Student Opportunity Act Plan

Ayer-Shirley

# Commitment 1: Focusing on Student Subgroups

*Student subgroups requiring focused support to ensure all students achieve at high levels in school and are successfully prepared for life.*

* Students with disabilities
* Low income/economically disadvantaged students
* High Needs students (defined as any student who is economically disadvantaged, has a disability, or is an English learner/former English learner)

*The rationale for selecting these student subgroups.*

Ayer Shirley Regional School District (ASRSD) is focusing on the following subgroups: High Needs (HN), Students with Disabilities (SWD), Economically Disadvantaged (ED).

In alignment with the recently developed 2019-2022 District Strategic Plan, the Ayer Shirley Regional School District (ASRSD) is committed to ensuring every student makes academic progress through deeper learning and mastery of grade level learning standards as promulgated by the MA Department of Secondary and Elementary Education.

In reviewing our achievement data, chronic absenteeism, graduation rates, and drop-out rates, ASRSD has identified an achievement gap in our subgroup populations. In addition to being identified as a Title 1 district, a more detailed analysis of our SWD population indicates that a large percentage of these students are also economically disadvantaged. The correlation between these two data sets is very concerning for us, and has served as a focus area for our strategic planning over the past year. Specifically, two of our strategic objectives (i.e., Teaching All Students and Social Emotional Learning (SEL)) directly target our district needs in these areas.

Since we are a small district, with fewer than 1800 students, we often do not reach minimum thresholds for subgroups to be considered in state reporting. A review of our state level data at our high school may be consolidated under a "High Needs" (HN) category, whereas data at middle and elementary levels may provide more detail about particular subgroups. From an analysis of 2019 achievement data, English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics (Math) achievement data for our high needs subgroups at the high school and elementary level are low relative to meeting targets. Grade 10 students earned 0 points toward achievement targets in ELA and Math, and an elementary school earned no points. This gap is further demonstrated when we look at our SWD and our ED populations. The two elementary schools earned 0 points for ELA achievement (ED) and one point for ELA achievement (SWD).

From 2018 to 2019 achievement levels in these subgroups at the Middle School earned nearly all points for meeting targets for these subgroups. We are very pleased with our Middle School data and want to replicate this level of success across the district. It is important to note however, in 2018 the Middle School ranked in the 24th percentile and in 2019 increased this ranking by 13%.

Performance as measured by other accountability measures reveals a performance gap for our SWD and ED. Chronic Absenteeism data for our HN subgroup is very high in our secondary schools. At the high school, the absenteeism rate increased from 24.5% in 2018 to 29.9% in 2019. Although our rate at the middle school has decreased during this time from 22.8% to 16.1%, the rate still remains high relative to other middle schools. Our chronic absenteeism rate for our SWD is calculated for our middle school and one elementary school. While this has decreased during the same time period (i.e., MS 24.6% to 19.5%, Page Hilltop Elementary 11.7% to 7.1%), the rate is still significantly higher than where we would expect it to be, as it is indicative of a large percentage of students who are not connected to school and as a result their achievement gaps continue to grow.

While our high school four-year graduation rate has been reasonably consistent over the past several years for all students with rates near 92%, we have noted that there is a significant gap when comparing our subgroups SWD, ED, and HN. From 2017 to 2019, our average four-year graduation rate for SWD is 85.1%; for ED is 83.1%; for HN is 86%; for African American (AA) is 85.2%; and for Hispanic (H) is 95.8%.

Similarly, our dropout rate for all students over the past several years has been steadily improving, with a decrease from 2016 to 2019 from 2.2% to 0.5%. However, over the same time period, the dropout rate for our subgroups has been much higher. Our average dropout rates have been 3.8% for SWD; 2.4% for ED; 2.4% for HN; 1.0% for AA; and 0.9% for H.

Enrollment by race in the district for 2021 is as follows: African American 3.8%, Asian 2.9%, Hispanic 11.2%, Multi Race (nonhispanic) 5.6%, White 75.5%. The enrollment by race and ethnicity has been reasonably consistent over the past several years.

