School Boards
Driving Turnaround

Wichita
Public Schools

Julie Corbett and Lauren Morando Rhim

http://centeronschoolturnaround.org

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School Boards Driving Turnaround Series

   Many schools are not preparing students for success in the 21st century. Far too many students are dropping out, and many of those who do graduate lack the key skills to succeed in college or the advanced economy. Successfully initiating, implementing, and sustaining the transformation of the lowest-performing public schools is a pressing challenge for policy leaders and practitioners nation-wide. Public schools governed by elected local school boards are one of the cornerstones of our nation's democracy, and local school boards sit at the junction of policy and effective implementation of targeted turnaround efforts. Yet ongoing efforts to improve public education focus primarily on the role of teachers, principals, and superintendents and, to a lesser extent, on state and federal policymakers. Missing from the work is a substantive role for local school boards. In line with the Center on School Turnaround's charge to support states' efforts, we sought to highlight three districts engaged in focused turnaround efforts where their respective boards played a key role in catalyzing, shaping, and supporting targeted improvement efforts. This brief is one of three describing the work. Our goal in developing these briefs was to present information-rich cases that can inform state and district efforts to optimize the board's role in school turnaround.

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> The work of Wichita Public Schools is to **empower** all students with the 21st century skills and knowledge necessary for **success** by providing a **coherent**, **rigorous**, **safe** and **nurturing**, **culturally responsive**, and **inclusive** learning community.

Introduction

Site Selection

Local school boards are often seen as a barrier to turning around low-performing schools and districts (Hess & Meeks, 2011; Rhim, 2013; Shober & Hartney, 2014). In seeking to identify examples of boards actively engaged in their districts' turnaround efforts, we sought nominations from our network of professionals actively engaged in turnaround efforts across the country. Specifically, we sought to identify school boards that had taken or were taking an active role in turning around not only their lowest-performing schools but also their entire districts.

Requests disseminated through the Center on School Turnaround (CST) network and conversations with colleagues from the National School Boards Association generated a list of potential districts. We then conducted preliminary research to gather data regarding the respective districts' turnaround efforts and confirm the role of their boards. Our goal in conducting the case studies was not to identify a representative sample that could be generalized, but rather to find information-rich cases that would be of interest to others.

In seeking nominations and subsequently collecting preliminary data, we sought to identify two urban districts and one rural district. Having identified districts with these key characteristics, we scheduled calls with the districts to explain the research and gauge their interest in participating. Results from the calls were combined with preliminary data analysis and a review of board meeting minutes to determine the best-fit districts.

In this series of three case studies, we examined Baboquivari Unified School District (Arizona), New Haven Public Schools (Connecticut), and Wichita Public Schools (Kansas).

Each brief includes a district profile; descriptive information about the broader community and state context; a description of the district's turnaround efforts; an overview of the board's membership, organization, and functions; a discussion of the board's role in the turnaround effort; and key takeaways. (See the Appendix for Wichita's shared beliefs and objectives.)

District Data Collection

For this case study of Wichita Public Schools, we conducted interviews with the superintendent, two senior district administrators, two former board members, and four current board members. In addition, we attended and observed a routine board meeting in March 2015; reviewed the district's website; analyzed student performance data; and reviewed board meeting agendas, policies, and minutes.

Overview of Wichita Public Schools

Wichita Public Schools is Kansas's largest district—enrolling approximately 52,000 students and managing 89 schools—and it has been led by Superintendent John Allison for the last six years. In the 2014–2015 school year, 75 percent of the students received free or reduced-price meals, and 13 percent of students were identified with special education needs.

Student Demographics

As seen in Figure 1, Wichita is an ethnically and racially diverse community, with almost equal portions of White and Hispanic students, followed by smaller populations of Black and multi-ethnic students.

Student Performance

As demonstrated in Table 1, Wichita Public Schools's attendance rate has remained relatively consistent over the last four years, and the four-year graduation rate has increased over nine percentage points. Figures 2 through 7 show that Wichita's performance on state summative assessments generally follows the state trends and demonstrates a slight closure in the achievement gap between the district and the state. District administrators noted that due to significant technical difficulties in the administration of the state assessments in 2013–14, it was questionable if any of the data gathered on Wichita Public Schools' performance were valid. They also noted that some of the technical issues occurred statewide, but Wichita experienced greater challenges due to the size of the district and the technical needs of a large district using the new assessment system.

In addition to the performance data in Figures 2 through 7, one of Wichita's partners, George Batsche from the University of South Florida, analyzed subgroup performance after one year of focused implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS); he found that the monitored subgroups demonstrated improvements, and the gaps between ethnic/racial subgroups, English learners, and White students were closing.

