

## West Hartford Public School District

**Agenda Item:** Opening of School: Overview and Observations

**Meeting Date:** September 3, 2013

**From:** Karen L. List, Superintendent



One of the many joys of leading a school district is witnessing the summer preparation for a new school year come to fruition on opening day. At the elementary schools, carloads of younger children, strollers, and students headed to our school grounds to be welcomed by their new teachers, former teachers, para-educators and principals. I smiled as I overheard parents departing after releasing their children to us, saying that they had taken a vacation day from work to be part of opening day. At the high schools, our freshman started school a day early to familiarize themselves with their schedule and new building, and to meet their teachers and classmates. Their visit culminated with a cookout prepared and served by building administrators and teachers. The opening week of school was smooth with everyone happy to be back in the routine of schooling. We are grateful for the partnerships we share with our families to ensure our children have every advantage to learn, knowing that everyone supports them. This summer *Hartford Magazine* and *Family Circle Magazine* recognized the desirability of our community for families as a result of our strong schools. Public support for the schools is sustained as a result of our continuing high performance, recognition of our high schools in the top 10 in Connecticut and top 2% nationally in *US News and World Reports*.

Close to 10,000 students crossed the thresholds of our 16 schools on August 28. Enthusiastic teachers and leaders helped to welcome our students from summer vacation to buildings that were thoroughly cleaned and some with improvements such as flooring, new pavement and masonry, improved sound systems and auditoriums and new technology.

This summer has been especially busy as we welcomed 16 new administrators to our district. The process of shaping a new leadership team has been exhilarating. The changes in leadership began during the 2012-13 school year with Dr. Nancy DePalma becoming our Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment and Ms. Karen Kukish taking over as principal of Whiting Lane. Other new principals include: Mr. Steve Woznicki, Braeburn, Dr. Karen Fitzsimmons, Duffy, Dr. Jas Singh, Wolcott, Ms. Joy Wright, King Philip Middle School, Mr. Julio Duarte, Conard and Mr. Daniel Zittoun, Hall. Natalie Simpson is the new part-time Assistant Director of Human Resources. New assistant principals include: Mr. Mark Grudzien and Ms. Patricia Mulhall, King Philip Middle School, Ms. Susan Henneberry, Sedgwick, Mr. Jamahl Hines and Ms. Keats Jarmon, Conard and Mr. Andrew Clapsaddle, Hall. Our new department supervisor for school counseling is Mr. Tor Fiske.

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Our leaders devoted over 30 hours thus far to preparing for the new teacher evaluation plan. During this year we will use an Instructional Framework rubric developed by our teachers to provide feedback and assess performance in our classrooms. Administrators observed teaching videos and spent time discussing what good teaching looks like in order to calibrate their rubric scoring. They will be using an electronic database to store and share teacher evaluation documents. Our learning of this new system will continue throughout the year in partnership with our teachers.

We are in the final implementation phase of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). I believe those closest to the work should have a hand in shaping the work. To that end our teachers have worked tirelessly over the past two years, including summers to craft and refine new units of study based on the standards. We have participated in scientific trials and pilots of the new Smarter Balanced Assessments (SBAC). These new assessments are aligned with the CCSS; the CMT and CAPT are not. My understanding is this month we can apply to administer an online version of the new state assessments in the spring of 2014 in place of CMT and CAPT in the areas of English, language arts and math. It makes sense to do so given the closer alignment with our new curriculum and will prepare us for the spring of 2015 when the new SBAC tests are mandatory. It is important to recognize that the SBAC is a new assessment and both the content tested benchmarks established will be different from those in the CMT and CAPT. Comparisons of SBAC results in future years with CMT and CAPT results from prior years will not be appropriate. It will take us several years of analysis of results from the new SBAC assessments to determine strategies for improving student learning outcomes. We went through a similar process in the mid-1980s when the CMT and CAPT were first administered.

I am grateful to the broader community for all that they have done to support the excellence in the West Hartford Public Schools in these difficult fiscal times. We know that the school district demands a lot of resources from this town, and I am pleased that the town recognizes the value of the schools and passed our 2013-14 budget passed without a referendum. This budget had the lowest increase in over 30 years and we've been able to maintain programs and class size guidelines for the vast majority of our classrooms. The Town Council has been a supportive partner for the mission of the schools and I value that support tremendously. I especially thank our Board of Education for their leadership and service to our community through the tireless hours they volunteer to ensure that our school district is second to none.

The improvements we've made in technology are massive. We've invested in a fiber-optic infrastructure that brought wireless to all schools, more powerful servers, better interoperability between schools, increased storage capacity and close to 2,500 new computers, including wireless devices (laptops, Chromebooks and iPads). I am grateful to Jared Morin, Director of Information Technology for his vision and action on our Technology Blueprint.

The Charter Oak International Academy building project is well underway. The architect firm of Perkins Eastman has been hired to design our new school. There will be many opportunities for community input this fall to guide the design process. This new facility will serve as a beacon for West Hartford and open to all students by choice. This will be the district's greenest school building

and represents a significant investment in Elmwood. The new Charter Oak International Academy will add to the premier reputation of the West Hartford Public Schools and community. It is scheduled to open in 2016.

Our Mission Framework guides us, our District Development and Performance Plan outlines our specific strategies for continuous improvement.

*To inspire and prepare all students to realize their potential and enhance our global community*

Our ultimate goal is to improve student performance and make schools places for children to experience, joy, wonder, encouragement, hope, and positive, productive relationships. We trust that our collective efficacy and investment in our students will result in a better future for all of us.

In closing, Dr. DePalma, Mr. Moore, Mr. Ledwith, Mr. McGrath, and Mr. Ward have provided detailed reports regarding our preparations for the opening of school that follow this report. I am grateful for this team and the remarkable leaders, teachers, custodians, secretaries, coaches, nutrition services staff, residency staff, information technology staff, paraprofessionals, maintenance workers, and volunteers who work collectively to ensure that our schools open smoothly and provide an environment where all students are safe and challenged beyond the expected.