should all be considered. As one principal indicated, “culture has to be fixed first.”

2. Clarity of Central Office Roles/ Communication

Updating job descriptions, clarifying and adjusting the roles of the two assistant superintendents, and working to build support for regionally competitive salaries will be good first steps. Increased communication about specific position responsibilities, including the increased awareness for people to “stay in their lane,” will bring relief to those who expressed a level of insecurity about processing the work and with whom. While recruiting from within can be a sound practice, the district should avoid tailoring positions to the competencies of particular individuals as a matter of course.

3. Special Education Administration

The district should consider additional administration for special education. Nearly everyone in the special education department (administrators and support staff) felt that meeting the substantial requirements of regulations and laws, and the caseload management of the children and families stress the ability of staff to remain in compliance.

This issue is exacerbated by the limited supervisory capacity of the district, particularly around the evaluation of staff. The high school, the school with the most staff, must assign one of the deans to supervise special education teachers and work with them on their evaluations. While the evaluation of staff is an important component in maintaining professional growth, it is also true that the effort involves significant oversight and time. The Waltham model of an assistant special education director for elementary schools and one for secondary schools should be considered. Weymouth should also consider moving the supervision and reporting of Special Education to the Superintendent, and Health Services to Special Education.

4. Business Manager

The position of business manager is one of the most important and sensitive in a school district. The complexity of the chart of accounts, the challenges associated with projecting future budget needs, the dynamic nature of budget management from day to day, the skill required in dealing with the many stakeholders with program budgets, the need to develop credibility with the school committee and municipal government (and community), and the importance of regular communication with the superintendent require a highly-qualified, fulltime administrator to be on site each day. The district will be well served by hiring a full time business manager for FY19 or sooner. This consultant recently facilitated a search for a business manager and found that the applicant pools are not large, many sitting business managers do not leave if they are happy where they are, and salary must be competitive to encourage people to change districts. Weymouth's current compensation schedule for the position (\$115k-\$132k) will make it difficult to attract the talent needed right now.

5. Human Resources

Weymouth's model for this position is not common- neither in title, nor responsibilities. The districts contacted, as well as this writer's experience is several districts, indicate that, more commonly, the human resources administrator in districts of this size and funding level, is not an assistant superintendent, but rather a director or administrator. Additionally, human resources directors usually have a narrower portfolio, without responsibilities for other major operations in the system. Weymouth should consider adjustments to the current position: its responsibility, and title. This writer recommends the position of Director of Human Resources with exclusive responsibility in personnel matters. This position should report to the Superintendent.

6. Director of Physical Education/Athletic Director/Football Coach

While not a focus of this study, it is worthy of comment that the position described above is too broad in responsibility. The position of physical education administrator, preK-12, is often considered a full time job in itself, as is often the case with athletics administrator. The current position is further complicated because the director is also the head football coach. Finally, it is much more common that the position of director of athletics reports to the high school principal rather than the Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Services and Support. Minimally, the district should consider moving the athletic reporting of the position to the high school principal, the physical education portion to the assistant superintendent, and breaking away the football coach position. This writer questions the current position's capacity to meet all of the staff evaluation responsibilities in the portfolio, let alone the programmatic needs of the two departments.

V. Summary of Recommendations

1. Strengthen the professional culture in central office as highest priority.
2. Adjust job descriptions and communicate, by multiple means, the roles and responsibilities of central office administrators.
3. Consider a second assistant director of special education.
4. Hire a fulltime business manager and add maintenance to the portfolio.
5. Reconfigure the position of Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources. Consider a Director of Human Resources and move most operations currently listed with this position to other positions.
6. Reconfigure the position of Director of Athletics and Physical Education. Eliminate any coaching associated with the position. Ideally, the Physical Education and Athletics should be 1.5 FTE in the district.
7. Reporting Recommendations:
 - a. All principals to the Superintendent along with central office administrators.
 - b. The Administrator of Special Education to the Superintendent.
 - c. Health Services to the Administrator of Special Education.
 - d. The Director of Athletics and Physical Education to the High School Principal (for Athletics) and to the Assistant Superintendent (for Physical Education).
 - e. Maintenance to the Business Manager.
 - f. WeyCare to the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction and Support.
 - g. Technology to the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction and Support or to the Business Manager, depending upon the nature of the position.