Table 1. Attendance and Graduation Rates

	Attendance Rates	4-Year Graduation Rates
2010–11	94.2%	66.2%
2011–12	94.5%	74.1%
2012–13	94.1%	76.5%
2013–14	93.9%	75.4%

Note: Adapted from "Wichita County Statistics" by the Kansas State Department of Education, Kansas K–12 Reports. Retrieved from http://online.ksde.org/k12/Countystatistics.aspx?cnty_no=12

Figure 1. 2014–15 Enrollment by Racial/Ethnic Identity
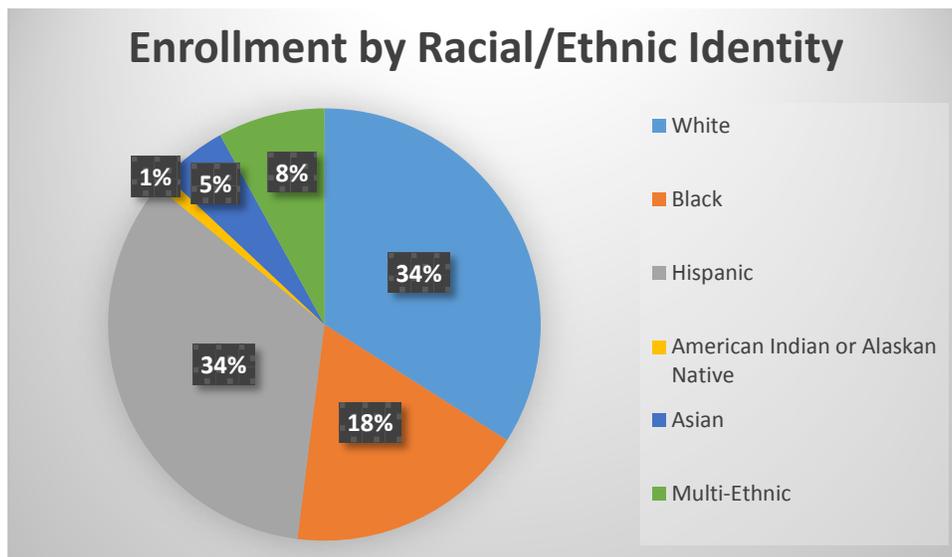
Note: Adapted from "Wichita USD 529 Statistics" by the Kansas State Department of Education, Kansas K–12 Reports. Retrieved from http://online.ksde.org/k12/CountyStatics.aspx?org_no=D0259

Figure 2. Grade 5 English Language Arts (ELA) Student Performance

Wichita - Grade 5 ELA Proficiency Rates

Figure 3. Grade 5 Math Student Performance

Wichita - Grade 5 Math Proficiency Rates

Figure 4. Grade 8 ELA Student Performance

Wichita - Grade 8 ELA Proficiency Rates
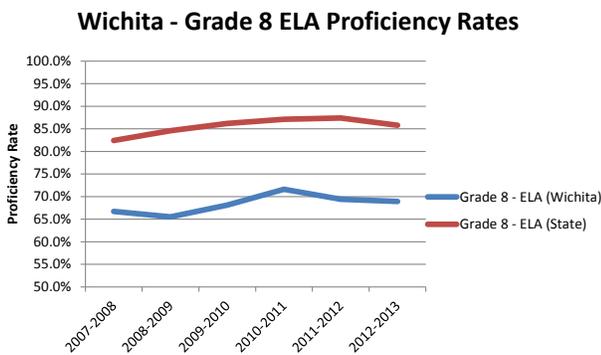
Figure 5. Grade 8 Math Student Performance
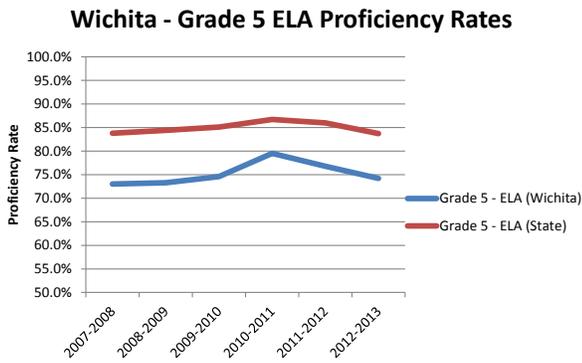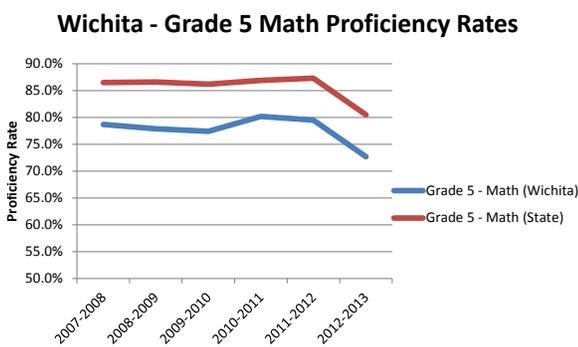
Wichita - Grade 8 Math Proficiency Rates
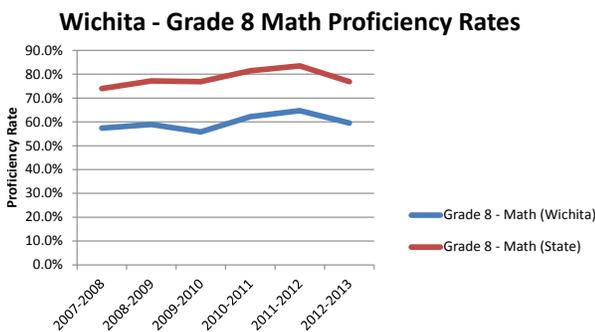
Figure 6. Grade 11 ELA Student Performance

