


VISION 2020



**A Strategic
Plan for the
Newton
Public
Schools**

June 2009



NEWTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

100 Walnut Street, Newtonville, MA 02460-1398

June 2009

Early in the strategic planning process, we realized that children entering kindergarten in the fall of 2007 would graduate from high school in the year 2020. What do we want our school system to look like by that time? How can we reach for the moon in this tough financial climate? How do we go about turning our dreams into reality? Thus, Vision 2020, our Strategic Plan, was launched.

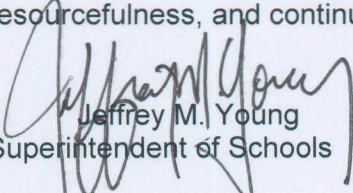
We present here for your consideration the Strategic Planning report. We invite everyone — educators, students, parents, and community members — to read the report and to engage in constructive dialogue about it. It is not long, but it is packed with concepts, goals, objectives, and initiatives that provide a roadmap for the future of the Newton Public Schools. For those who would like more supporting documentation, we urge you to read the Appendices, which are posted on the NPS website.

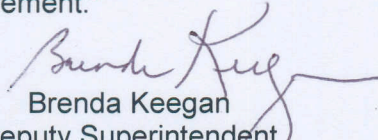
Our profound thanks go out to all who participated in this effort—members of the Strategic Planning Team and the three Working Groups, as well as individuals responding to a survey, attending a Visioning session, or attending a Community Conversation. What we have accomplished here is the beginning of a transformation — not the end.

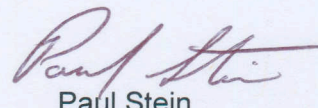
However, make no mistake. What we are describing here is a profound culture change, a paradigm shift in a field — education — that is often not comfortable with change. We are breaking away from a time when one teacher autonomously functioned in one classroom, when one school served as its own empire, when one school system functioned in isolation from its surrounding community, and when the United States schools operated in isolation from the world.

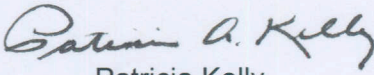
We now have a direction for moving forward, building on a strong foundation: the acquisition of core skills and knowledge. We urge the school communities through the School Councils to analyze their programs and align their school improvement plans with the Strategic Plan. Measures of success will be central as we move forward. Programs with demonstrated results will continue and be expanded. Those that are not achieving desirable outcomes will be modified or abandoned.

We invite educators, parents, students, and community members to join us on this change process by sharing ideas and working collaboratively to make them happen. We will know that Vision 2020 is a success if we achieve our vision to become a “model public school system known for excellence, resourcefulness, and continuous improvement.”


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I. INTRODUCTION

The Newton Public Schools embarked on a strategic planning effort in September 2007. We recognized that the world was changing rapidly and that our school system also had to change profoundly in order to rise to the challenge of providing a top quality education for our students. Business as usual would not suffice. We sought a positive vision for our educational system — a roadmap that would clearly articulate key goals, organize our resources around them, and provide an energizing vision for change.

There was a belief from the outset that we needed a strategic framework, new thinking and a break from current conventions. After several years of depressing budget conversations with no relief in sight, strategic planning would give us the jolt needed to revitalize our system. The effort was to bring in the best ideas from students, NPS staff, parents, community members, internationally recognized educators and other experts. This report chronicles what we have accomplished thus far as well as the work that remains before us.

II. THE RESULTS

The strategic planning process has yielded a clear and strong commitment by the Newton Public Schools expressed in the following mission statement, core values, vision, goals, and objectives.

Mission Statement

The mission of the Newton Public Schools is to educate, prepare, and inspire all students to achieve their full potential as life-long learners, thinkers, and productive contributors to our global society.

A mission statement reflects an organization's heritage, is enduring, and embodies the organization's soul — its reason for being. It serves as a guiding star, always to be pursued.

Core Values

The Core Values of the Newton Public Schools are Excellence, Innovation, Respect, and Responsibility.

