

Evaluation for Dr. David Thomson, Norwood Superintendent of Schools March 9, 2022

Background: Dr. Thomson is completing his fifth year of tenure as the superintendent of the Norwood Public Schools during the 2021-2022 school year. The School Committee, working with the superintendent, determined goals for his fourth and fifth years in the position. The current review cycle is a two-year cycle. The Committee also selected criteria to be used for evaluation. These criteria are a subset of the criteria established by the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). There are criteria from each of the four DESE major standards.

DESE has established ratings categories for their standards: Unsatisfactory, Needs Improvement, Proficient, and Exemplary. DESE notes that Proficient “is the rigorous expected level of performance.”

Process: The School Committee voted to approve the superintendent’s goals and the indicators to be used for this evaluation at the October 7, 2020 meeting. Dr. Thomson submitted evidence and his own reflections in January 2022. Each committee member then completed an independent evaluation of the superintendent. This document reflects a compilation of these independent evaluations. The School Committee voted to approve this evaluation on March 9, 2022.

Summary of Evaluation

District Improvement Goals: Met

Student Learning Goals: Met

Professional Practice Goals: Significant Progress

Standard I: Instructional Leadership – Proficient

Standard II: Management and Operations – Proficient

Standard III: Family and Community Engagement – Proficient

Standard IV: Professional Culture - Proficient

Overall Performance: Proficient

Impact on Student Learning: Moderate

Detailed Goals/Criteria and Responses

District Improvement Goals

District Improvement Goal 1: The Superintendent will work with the Middle School Building Committee to complete the feasibility study and initial schematic drawing of the middle school, and present the project to Town Meeting in spring 2022.

Met

The committee felt that the Middle School Building Committee has delivered on the task of meeting timelines and deadlines with respect to the feasibility, schematics, and education plans for the middle school project so that it can be presented at Town Meeting in March 2022. The committee agreed that communication from the Middle School Building Committee (MSBC) has been clear and open, using a redesigned website, community forums, tours, and videos. The committee was given ample information in order to make a decision on the final grade configuration for the new school.

The committee noted that they would have liked to see Dr. Thomson take a more proactive approach to the project, and they hope that he will confidently lead the next phase of the project, if approved by the town. At times Dr. Thomson would delegate tasks that would have been better led by him considering his expertise as a middle school principal.

District Improvement Goal 2: The Superintendent will lead the Strategic Planning Committee, develop detailed steps for years two and three of the Strategic Plan, and track progress with deadlines.

Met

The committee agreed that full implementation of the Strategic Plan was seriously impacted by the pandemic and the need to focus on guidance as it was released from DESE. It was an ambitious plan when it was drafted, and some edits and deferments were necessary as it became clear what was realistically achievable. Despite this, the progress on the plan by the district has been excellent. The hiring of the Director of Strategic Initiatives was a clear step forward in realizing the full implementation of the Strategic Plan. The alignment of the School Improvement Plans with the district plan is also a clear strength.

The committee felt that areas of improvement for this goal are to continue to work on district communication, which is addressed in the Strategic Plan. The committee also noted that they felt that Dr. Thomson deprioritized the Strategic Plan in his own goals once the Director of Strategic Initiatives was hired and key tasks were delegated. The adjustments to the Strategic Initiative were also not captured in mid-cycle check in through goal adjustments or captured in cycle-end documents. The committee would also like to see more thought and planning into how the updates to the Strategic Plan are presented to the committee.

Overall Rating – District Improvement Goals

Met

Student Learning Goals

Student Learning Goal 1: The Superintendent will facilitate the use of technology tools and blended instructional approaches to further develop the skill set that represents the Portrait of a Norwood Graduate in our students.

Exceeded

The committee felt that a significant strength of the district was the implementation of technology tools during the pandemic to allow students to fully participate in learning by hybrid model or through the Remote Learning Academy (RLA). The deployment of technology in such a short period of time highlights an area of strength for Dr. Thomson's leadership and dedication to the continuation of student learning during the pandemic. The work around the Portrait of a Norwood Graduate (PONG) was exemplified by the successful NEASC visit that showcased the hard work of the high school and its leadership team.

The committee noted that middle and elementary levels are behind schedule in work related to PONG and would like to see a specific plan for moving forward.

Student Learning Goal 2: The Superintendent will establish professional learning time and process to facilitate collaboration and improve instructional practice at each level.

