



ENTRY PLAN

Superintendent Cheryl Watson-Harris



I am honored, humbled, and excited to be the new Superintendent of DeKalb County School District (DCSD). I recognize this assignment is an extraordinary opportunity to serve all of the students of DCSD by developing and supporting a team that is focused on equity, access, and academic excellence!

As I enter into my role, my 100-Day plan aims to address the organizational structure, human resources, community advocacy, and the culture of the organization. You will also find a short section on balancing the tension of entry with the need to move the district forward, as well as a short conclusion.

Objectives of Entry Plan



This comprehensive plan is designed to communicate to the Board and our community stakeholders our shared interest in taking the District to higher heights and to gain a clearer understanding of the successes and challenges of DCSD. Listening and learning are critical to progress, and the basis for this plan is to listen, review, and assess the District's current needs in order to thrive as a healthy organization and school district.

With a strong focus on community stakeholder input, this plan will provide me with a systematic opportunity to delve deeper into the collected data and report back to the DCSD community what I've learned for discussion and validation. I expect this process will lead to the collaborative review of the current strategic plan and the internal and external goals of the district. I would also discuss the plan and guide the Office of Accountability on driving the strategic plan process to ensure that the plan remains measurable and on target, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During this entry process, I will:

- **Learn the rich history**, successes, and challenges of the DeKalb County School District;
- **Collect and analyze data from constituents and partners** (i.e. students, parents, teachers, principals, central office leaders, advocacy groups, civic organizations, faith-based and political leaders);
- **Organize data** into a presentation to be shared with the school committee and community;
- **Share outcomes** on what I've learned from these community meetings and improvement strategies based on stakeholder input;
- **Introduce my core values and beliefs** as a leader to the DeKalb County community at large;
- **Establish positive working relationships** with key partners throughout the county (from entry and ongoing);
- **Define and widely communicate entry strategies and timelines.**

Each of these objectives will require a set of activities and tasks that will guide my initial work and inform the tasks and timeline for completion. On subsequent pages, you will find a listing of the possible activities and tasks that will lead to successful entry. These tasks are separated or categorized as Structure, Human Resource, Political, and Symbolic. I am excited to listen, learn, and respond as we prepare.



Structural:

Through this frame, we will review the organizational chart, looking at the roles and responsibilities of employees, to ensure that positions and skillsets are properly aligned. We will also view policies and processes currently in place.

Human Resources:

Ensure alignment with organizational structure. This is an opportune time to look at the skills and needs of employees, including professional development, and to determine the types and frequency of professional growth opportunities. Capacity building and cross-training needs will be reviewed.

Symbolic:

Take a look at the district through its symbolic frame and explore what makes us who we are. This includes a review of organizational traditions, celebrations, and other ceremonial activities and their meaning or importance to the school district.

Academic / Instructional Assessment:

School improvement and student achievement are viewed as our “main thing.” This frame undergirds all of the rest. During the entry plan, I will review trends in school performance and student data to better understand areas of success and gaps.

Methodology

I will complete a district tour via my “**Wednesday Field Days.**” This will afford me opportunities to gain an understanding of the district’s geography, diversity and get acquainted with the richness of the neighborhoods that serve our students. This is both structural and human resource-focused. Some of these opportunities would include the following:

- Visit meal prep sites (our current summer feeding sites/meal sites during closure due to the health pandemic)
- Visit Athletic Conditioning (high school sites)
- Arrange a driving tour of the district’s boundaries with key partners and constituents
- Visit individual schools (invite board members and other local officials who represent that region to join me)
- Ride a school bus route with students
- Do a ride-along with members of the police force
- Engage in discussions and tours with members of the DeKalb Historical Society

I will convene formal and informal opportunities to engage in two-way discussions with various community stakeholders. This action will generate goodwill, build support, and establish communication channels that collaboratively support the efforts of the district. I propose documenting these efforts in some of the following ways:



● **Interviews/Discussions:** Schedule a range of interviews with a diverse set of stakeholders from the DeKalb County Community (these partners would include students, families, teachers, principals, advocacy groups, central office leaders, civic, community, and political leaders). An interview protocol will be developed to ensure consistent questioning, which will maximize time and opportunity. Information gathered will aid my ability to view the district through its **“Symbolic Frame”**. It will be critical during this process to offer stakeholders the option of confidential feedback if requested. Depending on the audience, some of the questions that I might ask include:

- ▶ What are you most proud of DCSD?
- ▶ What is important to individual stakeholders and/or stakeholder groups? (traditions, routines, celebrations, etc.)
- ▶ What must we absolutely keep doing?
- ▶ What challenges do you see?
- ▶ What ideas do you have for improvement?
- ▶ How can the district better support a two-way dialogue with stakeholders?

