



THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF  
PHILADELPHIA

# ACCELERATE PHILLY

*2023-2028 Strategic Plan*

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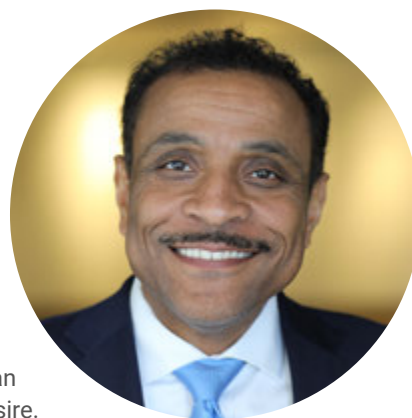
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# A Letter From the Superintendent

Dear School District of Philadelphia students, families, staff,  
and community members,

I present to you *Accelerate Philly*, the School District of Philadelphia's strategic plan. This strategic plan prioritizes student and staff safety, establishes deep partnerships with our community, and focuses our resources on proven, research-based strategies to improve student achievement. If we work together as one united Philadelphia, we absolutely can become the fastest improving urban school district in the nation and prepare all students to realize any future they desire.



This strategic plan is the culmination of months of hard work and insights from community members across this city including students, teachers, school-based staff, principals, central office leaders, union leaders, community members, and Board of Education members. It will inform how we align our District resources, including time, budget, and professional learning, over the next five years. While these steps may seem simple, they require focus, accountability, and consistent follow-through. I would like to express my gratitude to those who contributed to this plan and look forward to continued collaboration.

Philadelphia is a special place. Our children have proven themselves to be resilient, and we are in a unique moment in time where we have the people, the constitutional commitment to resources, and the collective dedication to accelerate growth for all students. Now is the time for us as a community to come together to execute on a plan that ensures that our students are more than just college and career ready — we need to help our students realize the futures they desire. To accomplish this, we must prioritize our children by thinking differently about how all agencies within this city collaborate with the business and non-profit community, as well as parents and guardians to position our children to take their place as leaders in this wonderful city where the Declaration of Independence was signed. Philadelphia should be the place where the nation looks to see what equity and excellence looks like in action. We have much hard work ahead of us, but our vision for our future is clear and compelling.

My Listening and Learning Tour and the Transition Team Report made clear that we needed to rethink how we engage with families, partner with the community, and communicate broadly. This year, I have worked with a fierce sense of urgency and collaborated with our students, families, staff, city and state leaders, unions, universities, activists, grassroots organizations, and business leaders to improve the experiences of the children we serve. *Accelerate Philly* will continue to build on these initial efforts.

As a father, former teacher, and former principal, I know all parents have hopes and dreams for their children. Parents look toward schools to partner with them to help children reach their innate potential. We can accelerate our performance and place our children on a trajectory of success by focusing on a limited number of research-driven strategies and being relentless about knowing our children and responding to their needs.

*Accelerate Philly* is our roadmap to accelerating our progress and transforming outcomes for our students. Its implementation marks the launch of a collaborative journey towards excellence. This will be hard work, but our children are counting on us to create life-changing opportunities and outcomes for them and their families. I will continue to ask "How are the children?", and look forward to when we can confidently answer, "All the children are well!"

I thank you for the opportunity to work together. Our best days are ahead.

In partnership,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Tony B. Watlington, Sr." in a cursive script.

**Tony B. Watlington, Sr., Ed.D.**  
Superintendent

# Overview

*Accelerate Philly* is the roadmap for serving our students, families, staff, and community over the next five years and represents the final Phase of Dr. Watlington's three-phase transition process. Phase 1 began in June 2022, where he engaged in an extensive Listening and Learning Tour with over 3,000 people across Philadelphia to hear what the District does well, what needs improvement, and how we can work more collaboratively. Phase 2 was the Transition Team, in which over 100 participants reviewed the current state of the District. In October 2022, they presented ninety-one recommendations to guide immediate and future actions.

In January 2023, and in alignment to Dr. Watlington's commitment to "nothing for us without us", over 200 members of our District community participated in three groups that contributed to the development of *Accelerate Philly*. These individuals represented a wide range of roles at schools and in District offices, as well as the diversity of the District and every region of the city. They drew on their varied identities, experiences, and viewpoints throughout the process. These groups, in collaboration with Dr. Watlington and the Board of Education, engaged in a multi-stage process to develop *Accelerate Philly*:

- **Leadership Team:** 25 school-based staff, school leaders, and central office leaders that served as the decision-making body for the strategic plan.
- **Steering Committee:** 60 students, parents and guardians, school-based staff, school leaders, and central office staff from across Philadelphia that generated the content of the strategic plan, which was reviewed by the Leadership Team.
- **Advisory Groups:** Groups of community members, including parents and guardians, principals, teachers, school support staff, students, union leadership, and central office staff, who provided critical insights and feedback as the strategic plan was developed.

Drawing on the themes that emerged from the Listening and Learning Tour, the recommendations from the Transition Team Report, and the lived experiences of the individuals who participated in the strategic planning process, we identified 5 Priority Areas and 62 Strategic Actions. Moving forward, we will align our resources to these Priority Areas and Strategic Actions to raise student achievement and accelerate progress toward achieving the Goals and Guardrails.

To reach our collective goals, *Accelerate Philly* must be implemented thoughtfully and carefully. A key consideration is the availability and allocation of District resources, including people, funding, and time. Therefore, not all Strategic Actions will be implemented at the same time. Each Strategic Action will follow four implementation phases between the 2023-24 school year and the 2027-28 school year:

- **Implementation planning:** Teams develop specific plans that include who will lead the Strategic Action, resources needed, ways to measure progress, and potential barriers to implementation.
- **Initial implementation:** Teams begin implementing the Strategic Action, regularly assess effectiveness, and make adjustments to the implementation of the strategic action before fully implementing it.
- **Full implementation:** Teams fully implement the Strategic Action and ensure there are enough resources and support for effective implementation throughout the district.
- **Sustained implementation:** Teams monitor the effectiveness of full implementation and consistently make necessary adjustments to the Strategic Action to ensure it can be sustained over time.

Equity, transparency, and collaboration have been central to the Strategic Planning Process and will continue to guide the implementation of our Strategic Actions. The following equity questions, adapted from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, will be answered at each phase in the implementation process. These questions will enable us to make decisions that center student and school community needs:

1. Are all stakeholder groups that are affected by the policy, practice, decision, or action at the table?
2. How will the proposed policy, practice, decision, or action affect each group?
3. How will the proposed policy, practice, decision, or action be perceived by each group?
4. Does the policy, practice, decision, or action worsen or ignore existing disparities?
5. Based on the above responses, what revisions are needed to the policy, practice, decision, or action under discussion?

As we implement *Accelerate Philly* over the next five years, we must hold ourselves accountable and be transparent about our collective successes and challenges. The Superintendent will provide annual updates to the Board of Education and the community on our progress. These updates will also guide future Board of Education decisions on policy, spending, and other needed resources to support the District in successfully implementing the plan. *Accelerate Philly* is a living document and will be regularly assessed to determine intentional, targeted adjustments to Strategic Actions as new lessons are learned.

Our journey is just beginning. Together, we can accelerate progress for all students and become the fastest improving large, urban school district in the nation.



# Goals and Guardrails

The Board of Education established Goals and Guardrails that outline what our students must know and be able to accomplish and describe the conditions needed in each school to empower all students to succeed in and beyond the classroom. The ultimate goal is to ensure that all students perform at or above grade level in schools that are safe and welcoming, offer well-rounded opportunities, and dismantle racist systems and practices. The Goals and Guardrails ensure coordinated efforts across the District to drive improved student success and serve as the long-term measurable outcomes for the Strategic Plan. By focusing on the Strategic Actions outlined in this plan, the District will accelerate its progress toward achieving the Goals and Guardrails.



## Goals

1. The percentage of students in grades 3-8 who are proficient on the state English Language Arts (ELA) assessment.
2. The percentage of 3rd grade students who are proficient on the state English Language Arts (ELA) assessment.
3. The percentage of students in grades 3-8 who are proficient on the state Math assessment.
4. The percentage of students who are proficient on all three state high school assessments (Algebra, Literature, and Biology) by the end of their 11th grade year.
5. The percentage of Career and Technical Education (CTE) students who pass an industry standards-based competency assessment by the end of their 12th grade year will grow.

