Muskogee Public Schools
Superintendent Dr. Jarod Mendenhall
100 Day Entry Plan Findings
Muskogee Public Schools has a proud tradition of excellence dating back to 1898. Since its inception, there have been many changes to the educational delivery and the Muskogee community. The student population grew for many years as the community was growing and developing; however, the district is now experiencing a steady decline in student population. There has been increased accountability measures placed on the district at both the state and federal levels and numerous changes in leadership.

The Muskogee community has demanded an educational system that is rooted in academic achievement and enriched by the arts and activities. Even though this has been challenging at times for the district, a solid foundation has been formed as the district embarks on a new chapter.

Over the past 100 days, I have had the privilege of speaking to numerous stakeholders, including parents, staff members, students, and community leaders. I have visited school sites to listen and learn and attended community meetings to hear their concerns as well. Everyone agrees that Muskogee Public Schools has the potential to become a stronger better organization for students.

The following statements reflect what I’ve heard:

• The district has great students and they want to be challenged
• The district has engaged parents and a talented staff that want the best for all kids
• The district wants to be led and engaged in the educational process
• The community is deeply committed to the education of all children
• The district and the community are ready for a transformative change
• The district has the potential and capacity to achieve more
• The school district and community are ready for strong leadership
• The school district is perceived to have an image problem
A leader is someone who can take people where they cannot go themselves. Change in organizations are difficult and it usually takes time for buy-in from staff and the community.

Many educators fear change and do not want to move beyond their level of comfort. However, a skillful leader will embrace the challenge and look for opportunities to grow the organization. Since education is rapidly changing, school districts must adapt to meet the needs of all students. A superintendent, who is a true leader, can diminish those fears by demonstrating a clear and coherent vision.

A Superintendent’s vision guides the district; the trust instilled anchors it. Trust is the foundation of leadership and to build trust, a leader must be competent, able to connect with people and exemplify high character. It takes time, but trust leads to credibility. Following through, having the courage to address challenges, and admitting when there are errors, strengthens professional relationships and builds trust. A superintendent with the ability to develop trust and work well with a wide range of people has the ability to lead transformational change.

Nationally respected educator and author Doug Reeves says, “a leader can make decisions with their authority, but they can only implement those decisions through collaboration.” I believe a collaborative process is powerful and provides an opportunity for others to embrace the change process. Not all decisions can be made through collaboration but the culture should be defined by involving the appropriate stakeholders when possible. Being able to involve others in decision making is a sign of a confident leader and often results in better decisions.

Exemplary school districts require effective leaders at all levels in the organization. Leadership is not defined by role, job title or job description within an organization. We understand that the Superintendent and the Board sets the vision, but others in the organization must help carry out that vision for it to be successful. Therefore, hiring the right people at all levels in the organization is imperative to the development of a healthy environment. Everyone must be committed to improvement and have a passion for kids.

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Organizations with leadership depth at every level obviously have strong guidance at the top. Leadership speaker and author John Maxwell talks about the “Law of Navigation” and the need for leaders to chart the course for their organization. Having confidence in the leader and knowing where the organization is going allows those inside the organization to become empowered and passionate.

Findings

Focusing on Budget - Due to budget cuts over the past five years, school districts across Oklahoma eliminated positions that were not directly tied to student instruction in the classroom. Therefore, the first positions that were removed from the budget were at the district level. Even though these positions were not working directly with students, their leadership and management added value to the overall effectiveness of the school district.
Removing Key Leadership Positions - Muskogee Public Schools chose to replace four district-level administrators and hired two executive directors, which placed a gap in the organization. These executive directors have coordinators and instructional specialists that reduce the work load, but it is not best practice.

Improving Facilities - The Maintenance and Operations of the school district flow through one Director and this individual reports to the Chief Financial Officer. These departments of the organization have been ignored during the budget downturn which has caused all of the facilities to become problematic. Prioritizing the district facilities will protect the investment that tax payers have already made and allow for a better environment for student learning.

Actions Steps

Action 1 - I recommend the district create four service divisions that oversee the specific departments within the organization. This structure will help streamline processes and allow departments to work better with each other. It will allow departments that already work together to have the same line of authority. The structure will afford better communication and service to students and staff.

Action 2 - I recommend the district develop four executive positions to oversee each of these divisions. These positions will serve on the Superintendent’s Leadership Team and assist with strategy and leadership for the organization.

Division Lead
Associate Superintendent
Chief Financial Officer
Chief Operations Officer
Chief Academic Officer

Division
Administrative Services Division
Business Services Division
Operational Services Division
Student Services Division
A public relations plan is imperative to successfully build support for the school district from its various internal and external groups. There needs to be an understanding from the Board to the Superintendent of the image desired for a school district. Public Schools have continued to be under attack from many publics both internally and externally, and these attacks must cease for progress to continue.