We are focused on these subgroups and improving our Tier I instruction in the academic and social emotional domains. From the research pertaining to students who are economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities, and high needs, a review of quantitative and qualitative data from annual achievement data, district-created parent and student surveys, the annual VOCAL Survey, and student advisory groups, it is clear that the social and emotional (SEL) needs of students across the district are very high. For the subgroups we've identified in particular at the high school level, students and their families need additional support regarding college planning, accessing financial assistance, career readiness, and other factors critical to the college admission process. This is critical, particularly for students who are first generation college students who rely most heavily on the school to support this process.

**Commitment 2: Using Evidence-Based Programs to Close Gaps**

ASRSD proposes to allocate SOA funding to supplement total funding for a Director of Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI) and School Counseling.

The department lacks synergy, a coherent PreK-12 vision and mission, and early intervention tools to support the significant increase of students on the Autism spectrum requiring services at the Preschool level. Individually, we have capable and competent School Counselors. However, effective leadership is needed to establish a common purpose, a coherent structure to support all students, and close achievement gaps. The purpose of a school counselor is to remove and/or reduce barriers to learning so that all students can learn and be successful academically. In order to achieve that, there must be a shared commitment to the whole child and the family system of which they are a part. The School Counseling Department needs a leader who will inspire them to achieve their fullest potential, individually and collectively.

The Director position is a combined position, focused on DEI, SEL and School Counseling. As such, the Director will collaborate with administration to coordinate the development, implementation and evaluation of diversity and equity activities, programs, and services in the district. The director will conduct an audit of current practices to identify equity gaps in our practices and work with leadership to address the gaps. This director will lead the district's school counseling department to create synergy and coordination of counseling services and the work around equity and diversity work within the integration of social-emotional learning in all classrooms across the district. The successful candidate will have the opportunity to create the vision, systems, and structures to support the district's focus on college and career readiness and social emotional learning.

ASRSD has been without a Director of School Counseling since its regionalization and prior to when Ayer & Shirley were separate districts. This has impacted our ability to effectively deliver Tier 1 and 2 SEL services and support for all of our students, individual and group counseling, and parent educational support (especially at the high school level). It has impacted our ability to develop a clear mission and vision for our school counselors, which inevitably impacts our neediest students most. It has impacted our ability to be a truly anti-racist district. It has significantly impacted our ability to provide counseling services to all students in a coherent, systemic, and effective school counseling model. The lack of clear and consistent support for SEL over the past year, has had a particularly significant impact on the performance of our high needs population, most notably our SWD, high needs, and ED.

Over the past year, we have placed an emphasis on SEL in our school district. In addition to professional development for all teachers and paraprofessionals to integrate SEL strategies during the course of regular instruction, we have begun the implementation of a variety of SEL strategies in each of our schools including:

* Implementation of an SEL curriculum at the elementary school (i.e., Second Step) Installation of sensory paths at each elementary school
* Use of a weekly advisory structure at the middle school and high school
* Implementation of comprehensive, Tier 1 developmental school counseling curricula at each school including these domains: Personal/Social and/or Social Emotional Learning, Career Development and Academic/College Planning.

Without a director supporting each of these initiatives, the SEL of students continues to be inconsistently addressed. Ultimately, the structure for an effective approach to the implementation of SEL exists however, without a director, it is lacking consistent support and its sustainability is compromised.

To address issues and gaps in diversity, equity, and inclusion in the district and meet the needs of our increasing LGBTQIA population and the approximately 25% of non-white students in our district, and to deepen connections with families and the communities, the School Committee recently developed a district-wide, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Advisory Committee. In addition, each school in the district has formed its own DEI Task Force. These school-based teams will help provide focus and develop action plans that will address DEI within each school, and to help ASRSD continue to make progress toward realizing our vision of excellence for every student. The Director of DEI & School Counseling will oversee the implementation of these building based teams.

## Focus Area 1: Increased personnel and services to support holistic student needs (C and/or D)

The Director of DEI & School Counseling will coordinate supports and services for students Including strengthening relationships with our external partners such as William James Interface Services, Loaves and Fishes, Community Links, and the Department of Children and Families to name a few. The goal is to provide more wraparound services that will address the many barriers to learning that our students face at all grade levels.