Wichita - Grade 11 ELA Proficiency Rates
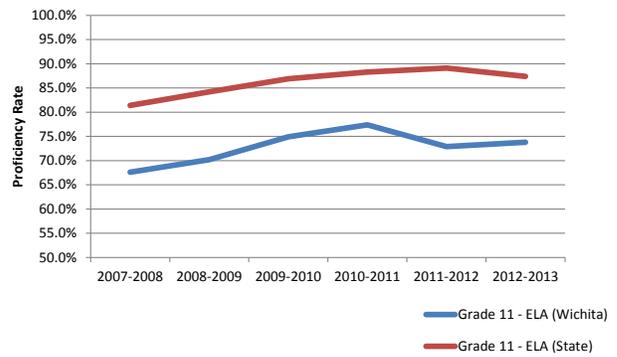
Figure 7. Grade 11 Math Student Performance

Wichita - Grade 11 Math Proficiency Rates
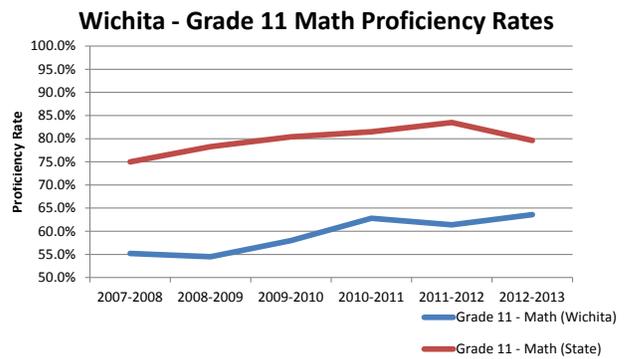
School Culture and Climate

Table 2 shows that some school climate measures decreased, but not as drastically as leaders expected they would. Upon reflection about the data, district leadership commented that the district actively worked to consistently report school suspensions across schools. In the past, some schools did not include their data in the district collection system, and the collection of additional data resulted in an increase in the number of reported incidents.

Table 2. Discipline Trends 2008–09 through 2014–15

	Number of Suspensions	Number of Expulsions	Enrollment
2008–09	13,697	191	49,146
2009–10	13,220	141	50,042
2010–11	12,773	138	50,033
2011–12	11,391	92	50,103
2012–13	10,934	42	50,639
2013–14	10,300	20	51,169
2014–15	11,035	30	51,330

Note: Data provided by Wichita Public Schools via email communication, originally gathered via the Truancy Office, Synergy, and district enrollment reports.

Turnaround Context for Wichita Public Schools

District Leadership

When Superintendent John Allison took over, he kept the existing district staff. Due to shifting roles and retirements, Superintendent Allison subsequently directly hired three of his senior team members.

Budget Crisis

Kansas is currently experiencing a major budget shortfall. Wichita Public Schools cut $7.8 million in school year 2014–2015, and another budget cut from the state is reportedly imminent. In addition, state lawmakers are debating a new funding formula that would significantly hurt high-poverty communities, including Wichita. The proposed changes would provide funding in a block grant and freeze the funding amount for the next two years. A growing district like Wichita would not receive additional funding to educate any new students during those two years. In 2009, there were also significant budget cuts ($16 million), and those cuts resulted in the district and board redrawing boundaries and closing some schools to maintain a focus on quality education. During one recent budget cut, the district eliminated 35 percent of the district administration, and now everyone wears multiple hats, including the superintendent.[1]

The state of Kansas was sued by a local school district in 2001, and the results of that Kansas Supreme Court ruling adjusted the state funding formulas to serve all districts equitably (Montoy v. State of Kansas, 2005; see also http://www. schoolfunding.info/states/ks/lit_ks.php3). After the court ruling, the base budget increased to more than $4,000 per pupil, but the base funds have decreased over the last five years, as can be seen in Table 3. If the funding formula is changed as is currently anticipated, the Wichita board may pursue legal action related to upholding the intent of the 2001 fiscal-equity ruling.