Significant Progress

The committee felt professional development was presented to the staff to improve instructional practices (CRSP, UDL) and common planning time has been scheduled into the school day. However, staffing issues have presented challenges to collaboration time. There was some concern from the committee that despite common planning time and instructional rounds being used, there is no district-wide standard for reporting to the administration and metric.

Student Learning Goal Overall

Met

Professional Practice Goals

Professional Practice Goal 1: The Superintendent will, in collaboration with the Administrative Team and School Committee, work to build the district's capacity for culturally responsive practice and communication as well as self reflect on ways to eliminate areas of racially biased practices and materials in the Norwood Public Schools

Significant Progress

The committee noted the professional development offered to the staff by the Highlander Institute on Culturally Responsive and Sustainable Practices (CRSP) as well as the Equity Audit by Mass Insight as positive steps towards achieving this goal. The committee feels that the next

steps in achieving this goal would be to enact changes based on the Equity Audit results. The committee also feels that district communication around this and other initiatives needs to be improved significantly.

Standard 1 Instructional Leadership

Indicator 1-A: Curriculum

“Monitors and assesses progress across all schools and content areas to ensure that all instructional staff implements effective and rigorous standards based units of instruction consisting of well-structured lessons with measurable outcomes.”

Proficient

The committee feels that the professional development being offered this year (CRSP and UDL) is a significant step towards standardizing and improving instructional practices across all of the schools in the district. The committee would still like to see evidence and plans for monitoring and assessing the implementation of the PD in the classrooms.

Indicator I-B: Instruction

“Monitors and supports Principals and instructional staff through observations and feedback to ensure that instructional practices in all settings reflect high expectations regarding content and quality of effort and work, engage all students and are personalized to accommodate diverse learning styles, needs, interests and levels of readiness.”

Proficient

The committee notes that Dr. Thomson works closely with the school principals and other leaders to ensure the high expectations are met within the schools and that the professional development tools are being implemented. Instructional rounds are used to assess instructional practices in the schools. However, the committee would have liked to see additional evidence of principal observations or administrative team meetings that focus on instructional practices.

Overall Instructional Leadership Rating

Proficient

Dr. Thomson has led the district on focusing on improving instruction over the last two years despite significant challenges due to the pandemic. Dr. Thomson should continue to build on the momentum and continue to monitor the implementation of the instructional practices.

Standard 2 – Management and Operations

Indicator II-A: Environment

“Develops and executes effective plans, procedures, routines, and operational systems to address a full range of safety, health, emotional, and social needs of the students as evidenced by: orderly and efficient student entry, dismissal, meals, class transitions, assemblies, and

recess; school and district buildings that are clean, attractive, welcoming, and safe; and safe and supportive learning environment for all students.”

Proficient

The committee feels that this is a strongly proficient area for Dr. Thomson. The schools, especially during the pandemic, were safe and clean. Dr. Thomson worked closely with the Department of Public Health and school nurses to implement policies put forward by DPH, DESE, and the CDC to make our schools the best possible environment for students. Dr. Thomson also worked with the Crisis Planning Team to focus on safe and supportive schools.

Indicator II-D: Laws Ethics and Policies

“Understands and complies with state and federal laws and mandates, school committee policies, collective bargaining agreements, and ethical guidelines, and provides the resources to support and ensure district wide compliance.”

Proficient

The committee feels that overall Dr. Thomson can navigate the many state and local laws that govern the school district. Federal and state laws are enforced in the district. Although the committee rates Dr. Thomson as proficient, several areas of improvement have been noted, specifically with regards to policies, procedures, CBAs and Student Services. Work is ongoing through the Policy Audit to update district policies, and once that work is complete, steps will need to be taken to ensure compliance in every school in the district through updated procedure. There is also further support needed by Dr. Thomson in the Student Services Department during this time of transition and improvement.

Indicator II-E: Fiscal Systems

“Develops a budget that supports the district's vision, mission, and goals; allocates and manages expenditures consistent with district and school level goals and available resources; and effectively communicates budget rationale to staff, community members, municipal stakeholders, and the school committee. Provides regular updates on implementation of the budget.”

Proficient

The committee noted that the budget process in the school district has greatly improved in recent years, and budgets are always thorough and well-researched. Grant management has been a strength, and quarterly budgets are detailed and informative. Dr. Thomson and the Director of Finance are also planning long-term so that there are no issues related to spending grant money without creating a “fiscal cliff.”