● **Back to School town hall:** Host a virtual town hall the week before school starts and solicit questions from the community. This will give the general public another opportunity to hear from me and enable us to discuss and answer the many questions around school re-opening.

● **Get out into the community:** Attend school district and community events as much as possible. Organize and convene events in various parts of the school district. Meet people where they meet, work, live, and worship to learn as much as possible about the community and its values.

● **School visits:** I will visit a minimum of 12 schools each month (at an even more exciting time when the students arrive) on a regular schedule. In addition to observing in classrooms, I will schedule opportunities to meet with middle and high school students and hold conversations with them to better understand their experiences and perspective. If remote learning is in place, meetings will be held virtually.

● **Review of documents/materials:** Conduct a review of financial, curricular, hiring, school improvement, strategic planning, and other documents/materials as deemed appropriate. These documents will be reviewed and considered as additional sources of data.

Report Back to Community

Once I have an opportunity to collect data through multiple sources (i.e. interviews, focus groups, formal and informal discussions with internal and external stakeholders, review documents, tours, and school visits, among many others), I will report back to the community what I've learned and how I've made sense of the data. This is important for several reasons. First, it is important to follow up because many individuals and groups will have shared their time and ideas, and they deserve a chance to hear how their thinking is informing my sense of the community and the school district. It will also be important for me to "test out" how I have made sense of the data that I have collected to ensure that I have "gotten it right." Finally, I'm hoping this process leads us into the review and/or development of the strategic plan that emerges from the voices, hopes, and dreams of the DeKalb County community.

I envision updating the community in the following forums:

- Formal report to school district in a public meeting
- Schedule a series of presentations with district leaders and school-based staff
- Schedule a series of presentations throughout the district
- Schedule a presentation with the DCSD Student Advisory group to solicit their feedback and advice
- Schedule presentations with various community and civic groups that partner and engage with our families
- Schedule to meet with various media outlets to discuss learning from entry and proposed action as a result

Introducing myself to community

It is often said that if one understands the core values of a leader then he/she can better understand the leader's actions and behaviors. **Due to the current pandemic, my introduction to the community and district employees was done virtually.** When it is safe for us to do so, I plan to convene a few community meetings in-person and share my leadership story with District stakeholders. Additionally, I will explicitly share my values so that when strategic goals are introduced, people will have a better understanding of the theory-of-action and beliefs that undergird revisions to the strategic plan.

In addition to using speeches, presentations and group/individual engagement opportunities, the district must continue to strengthen their social media strategy using Facebook, Twitter, blogs, YouTube, and podcasts, among other new and innovative strategies. The strong messages to the DeKalb community and beyond must be clear, consistent, and focused on what is great. Likewise, we must own what we must do to improve.



"I believe that you see something that you want to get done, you cannot give up, and you cannot give in." ~John Lewis~

Establishing Positive Working Relationships Throughout the County

I also hope this entry process will set me up for a strong and positive working relationship with stakeholders throughout DeKalb County and metro Atlanta. I will engage with parents, business and community leaders in their communities to address challenges and opportunities for improving instructional experiences for students. Below is a listing of community partners with whom strong relationships will be important. This is not an exhaustive list, but it is a start:



DeKalb County Government:

Schedule introduction with CEO Thurmond and DeKalb Commissioners



City Government:

local city Mayors and City Managers



Students: Set-up monthly meetings with the Student Advisory Council to hear their perspectives about the state of DeKalb County Schools, reflections on teaching and learning, and ideas students have for improvement.



International Welcome Center: Schedule a meeting with the International Welcome Center to hear first-hand how diversity plays an integral part in the DeKalb County Community. Work collaboratively with the Welcome Center leaders to ensure international families feel at home and the success of English learners are increased by providing social and academic support.