An effective public relations plan can be developed if there are clear and concise goals in mind. The purpose of the plan will serve as the catalyst for positively involving everyone in the educational process. Building and maintaining the support of the internal and external publics will be challenging but attainable.

A comprehensive public relations plan requires research, analysis, various ways of communicating to targeted internal and external audiences, and on-going evaluation. I would see that these steps are taken and I would recommend the following be included in the public relations plan:

**Findings**

*Celebrating Successes and Disclosing Challenges* – In order to build confidence, we must inform our internal and external publics about our innovations, successes, and relevant news. According to a 2000 Gallup Poll, the biggest challenge facing educators is to let people know about the positive things being done in schools. Identifying the areas of challenge and reporting the corrective actions will provide the public an opportunity to partner with the school district. This transparency will provide a culture of honesty and pay long-term dividends.

*Improving Staff Morale* – All employees of the school district have an opinion and over time develop a distinct perspective. Employees should be considered ambassadors of the district. Involving them in decision making and informing them of new initiatives will enhance the positive exposure for the school district. I will meet with the site Teachers of the Year on a monthly basis to hear concerns and/or recommendations as well as develop a District Teacher’s Council to receive input.

*Working with Community* – Understanding the community attitudes and opinions of the school district will be crucial to overall success of a public relations plan. The community stakeholders will communicate the areas of weakness and make recommendations for improvement. Providing the business community access to the schools will be helpful in filling this communication gap. A school-community alliance will be developed to engender greater understanding and support for each other. This alliance will work to educate those involved about their presuppositions, needs for the future, and potential partnerships.

*Developing Two-Way Communication* – Acquiring feedback allows school officials to know how the community and/or staff feel about decisions. The use of surveys, newsletters, and web sites can be extremely
valuable to this end. An advisory council will be created to receive input from the parents and patrons of the district. This advisory council will meet periodically throughout the year to provide feedback on different initiatives across the district.

**Action Steps**

**Action 1** - I recommend hiring a Director of Communications and Marketing which has already been done. The district hired an individual to fill this position in August 2018. This individual oversees the district website, social media and serves as a liaison for the district.

**Action 2** - I recommend the district conduct a strategic planning process for the organization. This process should involve community stakeholders and allow for people to be involved in the strategic planning of the district. This will provide a strategic direction for the next five years.

**Action 3** - I recommend a new website be developed and new social media platforms be utilized. In order to build confidence, we must inform our internal and external publics about our innovations, successes, and important news. Identifying the areas of challenge and reporting the corrective actions will provide the public an opportunity to partner with the school district. This transparency will provide a culture of honesty and pay long-term dividends.

**Action 4** - I recommend the district develop different committee structures so staff and community stakeholders can be involved collaboratively in decisions that will affect the district in the future. I am recommending that a Long Range Planning Committee be developed to provide insight on bond issues, school configuration, and elementary boundaries.
Effective educational curriculum combines structure and flexibility. The key is to find a balance so teachers may practice their craft and feel some autonomy in the classroom. Districts should prescribe specific curriculum but allow teachers to enrich and enhance it. If not, administrators may find themselves at odds with the very best teachers.

Curriculum should be results oriented with multiple types of assessments that measure success of both students and teachers. In the age of accountability, the focus of school improvement must be based on continuous student progress through vertical and horizontal curriculum alignment. In this process, teachers should have input into local standards making sure they align with state and national norms. This process is not effective without proper professional development and training that reinforces instructional strategies.

There must be a standard written, taught, and assessed curriculum for every subject in the district. The written curriculum should include curriculum guides, lesson plans, and grade records. The taught curriculum should include the essential knowledge and skills mandated by the state. Scope and sequence developed by the teachers through vertical teaming must also be a part of the taught curriculum. The assessed curriculum needs to include teacher-made tests, district benchmark assessments, and state assessments.

The curriculum must have a balanced core of learning. A foundation for challenging enrichment programs at the elementary level leading to Advanced Placement courses at the high school is important. Curriculum should be inter-disciplinary so students can make connections scaffolding their learning from one subject to another. All curricula must have a belief system by which a foundation can be built. The following are my beliefs:

• Relationships with students matter
• Teachers make a difference in the classroom
• Professional development leads to improved achievement
• Active learning and engagement of students is a priority
• Challenging curriculum promotes thinking skills
• School improvement is a continuous process
• All students can learn

Findings

Defining Instructional Practices - The district needs a consistent instructional program that is defined and practiced at all levels in the district. There should not be school sites that choose to opt-out of any of the adopted instructional practices. This will afford everyone the confidence and ability to provide students with the very best curriculum and instruction.