In reflecting on the historical evolution of education funding in Wichita, one board member noted:

[1]As of August 10, 2015, the legislature passed a block grant funding formula. The board has not currently taken legal action but is making additional cuts and suggesting other measures to increase revenue for the district. (Wichita Public Schools, retrieved from http://boe.usd259.org/modules/groups/homepagefiles)

"The problems went away for a little while—because of the [lawsuit]….We had a reprieve; then, the cycle started again. We had to table some of our wants, such as small class sizes." At one of the April 2015 board meetings, the current board learned about the potential changes to the funding formula, discussed issues with the formula, and developed a plan to proactively work with local community leaders and state legislators to address the changes and potential cuts for Wichita.

Table 3. Changes in Kansas Base State Aid

Year	Base State Aid	Difference from Prior Year
2008–09	$4,374	+$58
2009–10	$4,400	+$26
2010–11	$4,012	-$388
2011–12	$3,937	-$75
2012–13	$3,780	-$157
2013–14	$3,838	+$58
2014–15	$3,851	+$13

Note: Data provided by Wichita Public Schools via email communication; base state aid figures found in Kansas Fiscal Facts LEG003709 & SB294.

State Assessment System

Kansas, like many other states, is transitioning to a new assessment system, but the transition has not been smooth. There have been access and login issues due to Wichita's size, and district administrators commented that the data are not provided to the district in an accessible, timely, or usable format. Several interview participants stated that the current state data are not useful to the district, the data validity is questionable, and the district is not able to provide nuanced data to assess where students struggle. In addition, Wichita started implementing the Common Core State Standards before Kansas changed the assessment system, so the district's curriculum and the state assessments were not aligned for the last few years. Due to the transition and the lack of benchmark data, it will likely be two to three years before Wichita or any Kansas district is able to gather real comparative data from the state assessments. The state is not collecting any other metrics during the transition, but Wichita uses

a robust formative assessment system to inform students' instructional and curricular needs.

Political Environment

The Wichita area includes a strong contingency of conservatives and libertarians, including the Koch brothers (Hulse, 2014). This influence can be extreme and, in some cases, has resulted in the city government turning down federal grant funds simply because of a philosophical position related to states' rights. Some district staff members reflected that working under this environment is a challenge for the board "as [board members] want to advocate for our students while all their actions are under the microscope. It would have been easier to do some other things [such as cut programs or staff] rather than close a school, but the board is dedicated to doing right by its students." Board members are committed to making the right, albeit tough, decisions for the students and district, despite external political pressures.

Other Impacting Factors

Wichita Public Schools operates under a desegregation order, which started in 1971. The district ended busing for desegregation in 2008, and the district is still in the process of overcoming some of the racial tensions and emotional politics that arose due to desegregation. The district also passed two large bonds in 2000 and 2008 to fund a major overhaul of the infrastructure, renovate existing buildings, and build several new schools. In addition, several interviewees commented that the district has a huge issue with student mobility. The mobility is mostly related to family finances (e.g., when an apartment complex runs a special for a free month's rent or free utilities, or when the rent is due, families move between schools but stay within the district). District administrators estimated that mobility rates can be up to 90 percent per year in some schools. Consequently, the board and district prioritize consistency across the district to try to limit the impact of the mobility rates, so students attend schools with the same behavioral and academic expectations; and content is not repeated, if a student changes schools several times in one year.

Wichita Public Schools' Turnaround Efforts

In the early 2000s, the board sought to develop a system of support for all of the district's schools. This system would include an analysis of individual school needs that would be used to target resources (financial and programmatic) to schools and would include monitoring mechanisms to track results. The board did not know what this system would look like but tasked the district to find something relevant. The Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) was in the process of learning and teaching district leaders about the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). Wichita's district leaders determined that MTSS would meet the board's expectations and the district's needs. MTSS is now the district's framework for improvement and ensures that students get what they need.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports

Wichita's board members and district staff described their district as "a school system, as opposed to a system of schools." The turnaround effort is a systems-level strategy that pairs student behavior with academic improvements. In addition, the district provides graduated supports to students and schools to focus on what each student and school needs to succeed. Several board members noted that while these concepts seem common now, they required massive paradigm shifts six or seven years ago when first introduced.

The Wichita MTSS framework includes curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development, empowering culture, and leadership (Wichita Public Schools, 2012). After one year of planning, the district launched MTSS in 2009–10. To launch, Wichita ramped up academic standards and instruction, starting with a focus on literacy, while simultaneously building behavioral expectations for students. The superintendent reflected that the district needed to target academics and behavior in all schools right away, but the district lacked the capacity and buy-in from the staff to implement both strands in all schools concurrently. Therefore, the district administration decided to implement new literacy programs, standards, and practices in half of the schools (approximately 49 schools) in 2009–10, while the new behavioral systems were implemented in the other half of the district. After two years, the schools switched,

with the intention that they would maintain what they had already learned while learning the other strand. Over time, the district added district-level teams, including the Academic Leadership Team and the MTSS District Leadership Team, a performance management system, and a problem-solving protocol to monitor implementation and progress (Wichita Public Schools, 2012).

