Student Opportunity Act Plan

Waltham

# 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.*

* English learners and former English learners Hispanic or Latinx students
* Other - Write In: Students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE)
* African American/Black students
* Asian students
* Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic/Non-Latinx students
* American Indian or Alaskan Native students
* Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students

*The rationale for selecting these student subgroups.*

The Waltham High School Dropout Rate has been steadily increasing over the past several years, particularly for our emerging bilingual students and English Learners with Significantly Limited or Interrupted Formal Education.

Aligned with this steady increase in dropouts, chronic absenteeism has also steadily increased for Waltham High School's Latinx, bilingual, and emerging bilingual student populations. Chronic absenteeism is defined by the DESE as missing 18 days (10%) or more of school in a single 180-day school year.

These and other data suggest that traditional programming at Waltham High School is not currently structured to meet the needs of some students, who would benefit from more flexible scheduling models, competency-based curriculum, and bilingual content to accelerate their language and academic learning.

These and other data also suggest that our students of color do not feel connected to school, which we recognize is also the result of an absence of adequate representation among our teaching faculty. Though Waltham has more than doubled the percentage of educators of color from around 5.5% to 12.9% over the past five years, only 40% of our students are white, requiring us to further accelerate initiatives to hire educators of color. Such work is aimed at addressing experience and achievement gaps for our students of color across the district.

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

Waltham Public Schools conducted a comprehensive process to select and begin to implement this program in Spring 2020. This process began prior to the COVID Pandemic and included:

1. focus groups with families and students each program will target;
2. a survey to the community to help us identify which possible SOA programs were of most interest to the community; and
3. analysis and disaggregation of achievement, dropout, staffing, and attendance data to determine key areas of need throughout the district.

Project possibilities were presented to the school committee in February 2020 and the community was surveyed and invited to participate in forums in early March 2020. Some of these efforts were disrupted by the pandemic, but we have embedded elements of each program into our budgets for FY21 and now FY22.

Focus Area 1: Dropout prevention and recovery programs (I)

Evidence to Support Programming:

The Waltham High School Dropout Rate has been steadily increasing over the past several years, particularly for our emerging bilingual students and English Learners with Significantly Limited or Interrupted Formal Education. Our dropout rate for English Learners and Former English Learners increased from 12.6% in 2018 to 17.5% in 2019.

Aligned with this steady increase in dropouts, chronic absenteeism has also steadily increased for Waltham High School's Latinx, bilingual, and emerging bilingual student populations. Chronic absenteeism is defined by the DESE as missing 18 days (10%) or more of school in a single 180-day school year. For example, from 2018 to 2019 the rate of English Learners who were chronically absent increased from 8.9% at Waltham High School to 9.4%.

These data, alongside achievement data (SLG 22.9 for ELs & Former ELs in ELA, 2019), indicate that traditional programming at Waltham High School is not currently structured to meet the needs of some students, who would benefit from more flexible scheduling models, competency-based curriculum, and bilingual content to accelerate their language and academic learning.

In districts facing similar challenges, such as Revere and Chelsea, the development of alternative credit-bearing opportunities have led to a decline in the dropout rate among English learners and improvement in 4-year cohort graduation rates and extended engagement rates.

Program Features: Details of programming and implementation, targets and outcome measures, and other details for this programming will include the following.

1. Development of bilingual competency-based, credit-bearing curriculum modules.
2. Recruitment of bilingual teachers to provide flexible afternoon, evening, and weekend instruction in core subject areas.
3. Hiring bilingual leader to coordinate referrals and access to community resources, oversee curriculum and enrollment, and communicate with families.
4. Expansion of partnerships with employers and other community organizations to enable additional workplace-embedded credit-bearing opportunities.
5. Expanded partnership with community "wraparound" services to provide physical health, mental health, housing, nutrition, and other services for Waltham High youth and their families.
6. Analysis of root causes of chronic absenteeism and dropouts PreK-12.

This program, despite lack of additional supportive funding, has been planned and piloted throughout the 2020-21 school year and will open to a minimum of 50 high-needs students at risk of dropping out in the 2021-22 school year.

## Focus Area 2: Diversifying the educator/administrator workforce through recruitment and retention (D and/or H)

Evidence to Support Programming:

In 2016, the district prioritized recruitment of educators from diverse backgrounds. Since 2016, efforts to recruit an educator workforce that reflects the demographics of the student body and the wider community have met with some success. However, though the percent of educators of color in the district has increased significantly, the Waltham Public Schools' teacher and administrator workforce is still 88% white, serving a student population that identifies as approximately 60% non-white.