## Guardrails

1. Every school will be a safe, welcoming and healthy place where our students, staff and community want to be and learn each day. This means that our schools will be: (1) environmentally safe and clean; and (2) spaces with inclusive climates that provide students with access to robust social, emotional, and mental health supports.
2. Every student will have a well-rounded education with arts, athletics, and other co-curricular opportunities integrated into the school experience.
3. Every parent and guardian will be welcomed and encouraged to be partners in their child's school community.
4. Our students' potential will not be limited by practices that perpetuate systemic racism and hinder student achievement.

*The Board of Education is currently evaluating the Goal and Guardrail trajectories, targets, and leading indicators to extend through the end of the Strategic Plan and accurately measure progress.*

# What We Believe

The strategic plan Advisory Groups, Steering Committee, Leadership Team, and Board of Education provided feedback and insights to generate a revised District-wide vision and mission, core values, and a new theory of action. These elements will serve as the foundation for the strategic plan.

## Vision, Mission, and Core Values

### Vision

To prepare students to imagine and realize any future they desire.

### Mission

All sectors of public education in Philadelphia will work with urgency to provide every student with the opportunity to achieve positive life outcomes in partnership with diverse families, educators, and community members who are valued and respected.

### Core Values

- **Safety** is imperative to our work.
- **Equity** requires needs-based distribution of resources.
- **Collaboration** involves gathering and honoring community voices.
- **Joy** inspires active engagement and belonging.
- **Trust** is built through good communication, public transparency, and holding ourselves accountable.
- **Ambition** requires us to work with urgency to accelerate student achievement.



## Theory of Action

### When we focus on...

- Engaging with families and community members in the education of all students;
- Prioritizing the social-emotional well-being, mental health, and intellectual and physical safety of all students and staff;
- Centering schools and school leadership teams as the units of change;
- Advancing equity through everything we do and every decision we make; and
- Aligning our resources, trainings, and accountability structures to a limited number of innovative and research based priorities

**Then we will reach the Goals and Guardrails and transform learning and life outcomes for all students.**



# PRIORITY AREA 1

## Improve safety and well-being (physical, social-emotional, and environmental)

Safe environments are critical for our students and staff to learn and grow. This includes physical, social-emotional, and environmental safety. To make strides in these areas, our approach must be collaborative – including the District, the City of Philadelphia, and our partners throughout the community. As these Strategic Actions are implemented, students, staff, and families will see improvements in physical learning spaces, more consistent access to mental and behavioral health services, greater social-emotional supports, and an increased sense of safety in school buildings.

### Strategic Actions

**1.1 Establish a facilities master plan project team, including internal and external stakeholders, to identify a process and investments needed to significantly improve academic achievement and to achieve Guardrails 1 and 2.**

**1.2 Improve management of environmental conditions and hazards by hiring an administrator and investing in a modern data management system.**

**Why is this urgent?** Our students' perceptions of building conditions are related to their feelings of belonging, safety, and trust at their schools. During Listening and Learning sessions, students, school staff, families, and community members shared serious concerns about lead and asbestos remediation, lack of air conditioning, and needed upgrades to electrical and security systems in school buildings. A 2017 report estimated the replacement value to facilities across the district to be \$7.8 billion dollars.

**Why these strategies?** Spatial configurations impact students' and teachers' ability to perform. To maximize learning, students need clean air, good light, and a quiet, comfortable, and safe learning environment. High quality teachers tend to transfer to schools with better facilities when given the opportunity. Additionally, a recent study found that school facility improvements in Los Angeles had a positive impact on test scores and attendance, yielding a strong return-on-investment of \$1.62 for every \$1 spent.

**Aligns with:** All Goals, Guardrails 1 and 2; Transition Team Recommendations

**1.3 Replace all analog security cameras at 150 schools.**

**1.4 Pilot and evaluate Opengate weapons detection technology for stand-alone middle schools.**

**Why is this urgent?** Philadelphians believe that Dr. Watlington's first priority as Superintendent should be school climate and safety. In 2022, Philadelphia recorded over 15,000 violent crime offenses, including over 4,000 shooting incidences. District stakeholders feel that, at the most basic level, school building doors, locks, and cameras are essential for security, yet they are not always functioning properly. On the annual survey, only 55% of students reported that they feel safe in their school hallways.

**Why these strategies?** Safe schools are places where students are safe from violence, bullying and harassment, and the influence of substance abuse. Decades of research have shown that when students do not feel safe in school, they suffer socio-emotionally, behaviorally, and academically. Internal research shows that teacher retention is linked to teacher perceptions of school climate and safety. Working cameras outside of the school building have been shown to improve students' perceptions of safety. The Opengate technology identifies threats to safety by detecting specific types of weapons, such as assault rifles (it is not designed to detect lesser threats, such as knives).

**Aligns with:** Guardrail 1

### 1.5 Expand the Safe Path Program in partnership with foundations and city and state funders.

**Why is this urgent?** On the annual survey, 51% of students indicated that they have safety concerns going to or from school. Over 60% of students said they do not feel safe in the neighborhood surrounding their schools. Two-thirds of leaders said that neighborhood crime/safety is a challenge to student learning. During Listening and Learning sessions, students noted that neighborhood crime/safety impacts their ability to attend school.

**Why this strategy?** Research on the Safe Passage Program in Chicago found that it had a significant impact on reducing crime near schools. It is an important component of addressing stakeholder concerns, including students having to travel far distances and through unsafe conditions to get to their school, which is a barrier to regular, on-time attendance.

**Aligns with:** Guardrail 1; Transition Team Recommendations

### 1.6 Develop a bridge program for students transitioning back from placement at Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center, Pennypack House, and other long-term placements.

**Why is this urgent?** Over the past two school years, approximately 1,000 students transitioned back to a general education setting from long-term facilities, dependent placements, or mental health hospitals. These students are more likely to have experienced trauma and neglect and more than twice as likely to drop out of school than students who have not been sent to an alternative setting. However, when formerly incarcerated youth return to and attend school regularly, they reduce their chances of reincarceration and dropping out. Themes from Listening and Learning sessions with school leaders indicate a need to improve the coordination of services for students returning from placement, including collaboratively identifying the school that can best meet the needs and interests of each student and ensuring that every student is fully supported in adapting to and thriving in the new environment. School leaders also noted that transitional supports often do not last long enough to meet the extensive needs of returning students. Ideally, school leaders would like students to have the opportunity to participate in interim programming aimed at supporting their transition back to the general education setting.

**Why this strategy?** Students returning from long-term placement benefit from high levels of adult support and service coordination, which schools do not always have the capacity to provide. Supportive interventions, such as mentoring and restorative practices, can have a positive effect on attitudes about school for students who are transitioning back from a long-term placement. For students with intensive needs, educational programs that can “bridge” the gap between a long-term placement and a traditional learning environment can focus on providing these supports in order to fully prepare the learner to return to a traditional school setting.

**Aligns with:** Goal 4 and Guardrail 1

### 1.7 Identify, audit, and improve school climate programs.

**Why is this urgent?** National research strongly links school climate with student attendance, academic achievement, persistence to graduation, and teacher attendance and retention. In the District, when accounting for school-level student demographics, responses to climate questions on the student, parent/guardian, and teacher surveys were all significantly predictive of school-level math and reading proficiency. Fewer than half of student respondents on the annual survey indicated that they consistently feel like they belong at school (36%); feel welcome at school (45%); and enjoy being at school (31%). This is particularly concerning given that there is a strong link between academic achievement and how students feel in school. Evidence-based social-emotional and climate programs can significantly improve overall climate and students’ positive feelings about school; however, implementation data reveals that many schools struggle to implement these programs with fidelity.