The MTSS District Leadership Team includes multiple voices from across the district and analyzes data, addresses issues as they arise, and determines what supports schools need to move forward. In addition, several work groups were created and continue to be utilized to bring teacher voices into the mix as well. Superintendent Allison reflected, "There are no big secrets about our work. [The work is] not all being done together, but people know what's coming and what's going on. Our goal is to get more people involved in the leadership of MTSS across the district."

The performance management system and problem-solving protocol is based on the CompStat process (University of Maryland, n.d.) that ensures data are collected and analyzed on a timely basis. Wichita now utilizes the same process to monitor all aspects of its system. Cohorts of six to eight staff members work together to analyze and address problems as they arise. Individual schools are now starting to use the process at the building level as well.

In addition, the district had to align its approach to the state's plan for supporting schools. District staff communicate regularly with officials from KSDE. One district staff member reflected, "We spend a lot of time talking with KSDE…we don't want to do something different from them; we want to take what we're already doing deeper." The district uses the online continuous improvement planning tool managed by the Academic Development Institute (ADI), KansasStar (the state name for ADI's Indistar®), to support school-level planning and monitoring.

Five years into implementation of MTSS, the district sees improvements. While the student performance data on state summative assessments show improvements, albeit small ones, district leaders commented that student performance, student

behavior, and overall district efficiency have improved. A district administrator commented that these improvements are especially impressive knowing that the district's state funds were cut, and student enrollment increased.

Due to the inconsistencies in the state summative tests over the last few years, the district relies on formative assessments, other metrics, and anecdotal evidence to assess progress and identify areas of need. These metrics include formative assessments (universal screening, progress monitoring, diagnostic); summative assessments (end-of-chapter tests, state assessments when available, ACT/SAT, final exams); and school climate data (suspension and expulsion rates, disciplinary data). One board member reflected on an anecdotal change that "[after] four years, I'm seeing a real turnaround in how teachers articulate educating our students. Now I hear teachers say, '[MTSS] is good for our students.'"

Superintendent Allison noted that consistent behavioral expectations are also well ingrained in student practice. He provided an example of a two-week summer program that brought students from five elementary schools together: "While we were worried that the first day could be chaos, the students got off the bus and understood the expectations and rituals of the day. The teachers were able to get into instruction right away, because the students knew how to behave." A district administrator observed, "Middle and high schools noted that students came into their schools understanding the expectations because of the work at the previous schools." Superintendent Allison also reflected that other Kansas districts have poached teachers from Wichita and jump at the opportunity to do so, since the Wichita teachers are so well trained in literacy instruction and data-based decision-making. He commented that while he is sad to lose any good teachers, it is a positive sign that his teachers have increased their capacity and quality, and word has spread across the state.

Priority and Focus Schools

With the state's Elementary and Secondary Education Act waiver, KSDE identified one cohort of priority and focus schools in 2012: Wichita had 14 focus schools and 13 priority schools, in addition to two reward schools identified due to their strong academic growth (KSDE, 2012). Two of Wichita's priority middle schools also received federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) funding (one in Cohort 1 FY [fiscal year] 2009 and one in Cohort 2 FY2010).

Several interviewees mentioned that the initial identification of and supports provided to priority, focus, and SIG status-schools were muddled and rough. There was reportedly contention about how schools were identified, as some interviewees commented that the Wichita schools were low-performing, but they may not have been the lowest-performing schools in the state. Despite the frustrations about identification, all interviewees recognized that the identified schools required improvement, and the status designation allowed them to make some changes more quickly. Superintendent Allison reflected on the identification of schools: "Of course there's a compliance aspect to it, but we want to look beyond compliance. There's a reason these schools are priority and focus, so we need to fix them. We're constantly trying to defend our schools against the turnaround *de jour.*"

Regarding the supports provided to focus and priority schools, Wichita had some systems and processes already in place, like MTSS, while KSDE was figuring out how to support these schools and districts. At first, KSDE hired coaches for the schools, but there was a big learning curve to bring those coaches up to speed on district practices. After the first few years of limited progress, Wichita worked with KSDE to hire a coach for the district who understood improvement and district operations, and this addition allowed for a more beneficial coaching relationship. Wichita also tried to streamline the reporting and compliance requirements for priority and focus schools, since those buildings were getting overwhelmed by requests from the state and the district.

District staff described priority and focus status as "going deeper than what we're already doing. [Those schools] are further along in using the problem-solving protocols and the process to look at data, and they have more resources from Title I, such as social workers and reading interventionists." Superintendent Allison recognized that there are limitations, and "some buildings and leaders aren't as strong." He added that regular monitoring increases accountability and allows the district to intervene quickly.

