

Questions for the Monadnock Regional School Board and Budget Committee: A Thoughtful Worksheet

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Like school districts across New Hampshire and the nation, we face an array of challenges that some will tell us are intractable, along with a slew of competing priorities and constituencies, each of which needs our urgent attention.

As we work through the tough issues that are facing the district, we should quickly home in on the resources—people, time, and money—to meet the needs of the students. How we use these resources says a lot about our vision (what we dream of becoming) for the district; it will also provide insight into the problems we are trying to solve and how our investments may need to change to address them.

In that context, here are **four questions** that, taken together, will help us understand and make the best decisions about resource allocation and priorities that are likely to have the biggest impact on student performance.

1. What is our strategy for attracting, developing, and retaining top talent?

At its core, we are running a human-capital system. Teachers teach, and students learn. Ideally, great teachers teach brilliantly, and student learning explodes. But it doesn't happen by accident. Our system must be structured to identify, recruit, support, and retain the most talented teachers. Is it?

Start by asking:

- What's the value proposition for teachers in our district? Why would a teacher want to work in here?
- Whom do we attract, and why do they stay? Think about what happens to our best teachers. Do they take on our biggest challenges, seek out the lowest-need classes and schools, or leave the district entirely?
- How are we investing in teachers' professional growth? To what extent are these investments having a meaningful impact on teacher skill and in the classroom?
- What, if anything, happens to teachers who consistently fall short of expectations? Are they coached up, exited, or do they languish in mediocrity, along with their students, for years?

2. How are resources being used inside schools?

Successful schools organize resources to meet student needs based on both teacher capacity and available resources. This is called "strategic school design," and just a few key decisions can differentiate great schools from struggling schools. We are considered by the NH DOE to be struggling schools.

Consider the following questions:

- Are our schools designed for authentic teacher collaboration? Great schools build schedules and assignments that support **long blocks**—90 minutes or more—for collaboration, during which teachers focus on reviewing student work and are supported by expert coaches and/or teacher leaders. What is the case in our schools?
- How do school schedules and staffing plans enable students to receive truly individual attention? We're not talking about reductions in class size, rather structures that support very small flexible groups, reconfigured regularly, targeted to specific student needs.
- Do students have enough time during the school day, and with teachers, to reach their goals? Is the time available used with urgency? How much of the students' day is considered academically engaged time? Is it differentiated and flexible based on student need?

3. How is district evolving as the student population changes?

As state and nation's population changes, our district's student base is likely changing too. In many areas, district enrollments are falling as charter and home schools expand, while some families are leaving for distant suburbs. Those suburbs, in turn, are experiencing rapid growth, diversification, and new levels of need. Across the country, schools are serving more English-language learners than ever before. This is beginning to happen here.

Against the backdrop of this growing diversity, we should ask:

- How well are your investments in special populations, such as special education and English-language learners, meeting the needs of those students? How could you shift investment to focus on high-impact, early interventions with the greatest potential for positive outcomes? Do we identify students in need of services in high school when remediation is most challenging? Does our data suggest decreasing needs over time?

4. How equipped are we to manage resources strategically?

Our ability to answer the first three questions will offer clues about the extent to which we are set up to identify, evaluate, and execute strategic resource decisions.

Looking at our data infrastructure, are we:

- Tracking teaching-effectiveness data for every teacher, every teacher team, and every school?
- Tracking spending down to the school and student levels, including using actual, not average, teacher salaries?
- Analyzing scheduling and staffing metrics to understand how schools are using resources to meet student needs?

Also consider this: Do our schools have the motivation, knowledge and skills to uncover the information needed to make wise resource decisions? If they don't, that's a challenge worth addressing head on and quickly.

These questions won't give us every answer that we need to get and keep children on the road to excellence. But we must ensure that every moment, every dollar, and every ounce of human energy we invest goes where it matters most: toward improving educational outcomes for your students. When we think of the challenges ahead in creating our financial plan for FY15, these questions may help us focus on what's really important when making decisions.