Excellence:

We will

- Set high expectations and standards for all students and staff
- Educate the whole child by striving for excellence in academic, artistic, physical, interpersonal and vocational pursuits
- Inspire a lifelong love of learning in students and staff

Innovation:

We will

- Be a recognized leader in education and curriculum development
- Foster inventiveness, open-mindedness, critical thinking, creativity and collaborative problem-solving in our students and staff
- Continuously assess and improve our teaching and learning

Respect:

We will

- Create an environment where *everyone* feels known, safe, and valued
- Recognize the uniqueness and dignity of individuals of differing races, religions, classes, ethnicities, sexual orientations, learning styles and abilities
- Build upon the strengths of our diverse community

Responsibility:

We will

- Foster an environment in which all students and adults take responsibility for their individual and collective behavior
- Create a culture of collaboration, collegiality and honest communication
- *Cultivate citizens who contribute to and care about their community and the world*

Core Values reflect what is truly important to an organization and serve as guiding principles for decision-making. Our Core Values represent how we want to “live” within our school communities. Core Values are for children and adults to embrace, internalize, model and live by. They are an expression of what is deep and enduring in our school system.

Vision

The vision for the Newton Public Schools, by the year 2020, is to be a model public school system known for excellence, resourcefulness, and continuous improvement.

Every organization needs a bold vision — a clear and inspirational picture of what it wants to achieve over a longer time frame. Visions serve to energize an organization and push the thinking beyond current capabilities, conventions and organizational structures.

Strategic Goals and Objectives

To become a model public school system, we established four five-year goals, one for students and three for the system as a whole. Each of these goals is accompanied by more specific objectives. These goals and objectives are consistent with the latest research on global education and teacher quality.

GOAL 1 FOR STUDENTS:

Students will experience schools as an intellectual adventure, coming to understand core knowledge and skills as they develop 21st century habits of mind, e.g.:

- Critical and creative thinking
- Collaborative problem-solving
- Powerful means of communication
- Empathy, cultural awareness, and global understanding

Objective 1: To learn the power of inquiry, critical and creative thinking, collaborative problem solving, and connections across disciplines.

Objective 2: To use these 21st century intellectual strategies to acquire the core knowledge and skills defined by clear and strong curriculum standards.

Objective 3: To benefit from best educational practices including differentiated instruction, authentic assessments, and technological innovations.

Objective 4: To experience and appreciate their own and other cultures while developing a strong sense of social responsibility for both local and global communities.

Objective 5: To discover and pursue interests, passions, and avenues of self-expression through a variety of program offerings.

GOAL 2 FOR NPS:

NPS will attract and engage the best and brightest educators in inspiring and educating our students through a strong program of professional growth.

Objective 1: To hire top-quality, diverse educators.

Objective 2: To engage all educators in ongoing professional growth.

Objective 3: To establish a culture of collaboration.

Objective 4: To expect and support excellent performance.

Objective 5: To ensure retention of high-performing educators.

GOAL 3 FOR NPS:

NPS will expand beyond traditional school boundaries, using technology, innovative structures/schedules, and links with the larger community.

Objective 1: To create virtual learning opportunities.

Objective 2: To explore expanded learning time.

Objective 3: To establish internships/externships.

Objective 4: To develop partnerships with other academic institutions and businesses.

GOAL 4 FOR NPS:

NPS will continuously review and adapt its programs in order to operate within its means.

Objective 1: To evaluate programs for effectiveness and affordability.

Objective 2: To review operations to identify efficiencies.

Objective 3: To engage in multi-year financial planning.

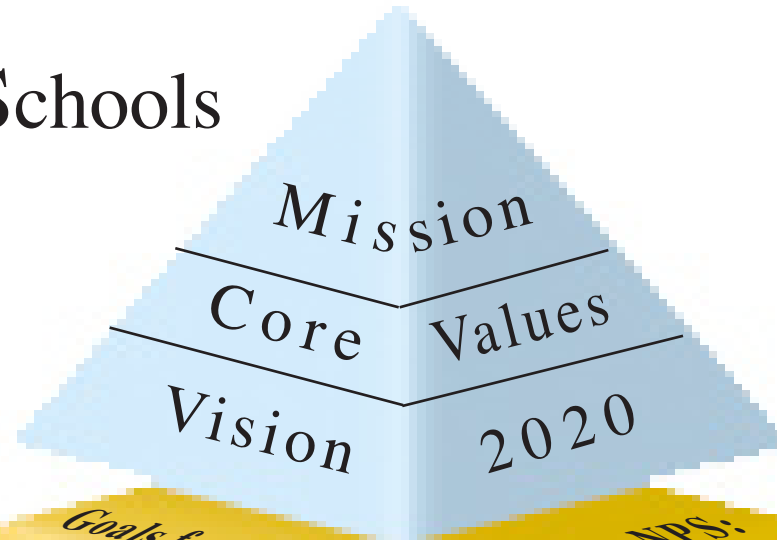
Objective 4: To pursue public/private partnerships and other revenue sources.