**Why this strategy?** The District currently supports three evidence-based school wide social-emotional and restorative climate approaches: Culturally Responsive Relevant Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CR-PBIS); Schoolwide Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and Relationships First (RF). Schools select their schoolwide approaches during the school planning process. When PBIS is implemented with fidelity, there are positive outcomes for students, such as reductions in suspensions and truancy, and gains in reading and math achievement. Schoolwide SEL practices in schools provide short- and long-term benefits to students’ well-being, prosocial behaviors, and avoidance of high-risk behaviors (e.g. substance abuse). These impacts persist regardless of parental income or race. The Relationships First program, which was modeled after Oakland Unified School District’s restorative justice program, is associated in multiple studies with decreases in suspensions, expulsions, and referrals for violent offenses, and with large gains in academic achievement. Strong implementation of these programs can be expected to improve outcomes in all of these areas.

**Aligns with:** Guardrails 1 and 4



## 1.8 Identify, audit, and improve mental and behavioral health services in partnership with the City of Philadelphia.

**Why is this urgent?** Exposure to chronic childhood trauma significantly increases the risk of developing mental health disorders, which in turn negatively impact academic achievement. Results of the Philadelphia Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) show that over 39% of District students have experienced traumatic events, including witnessing physical abuse in their home and violence in their community. Nearly all school leaders (91%) identified mental health as a significant challenge in their school, according to the annual survey. In addition, during Listening and Learning sessions, students, school staff, families, and community members shared that the District has insufficient staff to meet students' mental health and social-emotional needs, particularly in the midst of Philadelphia's gun violence epidemic. Schools need more trauma-informed approaches, more counselors, and more caring adults to listen and understand students' experiences.

**Why this strategy?** The Institute of Education Sciences has identified several trauma-informed mental and behavioral health services that have promising evidence when implemented with fidelity. They can improve outcomes for students, including the reduction in trauma-related symptoms. Several of these evidence-based programs are currently being implemented by the District, but we have yet to evaluate implementation or effectiveness.

**Aligns with:** Guardrails 1 and 4

## 1.9 Recruit and retain certified school nurses for all schools to provide in-person or telehealth services depending on student need.

**Why is this urgent?** Chronic health conditions are a barrier to learning for many District students. On the Philadelphia Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), 25% of high school students reported being told by a doctor or nurse that they had asthma, and 34% reported that their physical health was not good. Echoing this self-reported data, in the annual survey, 40% of school leaders reported that chronic illness was a great or moderate challenge to student learning. Recognizing the severity of health-related barriers to learning, The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) PolicyLab recommended that the District implement more optimal school nurse staffing models and supports to adequately respond to the volume and complexity of our students' health needs. Over the past three years, the District has had a year-end nurse vacancy rate of between 3% and 6%.

**Why this strategy?** The presence of a full-time school nurse is associated with reduced absenteeism and missed class time, particularly for students with asthma, students living in poverty, and African-American students. Emerging research shows that when in-person nurses are not available, telehealth services can be a valuable resource for expanding access to health services, which can result in better management of chronic conditions, improved education, reduced travel time and expenses, and fewer absences from school and work.

**Aligns with:** Guardrails 1 and 4; Transition Team Recommendations

## 1.10 Implement Breakfast After the Bell at all schools and offer sufficient, healthy, and appetizing food during appropriate meal times to all students.

**Why is this urgent?** Food-insecure children are more likely to have lower grades and test scores and to experience developmental delays, social-emotional and behavioral problems, and suspensions. District families report double the rate of food insecurity compared to state and national averages. On the annual survey, 41% of principals identified food insecurity as a great or moderate challenge to student learning. During Listening and Learning sessions, students, school staff, families, and community members shared that hunger is a challenge to student learning, and that not all District students have equitable access to healthy and appetizing school food. Students also noted that access to appetizing food promotes regular student attendance. On the annual survey, 48% of students disagreed that their school lunch tastes good and 44% disagreed that they got enough food to fill them up. Although all schools serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to families, participation varies due to meal timing and student perceptions of food quality and taste. District research found that students encounter barriers to getting to school early enough to access free school breakfast prior to the start of school. Additionally, lunch schedules vary from as early as 9:30am to as late as 1:30pm. When breakfast and lunch intervals are not aligned well, this can mean that students are hungry while in class.

**Why this strategy?** There are positive associations between school meal programs, including Breakfast After the Bell, and improved diet quality and food security, increased academic performance and attendance (particularly for food-insecure or malnourished students). District research found increased breakfast participation rates in schools with Breakfast After the Bell programs. Additionally, principals and school staff believe that offering popular items, such as fresh fruit and hot breakfast foods (e.g., egg sandwiches) increases breakfast participation. Ensuring that students have adequate time to eat at appropriate times during the school day means they have the energy needed to focus on learning.

**Aligns with:** Guardrails 1 and 4

1.11 Implement recess supervised by trained staff and aligned to national best practices for all K-8 students.

**Why is this urgent?** Bullying and other negative social behaviors are most likely to occur during unstructured time in the school day, such as recess. On the annual survey, about one-third of students reported being bullied at school, and nearly 75% of students reported that students in their school are bullied. Students who are bullied are more likely to be anxious, depressed, and have a harder time focusing on school. During Listening and Learning sessions, students cited bullying and negative relationships with peers as barriers to regular student attendance.

**Why this strategy?** High-quality recess requires a safe physical space, adult supervision, and planning and organization of play activities. Schools implementing supervised recess models show improvements in overall safety, reductions in bullying, and decreased behavioral disruptions in class. Findings from a District evaluation of Playworks TeamUp, one such model of supervised recess, indicate that school staff have largely positive feedback, but need additional staff capacity to implement with fidelity.

**Aligns with:** Guardrails 1 and 4



# PRIORITY AREA 2

## Partner with families and community

To live our core values of trust and collaboration, the District must foster trusting relationships with students, families, staff, and the entire Philadelphia community through transparent communication and frequent opportunities for partnership. Students, families, and staff expect the District to provide necessary information in an accessible and timely manner and to offer consistent opportunities for engagement to join in our work. Community partners expect clarity, consistency, and access to information to support relationships between the District and the Philadelphia community.

Forging strong partnerships and creating clear collaborative structures between the District and our broader community will enable us all to collectively support accelerated student achievement. Through the implementation of these Strategic Actions, families, students, staff, and community members will have greater access to information and timely responses, expanded access to enriching and well-rounded co-curricular opportunities, and new structures for collaboration with the Superintendent and District as a whole.

## Strategic Actions

### **2.1 Launch a two-way communications system with multilingual capabilities to improve communications with families and the community.**

### **2.2 Update the District and school websites.**

**Why is this urgent?** Survey data shows that stakeholders believe one of Dr. Watlington's first priorities should be communication and engagement. During Listening and Learning sessions, families voiced that trying to communicate with the District can be frustrating because it is unclear who to contact about their concerns, and issues are not always addressed in a timely manner. When feedback is sought, it often feels performative or like "lip service" rather than a true opportunity to provide meaningful input. Stakeholders believe there is a lack of transparent communication, particularly around logistics, schedule changes, capital project planning, and work order processes, which makes planning difficult for families and school leaders. Similarly, members of the Violence Impacting Schools working group identified shortcomings in the way the District communicates about community safety and violent incidents. This results in a lack of trust between families and the District. District students and their families speak a variety of languages, and it is critical that systems of communication are accessible to all families in their preferred language.

**Why these strategies?** Clear and open communication is critical for establishing trusting relationships between families and schools, which fosters greater engagement. Students with engaged parents and guardians are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, have better social skills, and graduate and go on to postsecondary education. Connecting students, families, and schools with community assets can promote student achievement, expand access to health and wellness resources, and help break the cycle of poverty.

**Aligns with:** Guardrail 3; Transition Team Recommendations

### **2.3 Launch a Superintendent's parent and guardian advisory group that reflects our diversity, including parents and guardians of underserved students, students with disabilities, and English Learners.**

### **2.4 Launch a Superintendent's teacher advisory group.**

### **2.5 Launch a Superintendent's principal advisory group.**

## 2.6 Relaunch a Superintendent's student advisory group.

## 2.7 Launch a Superintendent's advisory group with external stakeholders and community partners.

**Why is this urgent?** During Listening and Learning sessions, parents and guardians, teachers, principals, students, and community members shared that they want more opportunities to have their opinions and experiences heard and considered in decision-making. Stakeholders also feel that decisions made by the Central Office sometimes feel abrupt and arbitrary, and that decisions should be made based on shared values. On the annual survey, only 11% of teachers strongly agreed that they feel respected by the District, and only 22% of principals strongly agreed that they feel respected by the District

**Why these strategies?** A collaborative decision-making model means that families, students, and school staff are included in the decision-making processes that directly impact their work and learning. This structure enhances the ability of schools to respond to problems and opportunities, improves relationships between leaders and key stakeholders, increases satisfaction and morale, facilitates better decision making by eliciting more viewpoints, and helps reduce stress and burnout. School-community partnerships can enable the expansion of services and resources for students, and are often most effective when community partners and districts have a strong relationship based on collaboration and respect.