The district and the board do try to bring new systems and programs to the priority and focus schools before the rest of the district, as they might have more capacity and willingness to pilot new tools. For example, in 2015–2016, five priority and focus schools are piloting a new cohesive data delivery system. In addition, the district received a federal magnet school grant, and several of the priority and focus schools are now magnets, which allows for a significant revamp in the philosophy and approach of the schools while also changing the public perception of those schools (see http://magnet.usd259.org).

Overview of Wichita Public Schools Board of Education

Wichita's board has seven members; six represent specific areas within the city, and one is an at-large member. Members are elected to four-year terms, and board members elect officer positions for a one-year term. Voter turnout tends to be relatively low, and board members are not compensated. Some seats are uncontested, but others are contested. Recently, the at-large member, who happens to be the current board chair, won re-election in a strongly contested race.

The board has been remarkably stable for the past 15 years, with several members serving more than 12 years, including former educators, district staff members, businessmen/women, and civil servants.

Board meetings used to be called the "Monday Night Fights" due to the level of board member conflict. Today, board meetings are characterized as organized and professional. Several board members made it clear that while they often disagree with each other, they work out disagreements privately or in small groups and come together for the major decisions.

Board members have a clear understanding of their roles and highlighted the following responsibilities:

- Approve a budget that supports the district's direction. It needs to support the students of today and the students of the future.
- Hire, manage, and support the board's single employee, the superintendent.
- Develop the policies for the district.
- Act as cheerleaders—celebrating the successes of the students and staff.
- Help the community understand the importance of education.
- Establish directions and then follow through in supporting the expectations.
- Believe in the people and the district. One board member stated that district staff need to "trust in us and us in them. [District staff] need to trust that they can come to us with the confidence that we're going to support them."

In addition, board members understand that to serve the board successfully they must also:

- Put in time on the ground to be a community figure.
- Understand who they are serving.
- Be able to explain to stakeholders how and why decisions are made.
- Be accessible to the district and community they serve.
- Be prepared for meetings by reading the background materials, asking questions, and reading the district's reports.
- Educate themselves on the issues by having regular meetings with the superintendent or requesting more in-depth content workshops when needed.
- Keep personal disagreements private and demonstrate a unified front to the public.

Superintendent Allison recognized the strength of his board and cited board continuity as one of the reasons he was first attracted to the district six years ago. He reflected that there is "a lot of care and feeding of the board. Each [member has] different needs for understanding. If one [understands an issue], they all get it. They do their homework, and they read the agenda. I provide a weekly update—looking out two weeks to several months in advance—key things we're working on, key bids. If necessary, we do 3x3s (as I can meet with them up to 3 at a time). It's important for me to be able to take a couple of hours with each of them, so they can come to the table and efficiently move forward. [The] public doesn't realize all the back work, so sometimes it can feel like [decisions] can be a rubber stamp."

New board members are offered a great deal of individualized training from the superintendent, district staff, and other board members. In addition, the Kansas Association of School Boards provides new members optional trainings, but school board members reported that they would benefit from trainings beyond those provided by the association. Many board members attended other statewide educational trainings (provided by the

state education agency or other educational organizations) and visited other districts as well. Board members actively looked for opportunities to learn about what practices Wichita can implement.

Regarding board collaboration, one board member reflected, "We're usually pretty united in what we do because we have the information, and we've had the discussions. One of the great things about our board is that no one seems to have a hidden agenda. We all came on [to the board] because of our strong belief in public education."

Some board members would like more access to data to monitor progress of the district and individual schools, but others reflected that they trust that data analysis is happening regularly at the district level, and they find the occasional data check-ins sufficient.

Role of Wichita Public Schools Board of Education in Turnaround Efforts

The Board of Education in Wichita played a crucial role in the efforts to change the district's climate, culture, and performance. The board's role is broken down into several key areas, including establishing a healthy board culture, developing a strategic plan, hiring a strong superintendent, adopting the MTSS framework, institutionalizing MTSS, communicating with the superintendent, differentiating supports for schools, and monitoring board practices.

Establish a Healthy Board Culture

In the early 2000s, new candidates were running for board positions amidst ongoing concerns about student performance and perceptions that the board was dysfunctional. These new members, brought in over two election cycles, expressly committed to change the board's culture to drive meaningful change. Once the board established a baseline of functionality (e.g., well-run meetings), it shifted attention to more strategic priorities. Trust between the newly elected members slowly started to build as the members developed a shared vision.