Overall Standard 2

Proficient

The committee feels that overall Dr. Thomson has grown in his management and operations role in the last two years and has weathered the many challenges that the pandemic has brought. The administrative leadership team has done a wonderful job. There are a few areas of improvement, but Dr. Thomson has the tools and skill to achieve those improvements.

Standard 3 – Family and Community Engagement

Indicator III-A: Engagement

“Promotes, monitors, and supports comprehensive, culturally responsive, and collaborative engagement practices that welcome and encourage every family to actively participate in the classroom and school community, and engages community stakeholders to contribute to the classroom, school, and community’s effectiveness.”

Needs Improvement

With acknowledgement from the committee about the challenges around Family and Community Engagement due to the Pandemic, members of the committee have expressed their concern around engagement and communication as it relates to certain areas/issues, most notably, “student services, start times, and other contractual items.” Along with that, outreach and engagement with our highest need populations (i.e., ELL’s) is an area of improvement. Another area of concern around communication and engagement was that some communications sent to families feels “rushed and not proofread.”

Indicator III-B: Sharing Responsibility

“Monitors adherence to district-wide policies and practices that promote continuous collaboration with families to support student learning and development both at home and at school, as evidenced by: the collaborative identification of each student’s academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs; and connecting families to the necessary resources and services within the school and the community to meet students’ learning needs.”

Proficient

With acknowledgement of strong working relationships in the pandemic between the health department and the addition of the “Director of Logistics to help and assist in monitoring different areas,” including special education and ELL’s, there are concerns raised about the, “consistency and equity across the district in regards to policies.”

Overall Standard Family and Community Engagement

Proficient

The committee feels that overall, Dr. Thomson is proficient in Family and Community Engagement while acknowledging the difficulties of running a district and engaging with families during a pandemic. An area of improvement is around communication plans for what is sent out from the district. This area has been identified in the other indicators but the committee recognizes overall a proficiency rating for this standard.

Standard 4 – Professional Culture

Indicator IV-B: Cultural Proficiency

“Ensures that policies and practices enable staff members and students to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment in which students’ backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges are respected, as evidenced by the sufficient provision of guidance, supports, and resources to all schools to promote culturally responsive learning environments and school cultures that affirm individual differences of both students and staff. ”

Proficient

Although “always room for growth,” the committee overwhelmingly believes that under the leadership of Dr. Thomson, the district has taken “huge steps” towards creating a more culturally proficient and responsive district through things such as the “Equity Audit, UDL, and PD on Social/Emotional Learning.”

Indicator IV-C: Communications

“Demonstrates strong interpersonal, written, and verbal communication skills, as evidenced by regular and informative outreach to staff, families, and community members, and the school committee in a manner that advances the work of the district. Regularly seeks and considers feedback in decision making.”

Needs Improvement

In regards to communications, the committee felt this was an area that needs improvement and the feedback is echoed from previous sections. Specifically, “due to recent situations around student services, school start times, and some union concerns,” “it has become evident that written communication and documentation by the superintendent and some other administrators needs to be improved.” As a result, this is an area with opportunity for growth around communication inside of and with stakeholders across the district.

Overall Standard 4

Proficient

The DESE rubric defines professional culture as “Promotes success for all students by nurturing and sustaining a school culture of reflective practice, high expectations, and continuous learning for staff.” Although communication is an area of growth, under his leadership, the district has taken big steps towards creating a more culturally proficient, responsive, and inclusive community.

Overall Performance: *Proficient*

Impact on Student Learning: *Moderate*

With an acknowledgement of the challenges of the past two years operating within a pandemic, the committee ranked the overall performance as proficient and the impact on student learning as moderate. Highlights include the Equity Audit, PD around Social/Emotional Learning, and UDL has had its impact. Areas for growth include communication and organization around communication for major changes (i.e., School Start Times and Special Education Restructure). As described in the feedback, "Dr. Thomson brings many strengths to his role and to the district; and he has led this district compassionately and thoroughly through the really challenging experience of the pandemic. I am aware of how many unknowns and crisis situations pop up in his day-to-day schedule. I recognize how many long hours he puts in, and I appreciate how he has dedicated himself to Norwood. It cannot be easy to be a superintendent in these trying times. I have no doubt he is always advocating for Norwood students and staff, and that he has the best of intentions."