We have captured the strategic planning outputs in the representational form of two interrelated pyramids. The pyramids (see next two pages) interweave the mission, core values, vision, goals and objectives.

Newton Public Schools



Newton Public Schools



Goals for Students:

Students will experience school as an intellectual adventure, coming to understand core knowledge and skills as they develop 21st century habits of mind, e.g.:

- Critical and creative thinking
- Collaborative problem-solving
- Powerful means of communication
- Empathy, cultural awareness, and global understanding

Goals for NPS:

1. NPS will attract & engage the best & brightest educators in inspiring & educating our students through a strong program of professional growth.
2. NPS will expand beyond traditional school boundaries, using technology, innovative structures/schedules, & links with the larger community.
3. NPS will continuously review & adapt its programs in order to operate within its means.

Objectives for Students:

- To learn the power of inquiry, critical & creative thinking, collaborative problem-solving, & connections across disciplines.
- To use these 21st century intellectual strategies to acquire the core knowledge & skills defined by clear & strong curriculum standards.
- To benefit from best educational practices including differentiated instruction, authentic assessments, and technological innovations.
- To experience & appreciate their own & other cultures while developing a strong sense of social responsibility for both local & global communities.
- To discover & pursue interests, passions, & avenues of self-expression through a variety of program offerings.

Objectives for NPS:

1. To hire top-quality, diverse educators
To engage all educators in ongoing professional growth
To establish a culture of collaboration
To expect & support excellent performance
To ensure retention of high-performing educators
2. To create virtual learning opportunities
To explore expanded learning time
To establish internships/externships
To develop partnerships with other academic institutions & businesses
3. To evaluate programs for effectiveness & affordability
To review operations to identify efficiencies
To engage in multi-year financial planning
To pursue public/private partnerships & other revenue sources

III. IMPLEMENTATION

The strategic planning process is at an important crossroad. The “big thinking” reflected in the pyramid needed to be accompanied by an implementation plan with specific and measurable actions. To truly fulfill the strategic planning goals requires a significant culture change — a new mindset on the part of educators and families. Because this change is ambitious, coupled with the fact that a new Superintendent of Schools will be hired for the 2010-2011 academic year with his/her own vision and priorities, the implementation plan will be phased in through a combination of **SMART** goals (the acronym **SMART** stands for **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**ealistic, and **T**imely goals), task forces, and the many new and ongoing initiatives that are aligned with the strategy.

1. **SMART Goals:** We have chosen to create four **SMART** goals each supporting a key objective viewed as having paramount importance for moving the system forward. Eventually, we would like to apply the rigor involved in **SMART** goal planning to all of the actions emanating from our strategic planning objectives. We are initially starting with four **SMART** goals.

There will be a team leader to clearly define the specifics, processes, outcomes and timetable for each **SMART** goal. Each team leader will report on a regular basis to the interim Superintendent and twice yearly to the School Committee.

- Objective — To learn the power of inquiry, critical and creative thinking, collaborative problem solving, and connections across the disciplines.
 - **SMART GOAL #1** — By June, 2010, students in grades 2-12 will demonstrate a statistically significant increase in the ability to engage in collaborative problem solving and will show attendant increases in content knowledge through activities that link critical thinking, collaborative problem solving and core knowledge acquisition.
- Objective — To establish a culture of professional collaboration
 - **SMART GOAL #2** — During the 2009-2010 school year, building-based teams will be developed to systematically examine student work and use the group’s findings to inform instruction and improve student achievement.
- Objective — To evaluate programs for their effectiveness and affordability
 - **SMART GOAL #3** — During the 2009-2010 school year, the impact of math coaches on student learning will be assessed by periodically measuring and comparing the number sense of first graders in schools with math coaches to that of first graders in schools without math coaches.