Develop a Strategic Plan

Once the board became more functional, members developed a strategic plan to reflect the community's needs. In the strategic plan, the members sought to increase consistent expectations (behavioral and academic) across schools and scale up strong administrative processes and instructional practices that previously occurred in isolation. The strategic plan focused on how to build coherence and communication across the district. One former board member reflected, "As we looked at the diversity of demographics and inequitable distribution of resources, the board started asking questions to develop the strategic plan and vision."

During the planning phase, the board brought in local consultants and national advisors and connected with KSDE on improving board practices and developing a strategic vision for the district.

Hire a Strong Superintendent

As the board began the strategic planning process, the existing superintendent resigned, which provided the board the opportunity to recruit a leader who would be able to implement its vision. One former board member reflected, "When the last superintendent left, we had the chance to really sit down and talk as a board about what we wanted. We had islands of success, but we needed to find a unified, systemic approach to educate the child holistically."

The board crafted the job description around its vision of differentiated supports for all students and schools, and this attracted strong candidates. Board members reflected that during the interview process, Superintendent Allison seemed like a strong leader in curriculum, instruction, and business operations. In addition, his vision aligned with their vision, and he was comfortable taking their lead and implementing the board's vision. One board member commented, "I think our success is due to setting a vision for the district and then hiring the right superintendent. The superintendent is key, but the board needs to come together first and say, 'This is the direction we want to go,' and then [we need to] support that person." Another board member commented on the quality of the superintendent: "[Superintendent Allison] operates at such a high level that he inspires his staff and inspires the board to do our best, too. [He] doesn't have an ego. His attention is centered on students, so we can work as a team."

Adopt a MTSS Framework

Once Superintendent Allison started, he quickly worked with the existing senior staff members to come up with a program to reflect the board's vision. Together they identified and refined the MTSS framework and successfully sought the board's approval to move forward. The district leaders then quickly worked to develop an implementation plan. Several board members also electively attended, and continue to attend, statewide MTSS summits to learn more about the framework. One board member reflected, "If you're going to make a reform agenda, you have to start with the basics. Our ideas were different, and our approaches were different, but we wanted to do what was best for students. We needed to develop

shared beliefs and assumptions. MTSS became its own engine that moved the district forward."

Institutionalize MTSS

Once the MTSS framework was developed and implemented, the board role shifted significantly to monitoring the work and supporting the district with policy-level decisions. The board is now actively working toward codifying MTSS practices into policy to prevent any whole-system changes if the board composition changes or a new superintendent comes into office. Board members also recognized that it was important that they "truly understand what [MTSS] is and can advocate for it to the state legislators and explain why we need [consistent per-pupil] funding [allocations]. In the past we've done the data analysis, and we've been able to draw straight lines between [the level of] services [provided] and student achievement. Graduated supports require graduated resources." Board members and district administrators fear that additional cuts to the operating budget will decrease the services and supports provided to students and affect the quality of education.

In addition to embedding MTSS in the board policy, the board is currently evaluating all 430 existing policies, many of which are administrative guidelines or philosophical statements. The goal is to eliminate extraneous policies.

Communicate with the Superintendent

In addition to a weekly memo, the superintendent hosts regular meetings and conference calls to keep board members informed of district needs and situations. Each summer, several of the district's partners provide end-of-year reviews and conduct a workshop with the board. This annual review allows the board to monitor progress and highlight any issues that need to be addressed. Due to the board's focus on policies and evaluation of their one employee—the superintendent—a district staff member commented, "Not everything requires the board's approval, but we keep them aware throughout the process."

Differentiate Supports for Schools

Regarding priority and focus schools, none of the interviewees saw a clear distinction for the board's role in supporting priority or focus schools. One board member stated, "I think that all schools need to recognize that the board's direction is that we support **all** schools." The board member con-tinued, "We look to our superintendent to review and evaluate the data and say where we are and what else we need to change. Any specific designations are not really something that we address at the board table. We have to believe that close monitoring is being done, and we know it is being done, but how it's being done is unique to the building. One size does not fit all in education, and that's what's so great about Wichita."

Monitor Board Practices

When probed about the board's self-monitoring protocols, respondents' answers varied greatly. Some reflected on a training done several years ago by the Kansas Association of School Boards and noted that there is not currently a formal process for the board to evaluate itself. One member stated, "If that's a weakness, that's ours." Another commented, "How do we become a stronger board; how do we find a tool that does that—without getting into the politics? Once you've built that solid relationship, you guard that relationship." This member worried that a formal evaluation could bring up personal issues that would harm the strong working relationship the board has now. She added, "I wouldn't want to risk the solidarity that we have by even looking at a formal evaluation."

Another board member responded, "It's easy to say when things are good that you don't need to look inward. But it might be nice to reflect a little bit. Sometimes things are evaluated too much. But a tool for self-evaluation in a group setting would be nice." A self-evaluation would not trigger an executive session, so discussions would be in a public forum, which could hamper the honesty and frankness of discussions.