**Aligns with:** Guardrail 3; Transition Team Recommendations

## 2.8 Create a database of all District partnerships, their alignment to the strategic plan, and impact.

**Why is this urgent?** Schools reported a total of 1,646 external support programs in 2019-20, provided by 1,050 organizations, with an average of 15 programs per school. The data suggests that current school partnerships are not equitably distributed among schools, nor are they always meeting the critical needs of schools. During Listening and Learning sessions, stakeholders discussed how community partnerships are a key way to bring in more resources; however, there is a need to improve coordination between the District, schools, and community partners. Additionally, stakeholders shared significant concerns about managing partnerships and explained that they do not have the capacity to manage all the available partnerships that could benefit their students and communities. Thirty-two schools reported that they had a partnerships coordinator. School leaders reported that limited staff capacity to establish and/or coordinate partner programs was a challenge to partnership development.

**Why this strategy?** Improving schools involves addressing the social and economic challenges that students and their families face. Building partnerships strengthens the capacity of schools to respond to student needs. Partnerships can enhance students' social, emotional, and intellectual development. However, with limited time and numerous needs, it is the responsibility of the District to ensure that partnerships are properly aligned to the needs of schools and they are meeting the agreed upon expectations in terms of operations and outcomes.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

## 2.9 Relaunch Parent University to provide resources and support to families and community.

**Why is this urgent?** Census data shows that almost 22% of Philadelphians are living below the poverty line, 13% do not have a high school diploma, and only 33% have a bachelor's degree or higher. This speaks to the need for adult education programming. Additionally, Listening and Learning feedback highlighted that there is a lack of trust between families and the District; engaging parents and guardians in workshops and training is a way to increase engagement, which can help to build positive relationships and repair trust.

**Why this strategy?** Participation in adult education programming increases access to the knowledge and skills that enable social mobility and increased democratic participation. Furthermore, a study found that districts play an important role in providing adult education, as they are responsible for providing over half of the adult education programming available across the nation. Not only can participating in a parent university have positive outcomes for parents and guardians, but research has found that students can benefit when their parents and guardians have the skills and resources to be engaged in their education.

**Aligns with:** Guardrails 1 and 3

## 2.10 Establish a parent ambassador role (with paid stipends).

**Why is this urgent?** During Listening and Learning sessions, parents and guardians expressed how they have lost trust in the District and are often frustrated by the lack of communication about important aspects of their child's education. Currently, schools share Family



Liaisons that report to the Office of Family and Community Engagement. A way to improve positive relationships with parents and guardians and improve communication is to ensure that all schools have a dedicated liaison that can focus on a single school community and connect parents and guardians with their schools and the District.

**Why this strategy?** Parent ambassadors are members of the school community that have established relationships with parents and guardians. As part of a larger initiative to increase parent/guardian engagement with schools, parent ambassadors can be a way to build parent/guardian networks across school communities as well as spread the word about district-provided support and resources for parents and guardians.

**Aligns with:** Guardrails 1 and 3

2.11 Evaluate and replicate successful Community School models.

**Why is this urgent?** Community Schools provide resources that can address many of the barriers that our students and families face. In addition to providing students with wrap-around services, such as health centers, before and after school activities, and social and employment services, community schools serve to enrich students’ academic experiences by connecting them with mentoring, internships, and employment opportunities. These services were all mentioned as desirable to help meet the needs of our students and their families during Listening and Learning sessions.

**Why this strategy?** National research has shown that students who attend community schools have increased access to health care and higher graduation rates. A study of the Community School Initiative in Philadelphia during its first year found that there were some system level challenges to implementation at the school level, but stakeholders were satisfied with the initiative. Now that the Community School Initiative is in its sixth year, an updated evaluation would provide additional information about how community schools in Philadelphia are benefiting students and families, and how to replicate successful practices across community school sites.

**Aligns with:** All Goals, Guardrails 1 and 3



# PRIORITY AREA 3

## Accelerate academic achievement

The District's primary goal is to provide the learning environments and supports necessary for all students to develop foundational academic skills and graduate college and career ready. We also know that high-quality, well-supported teachers and principals are imperative to our students' academic achievement, especially in math, English Language Arts, and science. As such, we must provide all schools with rigorous, standards-aligned, culturally relevant curricula and prepare all leaders and educators to use high-quality and inclusive instructional tools. Further, we can expand equitable access to various course offerings that fit our students' interests and goals, and create opportunities for students to receive additional support that meets their unique learning needs. When these Strategic Actions are implemented, all students will attend schools that enable them to succeed.

## Strategic Actions

### 3.1 Inventory and improve access to high quality Pre-K programs for underserved populations.

**Why is this urgent?** According to Philadelphia's Commission on Universal Pre-Kindergarten only 1 in 3 of Philadelphia's three- and four-year olds has access to affordable, quality Pre-K. According to Pre-K for PA, 37% of eligible children in Philadelphia do not have access to high-quality, publicly funded Pre-K.

**Why this strategy?** Decades of research suggest several immediate benefits related to participation in high quality Pre-K, including increases in reading readiness and critical thinking, improved self-control and social skills, and higher classroom confidence. Recent research finds that students who participated in high quality Pre-K are more likely to enroll in advanced high school coursework, attend school regularly, and graduate on time. High quality Pre-K programs are defined by those that are aligned with rigorous and culturally appropriate learning standards, use a strong curriculum, employ highly trained teachers, provide adequate professional development, maintain a low child-staff ratio, screen and refer students for health related barriers to learning, and have a teacher observation and feedback system in place.

**Aligns with:** Goals 1-3

### 3.2 Purchase and implement standards-aligned core instructional resources for math (in partnership with teachers, school leaders, and parents and guardians).

### 3.3 Purchase and implement standards-aligned core instructional resources for English Language Arts (ELA), with a focus on the Science of Reading (in partnership with teachers, school leaders, and parents and guardians).

### 3.4 Purchase and implement standards-aligned core instructional resources for science (in partnership with teachers, school leaders, and parents and guardians).

**Why is this urgent?** In 2021-22, 17% of grade 3-12 students were proficient or advanced in math on the end-of-year state standardized assessments (PSSA Math and Keystone Algebra 1 exams); 36% of grade 3-12 students were proficient or advanced in ELA on the state end-of-year standardized assessments (PSSA ELA and Keystone Literature exams); and 33% of grade 4 and 8-12 students were proficient or advanced in science on the state end-of-year standardized assessments (PSSA Science and Keystone Biology exams). Teachers and school leaders have voiced that clear and consistent curricular resources are needed across schools. A curriculum audit also raised the need for a district-wide academic program that is aligned to Common Core standards and that is clearly based on a theory of action about how to improve student achievement.

**Why these strategies?** The use of a rigorous curriculum in combination with high quality materials can positively impact the quality of classroom instruction and student achievement.

Number competency in Kindergarten and first grade strongly and significantly predict later math achievement, and in some cases reading achievement, even when controlling for differences in other academic areas, behavior, cognitive development, family characteristics, and home environment. Students who are not skilled readers by the end of third grade are unlikely to graduate high school. Structured Literacy, based on the Science of Reading, is the most effective approach to teaching students to learn to read. Research suggests the majority of students in general education classrooms, and nearly all students with specialized needs, benefit from this approach to literacy. Research has shown that students who participate in design-based or project-based science curricular programming had more developed higher order thinking skills (critical thinking, problem solving, and application) and higher proficiency levels on the state science assessment than their peers who participated in traditional science courses. This strategy will ensure we use these research-based approaches to teaching math, reading, and science.

**Aligns with:** Goals 1-4; Transition Team Recommendations

### 3.5 Pilot evidence-based high impact tutoring in 6 to 8 schools.

**Why is this urgent?** The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on student achievement; one study estimates that students lost four months of learning by the end of the 2020-21 school year. Many District students are not meeting grade level standards, and require opportunities for accelerated learning to catch up.