Research demonstrates the importance of a diverse teacher workforce, especially for diverse youth; for example, having a black teacher in grades 3-5 significantly reduces the probability that low-income students of color will drop out (Gershenson et. al., 2017), and for white students, learning from diverse educators provides exposure to multiple perspectives and can improve students' creative problem solving and ability to think critically (Page, 2007; Phillips, 2014).

Efforts to recruit educators of color must include the development of internal pipelines for both school and district leadership teams and the teaching force. Such programs inspire current students and teaching assistants to become teachers. They also partner with local universities to enable professional study and licensure. Programming must also include not only adjustments to resources dedicated to recruiting, but also resources dedicated to the retention of diverse educators.

Our program will prioritize both the recruitment of new educators and administrators of color and the retention of those educators of color who have joined our workforce over the past several years. Through participation in initiatives such as Influence 100, Unbounded Cohort Programming funded by Barr Foundation, ongoing professional learning on bias and racial literacy, participation in Equity-focused grant projects with The Nellie Mae Foundation, and other initiatives, we have learned about systemic change leadership for equity, and will ground our program in the principles of anti-racist leadership. Our program will feature internal pipeline programs and partnerships to recruit both future administrators of color (Lynch Leadership Academy) and teachers of color (Laselle University). It will also feature development programs for educators of color who aspire to leadership roles in the school system (Influence 100, Lead Teacher Roles). Finally, it will improve our hiring practices, professional learning offerings, and opportunities for educators of color to meet in affinity groups. This multifaceted, all-hands-on-deck approach aims to gradually transform all aspects of our system, from operations to teaching and learning, to better meet the needs of our students of and educators of color.

Waltham Program Features:

1. Participation in recruitment and hiring fairs at racially diverse colleges.
2. Convening human resource committee to audit internal hiring processes and develop recommendations for hiring processes more likely to recruit diverse educators.
3. Expand existing high school pipeline programs for Waltham High bilingual students and students of color to become teachers, including "Future Educator" clubs at the middle and high schools and a partnership with Lasell University for dual enrollment for high school seniors and students of color who are interested in becoming teachers.
4. Expand leadership development partnership with Lynch Leadership Academy to recruit administrative interns of color and retain teacher leaders of color already in the system.
5. Expand teacher leadership opportunities and distributive leadership models across all schools in the system.
6. Provide resources for the formation of affinity groups for educators from diverse ethnic and language backgrounds.
7. Expand offerings of EDCO-IDEAS courses and shift towards requiring IDEAS 1 for educators new to the system within their first three years of employment.

**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
* Student Growth: ELA mean student growth percentile (SGP)
* Student Growth: Mathematics mean student growth percentile (SGP)
* High School Completion: Extended engagement rate (5-year cohort grad rate plus percentage of students who are still enrolled)
* High School Completion: Annual dropout rate
* English Language Proficiency: Progress made by students towards attaining English proficiency (percentage of students meeting annual targets calculated to attain English proficiency in six years).
* Additional Indicators: Chronic absenteeism (percentage of students missing 10 percent or more of their days in membership)
* Custom District Metric 1: School climate and culture measures from student, faculty, and family surveys
* Custom District Metric 2: School equity surveys for students, faculty, and families

**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.*

We have engaged families in several surveys and collaborative planning task forces prior to and especially following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We monitor family engagement and prioritize representative participation of families in these opportunities to provide feedback and opportunities to engage and co-create with members of our community.

Families were surveyed about the relative importance to the school system of the programs we are proposing for SOA and identified the two programs described here as top priority. Families were also invited to forums to discuss SOA proposals, but these were slated for mid-March 2020 and were cancelled due to school closures; since this time, family engagement efforts have focused exclusively on our response to the pandemic and other issues tied to student and community wellness.

However, our dedication to the programs articulated here has not waned; families of students who might enroll in our Youth Opportunity Institute have participated in feedback forums to discuss the program and its benefit to the community.

Additionally, teachers in our newly formed Professional Development Committee have offered feedback on professional learning opportunities to advance anti-racism in our system, including an all-staff Convocation Keynote by Yolanda Sealey- Ruiz, whose research on racial literacy has framed our work for the school year. We have shared the professional learning we are doing with families at school committee and in several virtual parent forums throughout the summer and fall, and these efforts will continue.

**Certifications**

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

Mid February 2020: School Committee meeting presentation to share five proposals for input and feedback from the School Committee (proposals were revised following this meeting in response to feedback).

Late February 2020: Survey to families with overviews of each possible program (we drafted five ideas for possible programming), asking families to rank each program by priority order and to offer any additional feedback or program ideas.

Early March 2020: Parent focus groups at McDevitt Middle School in English and Spanish to solicit family feedback.

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

Date of Approval: 01/20/2021