- **SMART GOAL #4** — During the 2010 fiscal year, a system of multiyear planning and forecasting **will** be developed and incorporated into the FY '11 budget process, including the issues of facilities and maintenance, program costs, and budget drivers such as compensation and employee benefits.

2. **Task Forces:** In the process of strategic planning, a number of promising ideas were put forward. We are establishing task forces to study three of these ideas in greater depth. Each task force will have a team leader and include both educators and community volunteers. The team leader will establish a process for selecting other team members who will work together to establish goals and timeframes. After they are constituted and have developed a timetable, each task force will report to the School Committee about their proposed work. The three task forces are:

- Partnerships with academic institutions and businesses
- Virtual learning opportunities
- Expanded learning time

3. **New and Ongoing Initiatives:** While Vision 2020 is a new document, many of the goals and objectives have been NPS priorities for at least the last two years and were reflected both in the 2008-2010 System-wide Goals (see Appendix I) and the FY 2010 Budget Guidelines. The initiatives listed here are **examples** of programs currently underway or planned for next year that align with each of the four strategic planning goals and the 18 associated objectives. One important action for the coming year is to document all of these initiatives in order to establish baseline data and share best practices.

GOAL 1 FOR STUDENTS: Students will experience schools as an intellectual adventure, coming to understand core knowledge and skills as they develop 21st century habits of mind.

Initiatives

- Elementary "Write to Learn" Program, which involves reflecting on inquiry-based science and mathematics lessons, the engineering design process, and historical and cultural narratives.
- Differentiated instruction in mathematics using flexible, in class groupings based on ongoing assessments
- Demonstration team in middle school classrooms equipped with wireless net books for each student and a full complement of interactive tools like white boards with mounted projectors and student response systems (clickers)
- Collaborative problem-solving and higher order thinking skills development--through engaging in new interdisciplinary units at the middle schools.
- Global Communities and other interdisciplinary high school courses
- Extensive travel and internship programs
- Expanded social competency programs
- Robotics team collaboration between the two high schools

GOAL 2: NPS will attract and engage the best and brightest educators in inspiring and educating our students through a strong program of professional growth.

Initiatives

- Professional learning communities to design common assessments, review student work, tailor curriculum, and share best practices
- Increased building-based professional development focusing on 21st century skills
- Creative revamping of schedules to build in common planning time
- Implementation of 360 degree performance management system for evaluating principals
- Expansion of Newton Teacher Training Institute (NTTI), a state-approved licensure program. Designed by Newton teachers, NTTI provides coursework and mentoring to prospective teachers. One goal is to attract mid-career math and science professionals to NPS.
- Multiple opportunities for teachers to train teacher candidates, mentor teachers and provide job-embedded professional development

GOAL 3: NPS will expand beyond traditional school boundaries using technology, innovative structures/schedules, and links with the larger community.

Initiatives

- Use of engaging, interactive software to reinforce core concepts and student skills during school and at home
- Expanded partnerships with business (e.g. PTC, our Robotics Team sponsor)
- Expanded partnerships with Lesley, Northeastern, Lasell, Simmons and Wheelock colleges to bring more interns to NPS which increases adult presence in classrooms and serves to train and preview prospective NPS teachers
- Expanded volunteer programs including over 100 trained math tutors and senior citizens helping students in other elementary school subject areas
- Expanded independent study and internship opportunities for high school students including WISE program at South and Spark at North where seniors intern in local organizations

GOAL 4: NPS will continuously review and adapt its programs in order to operate within its means.

Initiatives

- NPS has joined the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Data Warehouse, a comprehensive system for collecting and analyzing longitudinal student data, evaluating programs, and providing teachers with data to inform instruction
- NPS is reviewing operations to identify efficiencies. Comprehensive program evaluation studies are underway for Food service, Transportation, and Special

education. A new preventive maintenance program is in place for FY'10 as well as audits for new energy cost-savings initiatives.