**Why this strategy?** High impact tutoring can be effective at advancing student achievement when delivered with fidelity. Important aspects to consider when selecting a tutoring approach are when and how often the tutoring occurs, the quality of the materials used, and the extent to which tutors receive the necessary training and support. A study of Saga Education by the University of Chicago found that students who received tutoring with fidelity learned up to 2.5 years worth of math in one year.

**Aligns with:** Goals 1-3

### 3.6 Pilot a year-round and extended-day school calendar in up to 10 schools.

**Why is this urgent?** Many SDP students are not meeting grade level standards, and require opportunities for accelerated learning to catch up. During Listening and Learning sessions, students and teachers discussed wanting more opportunities to participate in programming before and after the traditional school day and highlighted the benefits of spending structured time with their peers beyond the hours of the current school day.

**Why this strategy?** Participating in high quality out-of-school time programming or extracurricular activities is tied to the improvement of a variety of outcomes for students, including math and reading achievement, physical and mental health, school attendance, promotion, graduation, college enrollment, and increased civic engagement. External research also suggests summer and after school programming can be effective in accelerating learning, provided there are small staff-to-student ratios, and adequate dosage in terms of hours. Incorporating these types of opportunities into the day-to-day school experience, rather than as “extra” or “additional” supports that students must sign up for, will likely result in similar positive effects for students.

In the United States, “year-round schooling” does not mean that students are in school for more days out of the year. Rather, the typical number of required school days, which is 180 in Pennsylvania, is spread out over the year so that there are more frequent, shorter breaks instead of having the extended summer break. For example, some schools in California that have a year-round-schooling model have a “60/20 calendar,” which means there are 60 days of instruction followed by 20 days of vacation.

Research on these types of year-round school models have found no positive effects on student achievement. Taken together, the research suggests that simply reallocating seat time across the year is not an adequate strategy for improving student achievement. Changes to the calendar must be paired with opportunities for students to participate in enriching and meaningful learning experiences that are not typically incorporated into the traditional school year due to time constraints.

**Aligns with:** Guardrail 2

### 3.7 Pilot learn to swim programs in different parts of the city in alignment with the curriculum.

**Why is this urgent?** Drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional injury death for children ages 5-14 in the United States. Black/African American and Latino urban youth report having poor swimming skills at higher rates than their white peers, putting them at greater risk of swimming related injury or death.

**Why this strategy?** When children and adults participate in swimming lessons, their risk of drowning is reduced.

**Aligns with:** Guardrails 1, 2, and 4

### **3.8 Audit and improve compliance with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and expand supports for English Learners.**

**Why is this urgent?** The special education population in the District is large and diverse. In 2022-23, more than 18,000 students are receiving specialized education supports across nine different types of programs. The District also serves a large and diverse population of English Learners (EL). In 2022-23, there were more than 20,000 EL students with over 150 different home languages. This represents an increase of 3,000 ELs over the prior school year. The EL population includes students with specialized needs, including newcomers, students with limited or interrupted formal education, and long-term English Learners.

**Why this strategy?** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act "...requires public school systems to develop appropriate Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for each child. The specific special education and related services outlined in each IEP reflect the individualized needs of each student." When districts are compliant with IEPs, students are receiving the appropriate supports for learning and are more likely to have improved outcomes. Similarly, when districts promote challenging activities with the right support for English Learners, students are more likely to achieve English proficiency and engage in grade level content.

**Aligns with:** All Goals; Transition Team Recommendations

### **3.9 Provide more support to teachers in the areas of content knowledge, student engagement, and culturally and linguistically relevant instructional practices.**

**Why is this urgent?** During Listening and Learning sessions, stakeholders voiced that there is a need for more Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion professional development and training for teachers and staff. On the annual survey, 47% of teachers said that a lack of support for teaching special education students was a challenge; 38% said lack of support for teaching English Learners was a challenge; and 70% said range of student abilities was a challenge to student learning. On the annual survey, less than half (45%) of students said that their school meets their learning needs most or all of the time.

**Why this strategy?** Research shows that special populations of students are best served when teachers are engaged with professional development that "builds educator capacity to understand how gender, race, class, language, ethnicity, and ability differences are perceived and treated in the institution and influenced by implicit bias and micromessaging." Additionally, teachers need support to use effective scaffolds to engage students in rigorous instruction; promote quality interactions, critical thinking, and discourse; use formative assessment to assess progress; and honor students' home languages, assets, and experiences in the classroom.

**Aligns with:** All Goals, Guardrail 4; Transition Team Recommendations

### **3.10 Establish a baseline standard for which courses, programs, academy models, and co-curricular opportunities will be offered in all schools (Elementary, Middle, and High School).**

**Why is this urgent?** In Listening and Learning sessions, students voiced they would like access to a wider variety of courses and electives that are more aligned with their interests, are relevant to their lives, and prepare them for their future. On the annual survey, fewer than 4 in 10 students reported that they learn interesting things in their classes most or all of the time. Stakeholders also believe that art and music classes should be available to all students each year.

Additionally, feedback was given that rigorous academic courses should be offered in all schools, not just in criteria-based schools. In the 2021-22 school year, 61% of District high schools offered Advanced Placement (AP) courses, 11% offered International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, and 43% offered dual enrollment or college level courses. Many of the new Act 158 graduation pathways also depend on these opportunities. Currently, 34 out of 130 (26%) schools that serve 8th grade students offer Algebra 1. These schools are mostly concentrated in Center City and Northeast Philadelphia.

**Why this strategy?** The intensity and quality of a student's high school curriculum is a strong predictor of bachelor's degree completion. For example, a high score on the AP final or IB final exam in any AP or IB course, or participation in dual enrollment programming, is positively correlated with college enrollment and persistence rates. Research shows that students who enter career academies are more likely to earn a diploma or General Educational Development (GED) credential, have more post-secondary opportunities, and higher wages than similar students who do not. Studies have also found that 9th Grade Academies can effectively support students' transition to, and successful completion of, 9th grade. Academies are most successful when they implement the following with fidelity: have a dedicated space in the school building for 9th grade students; have a dedicated 9th grade teaching staff with regularly scheduled time for collaboration; and a dedicated 9th grade administrator. While the District currently supports 9th Grade Academies, they are implemented with varying degrees of fidelity.



Art and music education are also key factors in the success of students in school and beyond. There is a positive relationship between involvement in the arts and increased positive non-academic behaviors, including participating in student government, volunteering, voting, decreased delinquency and drug use, increased self-esteem, and more positive interactions with peers and adults. There is some evidence that suggests that learning a foreign language promotes knowledge acquisition for students. Additionally, since many of the most competitive colleges have language requirements, all schools should offer at least two years of a foreign language in addition to Spanish and French, languages that many District students already speak as their native language.

Algebra can be a “gatekeeper” to success in advanced math and in the job market, especially in STEM-related careers. However, it is important that this strategy be accompanied by increased rigor in pre-algebra courses, as research shows that if students enroll in Algebra I before they are ready, they may end up struggling with coursework, which can decrease the likelihood that they take higher level math.

**Aligns with:** All Goals, Guardrails 2 and 4; Transition Team Recommendations

### 3.11 Develop a project team to recommend optimal middle school design, programming, and facilities.

**Why is this urgent?** According to Listening and Learning sessions with school leaders, in some cases, middle grade students are not properly prepared for the transition to high school. Specifically, leaders discussed: 1) inadequate investment in pre-algebra and literacy skills during middle school years; 2) a lack of exposure to career paths, high school options, and postsecondary opportunities; and 3) a lack of focus on preparing students for the social and operational aspects of high school.

**Why this strategy?** Research suggests that there is no significant difference in the academic performance of middle school students who attend K-8 schools and those who attend true middle schools. However, students in middle grades are more likely to fall behind academically than students in younger grades and, if not properly identified and supported, risk being off track for high school graduation. What is most important is that the school is properly resourced to: 1) respond to the specific needs of middle school students, 2) deliver an instructional program that prepares students for the rigor of high school, and 3) develop a sense of attachment and belonging.