Families and Community: The Office of Family Engagement is a top priority. I will visit the Family Impact Hub and begin a strong partnership with parent leaders and families to help our scholars achieve academic proficiency and college and career readiness goals. I will engage local parent groups and community leaders to hear their perspective about the state of the schools, reflections for improvement, and to collaboratively design pathways to increase engagement and empower students and families.



Teachers and Principals: Establishing a positive relationship with teachers and principals is paramount, as they are the individuals that will do the “heavy lifting” for DeKalb’s children. This includes monthly meetings with the Teacher Advisory Groups to problem-solve complex problems with teacher leaders.



Partners: Set-up monthly meetings for Community Based Organizations (CBOs), advocacy groups, political leaders to hear their perspective about the state of the schools, reflections for improvement, and to collaboratively design paths toward total engagement. I would also like to convene a partner summit sometime in late fall to do asset mapping and to more formally align and link partner and CBO work to a set of 4-5 strategic priorities.



Business: DeKalb County has a strong business community. I would like to share strategic priorities for the district and have an honest dialogue about ways in which the business community can support and enhance the work of DeKalb County Schools and partner with us to improve outcomes and increase access for our students.



Media: It is imperative to have a good working relationship with the media members that regularly cover DCSD and share our news with the community. I will engage in a series of interviews with all of our regular reporters to meet them, establish relationships and discuss district news.

Balancing Tension: Entry and Decision-making

I fully recognize that I have a lot to learn about DeKalb County School District, but I am certain that I can be an asset to this organization and bring leadership to the district that will ultimately take us onward-upward. I also take seriously the importance of building healthy work relationships and I understand that work needs to be accomplished, decisions need to be made, and the district needs to move forward, particularly during these challenging times. I hope that you can see that I can balance this important tension: the importance of me being in a learning space and my ability to make decisions when necessary. I commit that I will be a champion for DCSD children, while I, simultaneously, work with district and local school staff to analyze what is working well and what changes need to be made.



"The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education."

~Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ~



Conclusion

This document communicates my plan for a successful entrance into the school district.

DeKalb County School District has a strong foundation. We have a lot to celebrate, however, there is significant work to be done for us to close achievement and opportunity gaps. Our primary focus is our children whom we are privileged to serve. My commitment is to ensure, in collaboration with the DCSD Board, that we deliver to our most important stakeholders - our students- that which they deserve: a world-class education. We can do it. I believe this entry process sets us on the path to **Engaging** and **Empowering** our students as we **Operate in Educational Excellence!**

We are off to a great start. Below are some of the activities included in my timeline.



The Timeline of Events



Month Activities

July

August

- Send introduction letter to staff
- Meet with the Board of Education Members (one-on-one)
- Schedule 1-1 interviews with principals
- Schedule 1-1 interviews with central office staff
- Send introduction letter to elected officials
- Send letter of introduction to advocacy group representatives; schedule focus group meeting with representatives
- Observe all summer programs
- Tour schools

August

- Continue meeting with a diverse group of stakeholders
- Hold “back to school” events with students and families, including virtual town hall (also exploring additional options for virtual “Back to School” events)
- Meet with county governmental officials as they request meetings
- Lead important employee “back to school events” such as New Teacher Orientation, Summer Leadership, etc. virtually

September

October

- Take busses to schools throughout September
- Host “Meet the Superintendent” event for families
- Meet with Superintendent Advisory Council every two months
- Schedule brown-bagged lunches with teachers and student groups
- Visit classrooms
- Attend school team meetings like PLCs, Data Talks, Content Planning
- Initiate letter from students on “what I should know about DeKalb”
- Discuss entry plan progress at meetings throughout the county to hear feedback and make adjustments

November

- Share trends from July, August, September, October interviews observations and document review with the school committee
- Share trends from July, August, September, October interviews observations and document review with the admin team, teachers, students, families and CBOs and civic groups
- Offer 3-5 strategic priorities for system upon which strategic plan will be built
- Convene meeting with internal strategic planning facilitators

December

- Begin the collaborative strategic planning process that includes community
- Begin to convene strategic planning team



Comments

Listening is key to the success of this plan and our school district becoming the #1 choice for our students and families. If you have any recommendations or questions that you'd like to share, please contact supt@dekalbschoolsga.org.



DeKalb County
School District

1701 Mountain Industrial Boulevard · Stone Mountain, GA 30083 | P: 678.676.1200

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