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New Superintendent Donna M. Hargens | JCPS 90-day plan is just a first step

Map for schools has five goals

*By Donna M. Hargens
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As a new resident of Louisville, I've been struck by the fact that everyone — from state legislators to grocery shoppers in the checkout line — has a passionate opinion about Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS). The opinions are not always positive, but it's a positive sign that they're so passionate.

The abundance of strong opinions shows that all members of our community — even people who don't have children or whose children have already graduated — genuinely and deeply care about the quality of education that our students receive and always stand ready to advocate for their best interest. Even when the opinions are negative, even when they're harsh, I truly believe that people ultimately are rooting for JCPS to succeed.

So how are we going to do it? How will we establish a positive climate for continuous improvement at every school in the district?

As a first step, I've developed a 90-day plan that includes three key themes:

Assess the needs of students and schools as well as the performance of the district.

Initiate a long-range planning process to achieve a unified vision.

Take immediate, short-term actions on the priorities that must be addressed immediately.

The plan also includes five priority goals: student achievement; teamwork; community engagement; retaining, recruiting, and training high-quality employees; and fiscal and organizational accountability.

Goal 1: Focus on student achievement.

JCPS will thoroughly analyze the quality indicators for student achievement, data from under-performing schools and achievement gaps. We'll determine a course of action for under-performing schools and create a schedule to regularly review their status.

We'll also methodically assess our current approach to continuous improvement and determine how the district and our schools answer three essential questions:

What are students expected to learn?

The Kentucky Core Academic Standards, which are being implemented this year in math and English/language arts, provide a clear answer to this question. The standards specify what students should learn at each grade level.

Have students learned what they're expected to learn?

Teachers must be able to answer this question throughout the learning process — not just at the end of a course or the end of the school year.

What do you do differently if students haven't learned what they're expected to learn — or if they have learned it?

Systems and structures must be in place to provide extra support for students who need it and to help students move to the next level when they master the material.

Our focus on student achievement also will include a Curriculum Management Audit by Phi Delta Kappa International, a professional association for educators. It offers a unique review process that assesses how districts develop, teach and evaluate their curricula. Other large urban districts that have used their audit process effectively include not only my former district, Wake County Public Schools in North Carolina, but also school systems in St. Louis, Minneapolis, Seattle, Baltimore and Philadelphia.

We also will schedule Jefferson County Board of Education work sessions on key topics related to student achievement, and we'll assess results of the current student assignment plan and consider recommendations for improvement.

Goal 2: Develop a unified governance team.

The board and I will work as a cohesive leadership team with a focus on student achievement, and the 90-day plan will become a stepping-stone to much broader districtwide strategic plan that I will develop in conjunction with board members.

We'll also review and revise — or affirm — our mission, vision, core beliefs, goals and objectives; and my staff will develop communication protocols to ensure that board members always have all the information that they need to make decisions.

Goal 3: Engage the community.

JCPS will create a positive climate focused on high expectations for student achievement and continuous improvement. We'll develop a consistent message and establish positive relationships and open, responsive communication with school-based staff, district staff, parents, students and community members.

I'll meet not only with principals and their staffs but also with the state policy makers and community and business leaders. By the third month, I plan to conduct regular press briefings/virtual town hall meetings and hold a superintendent's summit to engage stakeholders in discussions about key issues.

Goal 4: Retain, recruit and train high-quality employees.

We'll assess our current recruiting systems to ensure a structure is in place to secure a high-quality and diverse workforce. We'll also review current teacher and principal evaluation systems as well as our professional-development offerings and the way they're delivered.

Goal 5: Assess systems for fiscal and organizational accountability and effectiveness.

JCPS will create a framework for data reviews for each department, and we'll begin these review sessions within the 90 days. We also will establish a system for program evaluations that includes detailed cost/benefit analyses.

An external review will help us make sure our organizational structure is efficient, purposeful and accountable. We'll build structures for transparent accountability and establish key quality indicators for schools and districts. I'll issue a district status report at the end of the first 90 days and establish a

structure for ongoing quarterly progress reports to the board.

Obviously, my plan includes a significant number of goals and there will be many challenges to meeting them in just three months, but at JCPS we're about action, not excuses. We're about striving for excellence, not just getting by. We're about critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and meeting community needs. We're not about avoiding scrutiny or hard work — or shying away from negative opinions.

Our community has high expectations for our students. We do, too. And we need your help so our students can reach their full potential. We need your commitment, your advice and your encouragement. Let's get to work.

Donna M. Hargens, Ed.D., is superintendent of the Jefferson County Public Schools.