**Aligns with:** Goals 1, 3, and 4

### 3.12 Appoint an administrator to identify, audit, and improve access for underserved students to Career and Technical Education (CTE) and building trades programs across the city in alignment with regional workforce trends.

**Why is this urgent?** In the spring of 2022, less than half (43%) of students in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs passed their occupational competency tests, assessments of whether or not their skills meet industry standards. Performance varied across schools and CTE programs. However, during Listening and Learning sessions, teachers, community members, and parents and guardians said they would like to see more CTE and internship opportunities.

**Why this strategy?** Career and Technical Education (CTE) provides students opportunities to personalize their education based on their career interests and unique learning needs. Compared to non-CTE students, CTE students are likely to graduate from high school on time, enroll in postsecondary education within two years of their expected high school graduation year, and have higher median annual earnings. Research done in the District mirrors these findings: participation in CTE is associated with higher graduation rates for students. Also, CTE students who do not meet promotion requirements in grades 10 or 11 are more likely to catch back up if they continue their CTE program. The District recently partnered with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of all CTE programs from January 2023 through July 2025. The evaluation will identify strengths, areas for improvement, and best practices for each CTE program, ensure they are in alignment with local and regional workforce demands, and replicate model programs throughout the District.

**Aligns with:** Goals 4 and 5; Transition Team Recommendations

### 3.13 Expand 9th Grade On-Track (Success Networks) to reduce dropouts and increase four year graduation rates.

**Why is this urgent?** In the spring of 2022, 29% of 9th grade students tested on grade level in ELA and 19% in math. Moreover, at the end of the 2021-22 school year, less than a third (27%) of 9th graders were firmly on track to graduate in four years. During Listening and Learning sessions, school leaders and students emphasized the importance of supporting students through the transition to high school so that they feel comfortable in a larger setting with new students and better understand academic expectations.

**Why this strategy?** School District of Philadelphia data consistently shows that 9th Grade On-Track status is linked with on-time graduation. Research from Chicago shows that 9th Grade Success Networks have increased on-time graduation rates. The District can leverage and expand a promising existing program, that is modeled off of the program in Chicago, and established through a partnership with the Neubauer Foundation.

**Aligns with:** Goal 4

### 3.14 Hire an administrator to better coordinate a District-wide dropout reduction strategy.

**Why this is urgent:** As of April 2023, over 3,600 District students in grades 7-12 dropped out of school. Not completing high school is associated with poor economic and health outcomes throughout life as well as an increased risk of incarceration.

**Why this strategy?** Many of the reasons associated with dropping out are complex and require the coordination of services across offices and providers. Supportive interventions, such as mentoring and restorative practices, can have a positive effect on attitudes about school for students, especially those who are transitioning back from a long-term placement. This is important because students returning from long-term placement are at a high risk of dropping out and benefit from intense levels of adult support and service coordination, which schools do not always have the capacity to provide.

**Aligns with:** Goal 4 and Guardrail 1

### 3.15 Launch a financial literacy module for all high schools.

**Why is this urgent?** Nearly 1 in 4 Philadelphians live below the poverty line and 12% live in deep poverty. Currently, 42 out of 73 District and Alternative schools serving students in grades 9-12 for which data is available offer a financial literacy course.

**Why this strategy?** Although the evidence is mixed, financial literacy courses may help students develop the knowledge and skills that support financial planning. Learning these skills can lead to greater financial independence, responsible decision-making, and active participation in the economy, ultimately contributing to students' overall well-being and success. However, access to wealth, not poor financial management, is the primary challenge faced by people living in poverty. The literature cautions against financial literacy approaches that attribute poverty to a gap in financial knowledge and skills rather than a system that functions to maintain wealth inequality.

**Aligns with:** Goals 4 and 5

### 3.16 Implement quarterly benchmark assessments to provide teachers, parents and guardians, and students with information about learning progress.

**Why is this urgent?** The District currently does not have a standardized benchmark assessment program. Benchmark assessments can be useful for communicating expectations for learning, planning curriculum and instruction, monitoring and evaluating instructional and/or program effectiveness, and predicting future performance. In order for benchmark assessments to fulfill these purposes, they should be aligned to the curriculum, scope and sequence, and to the Common Core Standards.

**Why this strategy?** A balanced assessment system is one that is coherent, based on a theory of action, and efficient. When these criteria are met, districts can ensure that each assessment is necessary to gather data that will help meet classroom, school, and district-level goals, and that students are not over-assessed.

**Aligns with:** All Goals

### 3.17 Reorganize learning networks to place resources closer to families and communities and to improve student outcomes.

**Why is this urgent?** The District's network structure is one of the key ways strategic support is disseminated to schools. School leaders vary greatly in their perception of District support. On the annual survey, 40% of school leaders reported that the District does not provide appropriate support for school leaders to act as talent managers; 51% reported that the District does not provide appropriate support to enable principals to act as instructional leaders; and 48% reported that the District does not provide appropriate instructional support for teachers.

**Why this strategy?** School networks should create the conditions to successfully support school leaders, centering schools as the unit of change. Effective network design can further a District’s theory of action by: 1) supporting the alignment and equitable distribution of resources to address the primary barriers to student achievement, and 2) supporting school leader autonomy and accountability. In order to achieve this ideal, the District needs to assess the assets and gaps of our current structure and reconceptualize how the network structure can best meet the needs of schools.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

3.18 Develop a “rounds model” for Central Office staff to visit schools, provide support, and debrief feedback.

**Why is this urgent?** During Listening and Learning sessions, school-based staff members shared that they want Central Office leadership to spend more time visiting schools. Over 40% of Central Office staff members indicate that they spend a majority of their time working directly with other Central Office staff members. Though not surprising or inappropriate, this finding highlights the need to facilitate contact between Central Office and school-based staff.

**Why this strategy?** Central Office site visits are an effective way for program offices to familiarize themselves with the context of each school and gather school level feedback to inform decisions. This strategy is guided by the principle that Central Office staff members can best learn about the ways in which their programs, decisions, and processes impact schools by being present in schools, developing relationships with school-based staff members, and seeing what their guidance looks like in practice.

**Aligns with:** All Goals; Transition Team Recommendations



# PRIORITY AREA 4

## Recruit and retain diverse and highly effective educators

Teachers and school leaders are the most important factor when it comes to student learning and academic growth. When educators feel supported, valued, and respected, they are more likely to stay in their roles and build strong relationships with students, which is paramount to student joy and academic achievement. Ensuring that all school staff members are well-trained and prepared for their roles allows our schools to prioritize high-quality teaching and learning, and cultivate environments that are supportive and nurturing to both students and staff.

This work requires intentional efforts to overhaul our recruitment strategies, reduce onboarding time for new hires, and implement plans to train and develop staff across all roles. Through these Strategic Actions, the District will intentionally hire and retain a workforce that reflects the demographics of our student populations, provide ongoing and relevant professional development, and create opportunities to attract and grow individuals who will serve our students well.

## Strategic Actions

### **4.1 Establish instructional leadership teams (Principal, Assistant Principal, Climate Manager, Literacy and Math School-Based Teacher Leaders, and Special Education Compliance Monitor) at every school and provide them with training and resources.**

**Why is this urgent?** During Listening and Learning sessions, stakeholders explained that good school leaders support collaboration and shared-decision making among school teams. The District's Employee Exit Survey data shows that half of teachers and instructional staff respondents who resigned for reasons under the District's control said that their supervisor's leadership/management style was a primary reason. Enhancing training and resources for school leaders and leadership teams is therefore key to ensuring that teachers feel well-supported.

**Why this strategy?** Support from school administration is one of the most important factors in teachers' decisions to stay in a school or in the profession, especially in urban, high-poverty public schools. When instructional decision-making is made by an instructional leadership team, rather than just a principal, school staff are more invested and committed to implementation. Developing principals who include teachers in decision-making and promote positive school climates may have an impact on retention.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

### **4.2 Pilot recruitment and retention incentives for teachers and principals to reduce vacancies in hard to staff schools.**

### **4.3 Appoint an administrator to audit and analyze staffing data to make recommendations to address long-term District staffing needs.**

### **4.4 Develop innovative retention approaches for hard to staff positions.**

**Why is this urgent?** Decades of research have indicated that teacher quality is among the most critical factors in student learning, as students with more effective teachers have greater gains in test scores. The ability to recruit skilled teachers, assign them to appropriate and equitable roles, and retain the most effective among them is a major factor in school effectiveness. Nationally, the most effective and highly certified teachers are less likely to be teaching in schools that serve poor and minority students. This is also the case in the District, where higher percentages of teachers with emergency certifications are teaching in the schools with the lowest levels of academic achievement and highest levels of student need.