Key Takeaways

Several key takeaways emerged from the interviews, site visit, and research on the school board's role in turnaround efforts in Wichita Public Schools. These key takeaways are described below:

- **Hire a good superintendent and let the leader lead.** Interviewed board members and district staff unanimously supported and trusted the superintendent. All recognized how fortunate they are to work with such a strong leader.

- **Start with the basics.** MTSS is not an overly complicated system but is one framework that guides the work of the board, the district, and the schools. All leaders refer to MTSS as the foundation of the district, and all other work is incorporated into the MTSS framework.

- **Maintain focus on the role.** Several board members struggled with balancing fulltime jobs, educating themselves about issues, attending public events, and participating in other board duties. Some suggested the importance of staying focused on the right issues and not wasting time micromanaging the district or addressing patron complaints or concerns. If a specific issue is brought to a board member's attention, he or she immediately refers the situation to the superintendent and then defers all communication to the district. It is important not only to ensure issues are addressed and that constituents feel satisfied, but also that the board members are not involved with district business.

- **Stay transparent.** Board members identified a list of topics that can trigger an executive session (i.e., property purchases, evaluation of the superintendent, specific students) but noted they try to keep executive sessions to a minimum. One member reflected that past boards used executive sessions too much, and their decision-making process lacked transparency.

- **Put in the time.** Board members are volunteers but are willing to put in the time to learn about the district, student needs, and the systems the districts uses to monitor practice.

- **Monitor one another.** Board members acknowledged that they disagree with each other, but they try to keep any disagreements private. Another member stated, "It's pretty simple; keep your fights out of the paper."

- **Keep the vision the priority.** Both board members and the superintendent acknowledged how well the board patrols itself to stay on task. Several of the long-serving current and past board members continued to run for several terms because they wanted to be there and support the superintendent in implementing the vision that they created.

- **Monitor board effectiveness.** Board members stated varying levels of interest in evaluating their board practices and effectiveness. All stated that there is always room for improvement, but some worried about negative impacts on a structure that currently seems effective.

- **Anticipate leadership transitions.** While all interviewees resoundingly supported the superintendent, it should be noted that six years in one district is a long tenure for a superintendent. In addition, several senior district staff members are nearing retirement. It will be crucial for the district and the board to develop succession plans for senior leaders, including the superintendent.

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Appendix

Shared Beliefs

• Successful public education is a community partnership.

• Public education is essential for the improvement of society and democracy.

• Everyone has worth and dignity and is treated with respect.

• We profit from diversity.

• Everyone can and will learn.

• It is worth the effort to ensure everyone learns.

• High expectations are essential for success.

• Families provide an essential foundation for learning.

• All families want their children to be successful.

• Learning is a life-long process.

• Everyone is entitled to a safe, supportive and nurturing learning environment.

• Every student is entitled to equitable opportunities, resources and services.

• Belonging is a key to student success.

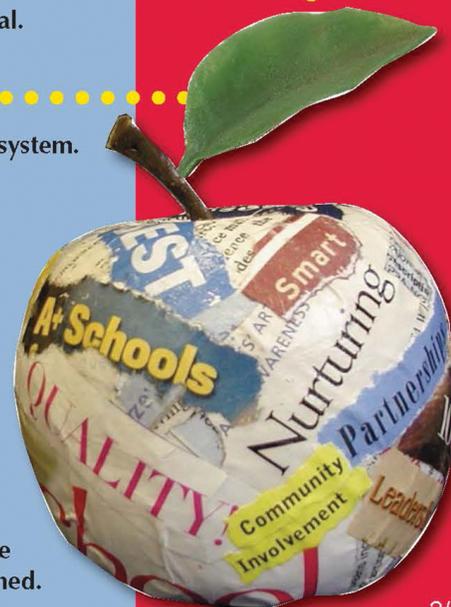• Change is inevitable and necessary; our response is intentional.

Objectives

• The graduation rate will be 100% using an aligned Pre-K–12 system.

• The 21st century skills and knowledge of all students will continually increase as measured by multiple assessments.

• The academic skill and knowledge gap among the student populations will be continually reduced until eliminated as measured by multiple assessments.

• The social skill and knowledge gap among the student populations will be continually reduced as measured by multiple assessments.

• A coherent, rigorous, safe and nurturing, culturally responsive and inclusive learning community will be fostered and sustained.

WICHITA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Work of WPS

The work of Wichita Public Schools is to empower all students with the 21st century skills and knowledge necessary for success by providing a coherent, rigorous, safe and nurturing, culturally responsive and inclusive learning community.

2/09

Wichita Public Schools website, http://boe.usd259.org/modules/groups/group_pages.phtml?gid=1505278&nid=122795&5f8979&5f8979&5f8979&095495&87090e&7d455e&20df85&3a4864&sessionid=237a846d135f18893f2e11e72178adc4