



Superintendents' forum: A community in transition --a holistic blueprint for success

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Change is part of life. Whether it be biological change, as we all experience in the journey of life, changes from physical anomalies or changes in historical migration patterns, change has been occurring since the beginning of humanity.

Change occurs whether you are expecting it or not; however, one important item for sure is if you are unwilling to change in plan, you are destined for failure. Those failures can be devastating personally, communally, and can cycle for generations.

The Muhlenberg School District serves over 4,000 children from the combined communities of Muhlenberg Township and the borough of Laureldale. These two municipalities have approximately 24,000 residents. In 2013-14, 33% of students in the Muhlenberg School District were identified as economically disadvantaged and 35% of students were identified as being from minority groupings.

State data clearly indicated a changing demographic trend in the community prior to the 2013-14 school year. Seven years later, Muhlenberg is the 10th most diverse school district in the commonwealth, with 64% of our students economically disadvantaged and 70% of our students identified from minority groupings.

Change and transition are certainly real in our community. This information is important from a visionary perspective, as it was imperative to plan financially, academically, and programmatically to deliver important and meaningful services for our children.

The first priority was to create and develop a plan with fiscal responsibility, solely to address the needs of our children and to ultimately empower our families in the community. Our plan, a Blueprint for Success with holistic pathways, was tailored and developed to strategically fit the Muhlenberg School District and its diverse, growing enrollment.

We focused on three central initiatives and several seeds for growth, including citizenship with inter-crossing domains. There are three critically important issues for students to succeed: literacy (reading) and writing across the curriculum; science, technology, engineering and math initiatives; and music, arts and the humanities.

Literacy is the most critical initiative. Clearly, if you are unable to read and comprehend information, you are most likely destined to struggle and fail across multiple disciplines in life; therefore, we needed to begin with our younger children and eventually our middle school children.

Another essential need was to address technology deficiencies and give our children one-to-one capabilities. Each child needed to have access to technology and be able to use this technology in relationship to instruction from our teachers. We have invested millions of dollars over the last seven years in accordance with our Blueprint for Success to address our technology needs.

Our Blueprint for Success grew in just three years into a revised action plan so the district could focus on key programs and pathways for our children to succeed. The district piloted several programs over the course of four years with literacy being the primary pilot. These pilots focused around math, science and most recently a mental health program for our district.

Collaboratively, our teachers and staff all participated in choosing specific programs that would enrich our children and be actively used as a basis for classroom instruction. These programs enabled our district to provide a fair and consistent playbook for students in kindergarten through 12th grade without suffocating our teacher creativity while engaging with our children.

As our programs grew, so did our school enrollment with an additional 600 children. Many of these children need support as English language learners or have special education considerations. The district has reached out with the hiring of a community outreach coordinator to assist and develop programs for our families in transition to our district.

The district landed an incredible opportunity for our high school students competing against hundreds of other schools with an Air Force Junior Reserve Officers Training Core Program, in which we are in our fourth year of operation. Hundreds of our students have participated in the program, which develops service, integrity and excellence in their endeavors. Our goal is to not only enrich our students academically but to provide a rich respect for our country and citizenship.

At our jointly operated Reading-Muhlenberg Career and Technology Center, we increased and promoted our student enrollment 25% over the past five years for those students desiring skilled labor training.

Each year, our students exhibited academic growth, which ultimately has led to a distinction the district has never received before in its history. *U.S. News and World Report* recognized the district's high school as being one of America's best. This unquestionably could not have occurred without visionary leadership and an investment in meaningful tools for our children to succeed.

We believe the most significant item is the spirit to help empower all of our children who so much need the attention and care to grow in life. These accomplishments occurred with the district having the second highest economically disadvantaged rate and the lowest per-pupil spending of any school district in Berks County.

Our challenges are great, and there is no question that we have many areas to improve upon. As we continue to navigate in these unprecedented times of a worldwide pandemic, our need to restructure and plan for a new traditional learning environment is a reality for all school districts not only locally but nationwide.

Change and transition are upon us, and our obligations to our children are more important now than ever before. To this, to the generation of learners today and leaders for tomorrow our hope and mission is to embed a strong belief in our democracy in the greatest country on Earth - the United States of America.