**Why these strategies?** A single approach is not sufficient to recruit and retain high quality teachers. Hiring and performance incentives must also be combined with strong school leadership, responsive and differentiated teacher development, and incorporating teacher feedback in decision-making.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations



**4.5 Recruit more Black and Latino male teachers and principals, in partnership with colleges, universities, the Center for Black Educator Development, and the Mayor’s Commission on African American males to improve Black and Latino male student outcomes.**

**4.6 Develop a teacher preparation middle college high school in partnership with colleges, universities, and the Center for Black Educator Development.**

**4.7 Expand “Grow-Your-Own” programs for aspiring teachers and leaders with attention to historically underserved groups.**

**Why is this urgent?** Teachers of color have been found to have a positive impact on learning gains and social-emotional well-being for students of color. However, nationally, while 53% of K-12 students are students of color, only about 20% of teachers are teachers of color. In the District, 61% of instructional staff are white compared to 14% of students.

**Why these strategies?** Increasing teacher diversity within a school may enhance the well-being of teachers of color, leading to improved satisfaction and reduced turnover. Experts have recommended partnering with local teacher preparation programs, including those at minority-serving institutions, to coordinate student teaching placements and vet candidates before they graduate, and there are successful models for these approaches for hiring teachers of color, such as in the state of Minnesota.

“Grow-your-own” programs have been found to be particularly effective in recruiting teachers of color. For example, alternative teacher and principal preparation programs have proven to successfully recruit and retain teachers and leaders of color. Overall, The National Center for Educational Evaluation (NCEE) found that the percentage of teachers from Teacher Residency Programs (TRP) who remained in their starting district was 15 percentage points higher compared to non-TRP teachers. Additionally, a national study shows that the first-year attrition rate for teachers recruited from paraeducator career ladder programs is considerably lower than attrition rates of other first-year teachers.

The District’s paraprofessional to teacher pathway program has become a model program for supporting historically underrepresented groups of employees as they seek to become classroom educators in our District. There are currently 114 paraprofessionals participating in the pathway program, with more starting next school year. Sixteen are graduating and moving into teacher roles next school year. The rest are graduating between December 2023 and December 2024, and are preparing to become teachers of record in elementary PreK-4 or other professionals within the District.

The District leader residency programs have also proven successful. Since the launch of the Aspiring Principals’ Academy, the percentage of first year principals that stepped into the role from being a District assistant principal position grew from 21% in 2017-18 to 96% in 2021-22. In another program, 80% of Black men who participated were made eligible or have attained an assistant principal position for the 2023-24 school year.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

**4.8 Develop an aligned coaching and feedback model for instructional staff.**

**Why is this urgent?** On the 2021-22 annual survey, over half of teachers (54%) indicated that they rarely or never participate in professional development that involves observation and feedback. On the same survey, nearly one-third (30%) of school leaders reported that they spend five or fewer hours per week on instructional leadership activities that include observing classroom instruction and providing feedback.

**Why this strategy?** Professional development opportunities, especially those that are differentiated based on teacher needs and informed by principal observations, strongly influence teacher retention. Teacher coaching, especially coaching experiences that are tailored to the individual needs of teachers and local contexts of the schools where they work, have demonstrated positive effects on teaching and learning. Coaching cycles, including those that use recorded lessons, have also been shown to improve the achievement of students in the classrooms of novice teachers and those teachers who need to improve their practice.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

4.9 Provide ongoing professional development for non-instructional job roles.

**Why is this urgent?** Currently, the District employs 4,051 paraprofessionals, climate staff, and secretaries. These positions play a critical role in ensuring that the needs of our students and families are met. Moreover, 18% of the allotted positions remain vacant. Throughout Listening and Learning sessions, many staff members highlighted the need for additional development opportunities for non-instructional staff, particularly paraprofessionals and climate staff, to maximize their effectiveness with students and increase retention.

**Why this strategy?** Studies have found that paraprofessionals report the need for additional training in order to best support students they work with. When they receive ongoing appropriate development, paraprofessionals have positive effects on students, particularly in the areas of supporting students with disabilities and increasing reading achievement.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

4.10 Launch surveys that provide principals, Assistant Superintendents, and District leaders with feedback from their direct reports.

**Why is this urgent?** School principals are evaluated based on a self assessment and feedback from their supervisors. This feedback does not take into account the experience of teachers and additional stakeholders, which is essential to helping leaders develop a better understanding of the ways in which they can improve their practice and rethink their current behaviors. Feedback from teachers and stakeholders is also helpful in developing individualized support plans to speak to specific needs of school leaders as identified by those who they work with most. While the *Philly School Experience Survey* (PSES) for teachers includes a leadership topic, the feedback is not specific to individual leaders, there is no formal mechanism for school leaders to regularly review and reflect on this feedback. Central Office employees do not take the PSES and have no mechanism to provide feedback to their supervisors. The lack of evaluations for Central Office leaders has been highlighted by stakeholders as a major barrier to Central Office effectiveness.

**Why this strategy?** Schools with effective school leaders see higher teacher retention rates than those with less effective leaders. High performing teachers, in particular, are more likely to stay at a school with an effective school leader. One way to better understand school leader effectiveness is through a 360 feedback process, which includes the perceptions of teachers. Because teachers' decisions to stay or leave a school is governed to a large extent by their relationship with their school leader, incorporating teacher perceptions in school leader evaluation systems can promote teacher retention. In regards to Central Office leadership, well designed surveys that solicit feedback about leaders in the workplace are useful tools for improving productivity and office culture.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails



# PRIORITY AREA 5

## Deliver efficient, high-quality, cost-effective operations

To achieve our goals as a District and to drive progress toward accelerated student achievement, we must have productive and equitable operations supported by high-functioning systems, clear prioritization, and strong accountability. It is essential that we cultivate a high-performing, collaborative, and results-oriented culture that supports school leadership teams as the unit of change. When budgeting, staffing, feedback cycles, and data systems are efficient, transparent, and aligned, all other aspects of the District can excel. These Strategic Actions address gaps in our current system and will enable the District to better provide direct support to schools, create a structured approach for implementing this Strategic Plan with fidelity, and support alignment through improved processes for hiring, budgeting, data use, and evaluations.

### Strategic Actions

#### 5.1 Establish a system-wide project management culture to improve organizational coherence, execute the strategic plan, and develop a collaborative, trusted, and results-oriented culture.

**Why is this urgent?** Selecting an evidence-based policy, practice, or intervention is only the first step toward achieving the intended outcomes. Identifying and executing a consistent implementation plan that incorporates feedback and buy-in from stakeholders across the organization is a critical next step in the process that currently needs improvement.

**Why this strategy?** Using implementation science and a continuous improvement cycle to coherently execute the actions of the strategic plan can improve the likelihood of implementing with fidelity and seeing the desired outcomes more quickly. This will also require a strong culture of collaborative project management to solve problems and promote a shared understanding of the actions needed and timelines that must be met to reach the desired outcomes.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

#### 5.2 Use Council of the Great City Schools Central Office structure audit recommendations to enhance the District organizational structure.

**Why is this urgent?** Research suggests that the most critical action that districts can take to improve schools is to organize Central Office staff time and workflow around the needs of schools and school leaders. This requires all Central Office staff to understand how their work connects to creating the conditions necessary for effective teaching and learning. During the Listening and Learning Tour, District staff shared that Central Office departments are currently too siloed and disconnected. Offices too often do not seem to communicate or coordinate well with one another or with schools.

**Why this strategy?** The Council of the Great City Schools, an organization tasked with convening, guiding, and supporting improvement of 78 the nation's largest school districts, is completing an audit of the District's internal structure, capacity, and areas of focus. Results are forthcoming and will be used to guide next steps in improving the District's organizational structure in services of maximizing services to schools and students.