Following the murder of George Floyd, there was a strong, public outcry from some parents and some students in the district who were calling for the district to be an anti-racist district. It was presented to the school committee that the position of Director of School Counseling be expanded to include the title and job responsibilities of a Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. This new position, Director of DEI & School Counseling, was approved by our school committee, and we hired a candidate who started December 14, 2020. We are using multiple funding sources, such as grants, school choice, and the LEA budget to support this position, with the understanding that SOA funds would be used to support this position.

The Director will also administer and support the expansion of the advisory structure in the high school and the middle school, thereby positively influencing the graduation rates, drop out rates, and achievement rates of our neediest students.

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|  | **FY21 budget item** | **Amount: enter number, do not use the $ character** | **Foundation Category** |
| **1** | **Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and School Counseling** | **50,700** | **Guidance and Psychological** |

**Commitment 3: Monitoring Success with Outcome Metrics and Targets**

*Outcome metrics that will be used to measure progress in closing gaps for selected student groups.*

* Student Achievement: English language arts (ELA) achievement as measured by average scaled scores on MCAS
* Student Achievement: Mathematics achievement as measured by average scaled scores on MCAS
* Student Achievement: Science achievement as measured by average scaled scores (or CPI, depending on grade level) on MCAS
* High School Completion: Four-year cohort graduation rate
* High School Completion: Annual dropout rate
* Custom District Metric 1: Student and Parent Survey Data (SEL, Equity, etc.))

**Commitment 4: Engaging All Families**

*District plans for ensuring that all families, particularly those representing identified student subgroups most in need of support, have access to meaningful engagement regarding their students’ needs.*

The addition of the Director of DEI & School Counseling position enhances our ability to maintain strong connections with our families. Over the past several years, we have administered multiple parent and student surveys to solicit input from families on the relative effectiveness of our school district. With the addition of this position, we will be able to better assess the needs of parents and students relative to Equity and SEL through pre and post surveys.

We engage families in multiple ways and through multiple means of representation. We intend to measure increased parent engagement through pre-post surveys, attendance-taking at events, and increased student engagement and performance of students in identified subgroups.

While we have strong parent participation in large school events, such as our District Arts Nights, Open Houses, and PTO fundraisers, participation at smaller events, such as Curriculum Night, Superintendent's Coffee and Conversation, and other Title 1 events attract fewer families. We have noted however, that providing virtual events for students and families during this time of COVID have been an effective means of engagement. We have held several virtual meetings with families and had approximately 400 families join us. For those families (identified subgroups), virtual meetings and presentations definitely provide them the opportunity to meaningfully engage with the district. Pre-covid, we always provided child care and nourishment at events, which really did not increase participation. Virtual meetings and presentations are here to stay in this district.

We will continue to engage our families both at the school and district levels through our website, messaging platform (i.e., Blackboard), newsletters, and using videos in concert with our local cable access partners (i.e., Ayer Public Access Channel (APAC) and Shirley Public Access Organization (SPACO)). Under the direction of the Director of DEI & School Counseling, and in concert with building principals, school counselors and classroom teachers will be primarily responsible for engaging families directly in the learning process.

The Director of DEI & School Counseling position will allow us the flexibility to connect and engage with more families, to implement a home visiting program, and build a parent workshop series (monthly presentations) that targets the needs of our families.

We look forward to the flexibility that this position creates to allow for more community outreach, partnerships, and potential family home visits.

**Certifications**

*Certification that stakeholders were engaged in accordance with the Student Opportunity Act.*

The development of this SOA plan began in earnest immediately following the completion of a revision of our three-year district strategic plan. As part of this strategic planning process, we engaged many different stakeholder groups over the span of several months, including representation on our task force of teachers, students, parents, and community members. The concepts of equity, inclusion, and social emotional learning were very discussed in great detail, and are included as strategic objectives in our strategic plan. In addition, over the past several years, the district and school committee have identified the need for the creation of a leadership position to oversee the Counseling department and the implementation of SEL. Once this plan was developed, we also began engaging our staff in the district through in-person meetings that began in earnest in March 2020. The School Committee voted to approve the creation of the position through the FY21 Budget process. Finally, through our engagement of other stakeholders, including community members from the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Committee, this position was amended to include the concepts of DEI.

*Certification that School Committee has voted (or is expected to vote on the district’s Student Opportunity Act Plan.*

Date of Approval: 01/05/2021