- NPS is pursuing public/private partnerships and other revenue sources. There is a new School Committee policy on donations. The Newton Schools Foundation is working with the Technology Department to raise funds for 21st century classrooms across the system.

4. **Additional next steps:**

- The Administrative Council (Central administrators, Principals, Department Heads, Curriculum Coordinators) is engaged in ongoing discussions, continuing to prioritize the system's strategic action plans for the next one to five years.
- Principals will be working with their school councils on aligning their school improvement plans with the strategic plan, including planning possible pilot programs for their schools.
- The system has already begun work with Public Consulting Group (PCG), a firm that works with public education systems and other clients to achieve performance goals. PCG is helping NPS audit the current practices of our educators with respect to the strategic vision, and in particular, teaching 21st Century skills. This will create a baseline data set that will enable us to measure our progress over time.

IV. HISTORY OF THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

GETTING STARTED

Superintendent Jeff Young launched the strategic planning effort by introducing three key readings to his senior administrators: Good to Great and the Social Sectors by Jim Collins ¹, The World is Flat by Thomas Friedman ², and A Whole New Mind by Daniel Pink ³. These three books, taken together, provided a context for global thinking, creativity, and adaptation of best business practices. Table 1 below summarizes the strategic planning process.

Superintendent Young, along with School Committee members Claire Sokoloff and Dori Zaleznik, served as the steering committee for hiring a consultant with experience in innovative strategic planning and organizational change. We hired Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC) after reviewing a number of applications responding to our request for proposal. We agreed to use the "good to great" management model tested in business and social sectors to identify and leverage what is working, while opening our minds to new approaches for moving forward ¹.

With the help of IISC consultants Andria Winther and Curtis Ogden, the next step was to select a Strategic Planning Team (SPT) composed of key stakeholders: administrators, teachers, union head, parents, elected officials, and community members that would meet monthly to

guide the process. A separate Design Team (Young, Sokoloff, Zaleznik, and Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education Patricia Kelly) worked with the consultants to map out the process and prepare for SPT and other meetings.

SURVEYS

The SPT began by surveying parents and educators to uncover the enduring strengths of our system, to excavate from their stories what it is that Newton has held sacred — whether explicitly or right below the surface. The staff survey was completed by 618 NPS employees who cited the system’s reputation, location, diversity/respect for human differences, salaries and benefits as key reasons for choosing to work in Newton. Sources of pride included high caliber of their colleagues, commitment to academic excellence, diversity/respect for human differences, support for teachers, and ability to embrace all learners. Specific bright spots mentioned were high caliber staff and students, quality of special education, parental involvement and differentiated curriculum. Areas needing improvement that were highlighted included mechanisms for implementing curriculum changes (e.g., clarifying priorities, increased planning time), upgrading and integrating technology, school facilities, and instructional support (including SPED staff and services).

Eight hundred and ten people completed the parent survey. The similarities between staff and parent responses were quite striking. System strengths identified by parents included high quality teachers and administrators, commitment to academic excellence, supportive parent community, respect for human differences/diversity, and welcoming neighborhood schools. Specific bright spots included caring and competent staff, welcoming community, breadth of curriculum, and the ability to address individual learning styles and needs. Most frequently mentioned areas for improvement were curriculum (e.g. strengthening the core in math, science, and literacy and broadening offerings like arts, sports, and elementary world language), meeting the needs of all student learners, middle school experience, class sizes, school facilities, investing in the system and communication.