**Aligns with:** n/a

#### 5.3 Implement a streamlined onboarding process to improve hiring timelines.

**Why is this urgent?** During Listening and Learning sessions, leaders described a need to reexamine how we attract teachers and backfill positions with a greater sense of urgency. School leaders also said that staff burnout is the result of staff vacancies and substitute shortages, which creates additional challenges for the remaining teachers in the building.

**Why this strategy?** Our current hiring process requires a timeline that does not meet the urgent need of schools to be fully staffed and able to provide students with a quality education. The length of the hiring process and the resulting disruptions of late hiring may lead to hiring lower quality candidates, insufficient time to onboard and develop teachers, less effective teachers in high-need classrooms, and reductions in student achievement. Reducing the length of vacancies would also likely improve the attendance and retention of staff.

**Aligns with:** Transition Team Recommendations

#### 5.4 Develop succession plans at all levels of the organization.

**Why is this urgent?** Turnover in senior leadership at the District is an ongoing concern and has increased in recent years. In addition to turnover, staff members may have long-term approved leave time, such as parental or medical leaves. Without a succession plan, the continuity of operations is disrupted because institutional knowledge and memory or authority to perform certain functions are not shared.

**Why this strategy?** Turnover in districts, especially turnover of school and district leaders, can negatively impact student outcomes. Succession planning is an important feature of organizational stability, particularly in high turnover sectors, and can promote a smooth transition of talent when necessary. Succession planning requires identifying talent who can step into critical roles immediately and ensuring they have the institutional knowledge and development necessary to do so efficiently and effectively. Yet, succession planning is not the norm in education, nor have many districts strategically embraced the concept. Without careful planning for transitions, districts fall into the trap of simply replacing key staff members without the essential overlap and mentoring necessary to ensure more immediate efficacy.

**Aligns with:** n/a

#### 5.5 Develop a project team to audit and make recommendations for student remote learning and staff remote work.

**Why is this urgent?** Time is a precious resource. During Listening and Learning sessions, school leaders and students discussed the need for a more flexible approach to schooling that accommodates the differing needs of students, especially the need to complete high school while meeting competing economic demands. Leaders and students emphasized that a “one size fits all” approach to education is archaic and is not serving many students, instead forcing them to decide between work, family, and school obligations. Staff members shared similar needs for flexibility, noting that workplace flexibility is critical in attracting and retaining high quality Central Office employees, particularly those who could have workplace flexibility in similar positions in the private sector. Stakeholders also explained that allowing hybrid work ensures retention of employees with key institutional knowledge and demonstrates trust between employees.

**Why this strategy?** Schools across the country are exploring and experimenting with innovative approaches to teaching and learning, especially after extended periods of virtual education during the COVID-19 pandemic. These alternatives include competency-based education, experiential learning, online and blended learning, and flexible scheduling. All of these alternatives seek to prioritize the student experience, promote an individualized instructional approach, and focus on mastery of knowledge and skills rather than seat time. Although extensive research points to the ways in which remote work increases productivity and employee satisfaction, wellbeing, and retention, especially for women with children, particular challenges exist when applying this concept to the education sector. The District has been experimenting with hybrid options for Central Office staff members but has yet to step back and identify the best practices for making hybrid work most productive in the educational setting.

**Aligns with:** All Goals

#### 5.6 Develop a performance evaluation system for all Central Office staff.

**Why is this urgent?** Stakeholders describe inconsistent effectiveness and competence across departments in Central Office, yet there is no evaluation system in place to determine to what extent Central Office staff members are meeting the expectations of their role in alignment with achieving our Goals and Guardrails.

**Why this strategy?** Central Office performance reviews can be an important way to “define expectations, enhance communication, and prioritize district goals.” Effective evaluation systems can also be useful tools for promoting continuous improvement.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

#### 5.7 Launch an annual school leaders survey to provide feedback about Central Office operations.

**Why is this urgent?** According to the findings from Listening and Learning sessions, many aspects of Central Office operations were viewed as needing improvement. Respondents said that some departments have good leadership, delegate and prioritize well, and work well with schools. However, other departments were seen as needing better leadership or better staffing to function effectively.

**Why this strategy?** Districts with improved student outcomes have successfully pivoted Central Office duties from monitoring and compliance to actively and collaboratively supporting schools. One of the primary practices of districts who have made this change was the creation of a culture that establishes schools as the client of the central office and ensures that staff members have the mindsets, skills, and professional development to appropriately support schools.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations



### 5.8 Extend the operating budget development timeline and evidence-based budgeting practices to improve collaboration and transparency.

**Why is this urgent?** During Listening and Learning sessions, stakeholders described wanting more input on how resources are allocated, and more consistency and predictability in the budgeting process to support school planning. Currently, there is a mismatch between the timeline for budgeting and other critical processes such as finalizing the annual school plan.

**Why this strategy?** Research suggests that traditional budget processes do not ensure that funding decisions are aligned to implementing strategies that are most likely to move the needle on key performance indicators. An evidence-based budgeting process requires that funding requests be aligned to the organization’s mission and strategy. When possible, funding requests should also be supported by internal or external evidence of effectiveness.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

### 5.9 Review the school selection process annually and implement national best practices.

**Why is this urgent?** During the Listening and Learning sessions, stakeholders explained that they feel that the current school selection process is not equitable. School counselors, families, and students have expressed frustration navigating the application and enrollment process, and wish for better clarity and communication from the District.

**Why this strategy?** Over the past decade, large urban districts, including Boston, New York, and Chicago, have revisited and reformed the process by which they determine which students are eligible and admitted to criteria based high schools

**Aligns with:** Guardrail 4; Transition Team Recommendations

### 5.10 Recruit executive(s) on loan to advise the Superintendent and Chief Operating Officer on facility challenges and operational efficiency.

**Why is this urgent?** Facility challenges continue to plague the District; hundreds of District-operated school buildings have asbestos containing materials, many have notable lead issues, and over a hundred lack adequate air conditioning. These challenges often force schools to close early or entirely, impacting student and staff wellness and learning.

**Why this strategy?** Literature from other fields suggest that advisory boards can have positive impacts on organizations, especially when those selected to advise have industry experience that speaks to the specific needs of the organization. By engaging with industry leaders, organizations can build their understanding of areas that are critical to the success of their mission and avoid pitfalls by relying on the knowledge of experienced professionals. Additionally, workplace coaching can have positive impacts on the performance of an organization by impacting a leader’s knowledge and confidence.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

### 5.11 Provide the staffing, resources, and training necessary to meet school cleanliness standards.

**Why is this urgent?** On the annual survey, less than 30% of students indicated that their building was clean, and only 35% of students indicated that their building was in good condition. Findings from Listening and Learning sessions echoed concerns that schools are not clean and facilities are not properly maintained. Currently, 1 in 10 custodial positions is vacant.

**Why this strategy?** School cleanliness affects school climate, attendance, and achievement, and multiple studies have shown there is a direct connection between custodial staffing and building conditions. Maintaining environmentally safe and clean facilities also helps reduce student absences and teacher sick days.

**Aligns with:** Guardrail 1

5.12 Benchmark District performance against other large urban districts, utilizing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) from the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) in: Academics, Finance, Procurement, Human Resources, Information Technology, and Operations.

**Why is this urgent?** The role of the Central Office in ensuring that data is reliable and useful is imperative to the success of schools. Beyond collection and provision of data, effective data use by schools requires that the Central Office models best practices of data use, communicates expectations for and supports data use across the system, and convenes critical conversations that center on performance data. According to the annual survey, there is variation in the extent to which school leaders use data to make decisions.

**Why this strategy?** Developing a data strategy is an essential foundational activity. There is currently no indicator of how effectively Central Office staff are using data to make decisions, nor is there a clear expectation of how data is used across the Central Office. Research indicates that access to reliable data and professional development on the use of evidence-based decision making protocols, such as the Team Initiated Problem Solving process, can improve teams' ability to use data effectively, implement actions and interventions aimed at areas of concern, and improve student outcomes. It is imperative to start with a focused set of Key Performance Indicators that we can benchmark against other districts nationally.

**Aligns with:** All Goals and Guardrails

## Supporting Research for Priority Area 1: Improve safety and well-being (physical, social-emotional, and environmental)

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