The full reports appear in Appendix II.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

Two important themes emerged from our review of relevant literature. The first theme is the importance of high quality teachers. The McKinsey & Company report from September 2007 entitled: “How the world’s best-performing school systems come out on top”⁴ highlights three key points:

- The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers
- The only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction
- High performance requires every child to succeed

The second theme is the importance of teaching an approach to learning for the 21st century. This issue is addressed in different ways in “Deval Patrick’s Readiness Report”⁵, the education program outlined by then candidate and now President Barack Obama⁶, and a book entitled

The Global Achievement Gap — Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need by Tony Wagner of Harvard's Graduate School of Education. ⁷

Business and academic leaders stress that our students need 21st century skills. In an Education Sector report, "Measuring Skills for the 21st Century," ⁸ Elena Silva quotes the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce 2006 report, which states, "It is a world in which comfort with ideas and abstractions is the passport to a good job, in which creativity and innovation are the key to the good life, in which high levels of education — a very different kind of education than most of us have had — are going to be the only security there is." She further writes, "It is an emphasis on what students can do with knowledge, rather than what units of knowledge they have, that best describes the essence of 21st century skills."

As Paul Reville, the Massachusetts State Education Secretary, writes, "We are not preparing enough of our students to do the jobs of the present and future...too few can make coherent oral presentations [or] solve complex problems using either creativity or technology."

VISIONING

It was becoming clear from the thinking of our SPT, reinforced by the review of relevant literature, that we really were describing a change in mandate for our public schools. The next steps for the SPT were to organize a series of "visioning" sessions with staff, community, high school students, and Frank Catanzaro, a futurist and charter member of the Millennium Project, an internationally recognized think tank for global foresight research. The visioning sessions were highly interactive and asked participants in small groups to imagine NPS on the cover of Time magazine in the year 2020. They were challenged to envision specific descriptors of NPS as a model public school system at that time.

A picture emerged from these sessions of capable, curious, confident, community-minded students. The groups imagined that all students would achieve their full potential, have an opportunity to apply learned knowledge and would embrace their responsibilities as citizens of the world. The educators would feel highly supported by the system, engage in innovation and continuous improvement including benefiting from strong instructional leadership, self-awareness, and knowledge of best practices, and would be passionate in pursuit of NPS mission and core values. NPS was envisioned as internationally recognized for academic excellence, providing the best possible instruction for every student, and having "permeable" boundaries that reach across the city and the world. Further, Newton was envisioned as a community of choice for educators and families with children based on the reputation of its schools, having "green" school facilities, and making sound education and fiscal decisions. The "envisioned future" document compiled by the SPT appears in Appendix III.

WORKING GROUPS

Based on the Mission, Core Values, and envisioned future work, the SPT identified three strategic areas for in depth review:

- **Learning in the Global Age**
 - How does NPS prepare students for success in a global environment?
 - What are the core competencies?
 - What will the curriculum look like?
 - How will we individualize learning and differentiate instruction?
- **NPS Workforce of the Future**
 - How will NPS establish itself as a leader in the education profession?
 - What innovative structures and practices will enable us to attract, retain and develop an exemplary and diverse workforce?
- **NPS as a Permeable Campus**
 - How can NPS challenge itself to think outside its current structures/realities/boundaries?
 - What sorts of partnerships, real-life opportunities, schedule/approaches will ensure future success?

These three strategic areas of focus emphasized learning strategies for the 21st century, the importance of teachers in the lives of students and as collaborative colleagues for one another, and the need to break down walls separating schools from the larger community.

Working groups for each of these areas of focus were formed. Leaders of these three working groups were Deputy Superintendent Brenda Keegan for Learning in the Global Age, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources Paul Stein for NPS Workforce of the Future, and Grants Coordinator Susan Linn for NPS as a Permeable Campus. Each working group had more than 20 participants and included members of the SPT, staff, and other community volunteers. These groups worked from June through November 2008 to identify goals and initiatives in each of these three areas. The reports of the three working groups can be found in Appendix IV.

These reports then became the basis of strategic initiatives that were vetted by the SPT, the public in two community conversation exercises, and by the Administrative Council (central staff, school principals, curriculum coordinators, and high school department heads). The list of 12 integrated strategic initiatives is in Appendix V. The outputs of the working groups with priority assessments from all of these stakeholders were then integrated into the pyramid which provides strategic direction for NPS with (4) five-year goals and 18 objectives.

The implementation phase is now underway. The focus for the upcoming school year is on four **SMART** goals, launching three high priority task forces and supporting a number of new and ongoing initiatives that align with the strategic plan.

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- 1 Collins, Jim. "Good to Great in the Social Sectors," 2005.
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