Adopting Progress Monitoring - A consistent method for assessing students is a highly effective tool for staff to evaluate if students are growing over time. Longitudinal data that is regularly reviewed by staff will guide the instructional practices in the classroom. The district utilizes the professional learning community (PLC) process for teachers to discuss and review student data. Using this time effectively can be valuable in helping improve student performance.

Developing Enrichment - Students that score well academically need to be challenged in the classroom. Therefore, differentiation for these students becomes imperative. Providing the appropriate engagement opportunities for advanced students to be challenged is important to their growth and development. The district needs to find alternative methods to enhance the curriculum for these students.
**Innovating Technology** - The district must continue searching for the newest and most innovative technology for students. The district has already implemented a one-to-one initiative which provided all students with a personal device. Additionally, the district secured a $1.16 million grant from T-Mobile to provide internet access to every student. Even though this is a great first step, it is important to continue providing students with the latest technology that is available.

**Developing Student Leadership** - The foundation of any organization lies in the overall strength of its leadership which can also be applied to school districts. All schools have distinct cultures that can be experienced the moment you walk through the front doors. Student leadership should be at the core of this culture and must be developed. Therefore, being purposeful in the leadership development of students will make a significant impact to the overall health and growth of any school.

**Action Steps**

**Action 1** - I recommend the district adopt a consistent reading and writing curriculum that can be taught throughout the district. Schools should not be able to opt-out or choose an alternative curriculum to follow.

**Action 2** - I recommend the district begin implementing “Response to Intervention” (RTI) model for intervention and enrichment activities. The district should transition to this methodology for placing students into Special Education but should not be exclusive for this purpose.

**Action 3** - I recommend the district adopt a character education program that is current, up-to-date and consistent across the district. The culture of the district will improve through the implementation of a comprehensive program that builds from the early childhood center through the high school.

**Action 4** - I recommend the district implement the STEM philosophy throughout the district and include the project-based learning model. The educational environment that is driven by STEM practices will enrich and enhance the curricula and provide a strong foundation for the scientific method for solving problems.

**Action 5** - I recommend that the district add a student leadership class taught by a certified teacher at the high school. The students need help developing their leadership skills so they can lead appropriately. The culture of the high school will continue to improve and evolve if key leadership skills are taught to these students.
The physical structures within a school district should appropriately support the learning process. The success of students and the academic achievement can be greatly enhanced if the learning environment is clean, attractive and well maintained. Facility maintenance should never be overlooked in a school district.

Facilities that are safe, functional and age appropriate should be the priority of the school district. The challenge for many school districts has always been the funding for new buildings and facility enhancements. Therefore, bond referendums are key to ensuring that the appropriate facilities are provided for students.

The planning and stakeholder input process should not be overlooked in developing buildings that are for teaching and learning. The "end user" which is considered the teachers and the principals at each school site should have input into the design and functionality of the facilities being built. Developing a process where these stakeholders have input will serve a district well.

**Findings**

*Maintaining Facilities* - The facilities in the district are older structures; therefore, making it more difficult for staff to clean and maintain. Many of the ventilation systems are older and need to be replaced. Aging roofing materials will also require a large amount of funding. Due to these conditions, the facilities are problematic and make it difficult for teaching and learning. The buildings are cleaned daily by the custodial staff but the district has cut staff in these positions over the past few years. This is an area that can be addressed through additional staffing, retraining and proper equipment.

*Enhancing Safety and Security* - The safety and security of the students and staff are priority, but there are conditions that make campuses a concern. The front entries of some of the school sites do not have a secure vestibule which needs to be addressed. The intercom and camera systems are a good deterrent but other precautions need to be taken. The outside doors to all of the campuses need to be changed to keyless door locks which help to secure the site properly. These modifications can’t be completed without large amounts of funding.

**Action Steps**

*Action 1* – I recommend the district develop a long-term comprehensive facilities plan for the construction and technology areas of the district. This would include all of the needs for infrastructure and future needs for equipment.

*Action 2* – I recommend the district develop a Long Range Planning committee that would be sanctioned by the Board of Education. This committee would be made up of community stakeholders from across the school district. They would make recommendations on land acquisition, boundaries, bond issues and grade configuration.

*Action 3* – I recommend the district hire a Chief Operations Officer to oversee the operational areas in the school district. This position would report directly to the Superintendent and serve on the leadership team.

*Action 4* – I recommend the district hire an outside service to conduct master planning for the school district. This group would evaluate all school sites and determine the best way to remodel and/or rebuild at each of the school sites. This plan should be followed by the district over the next ten years and revisited annually.
Change in any organization is difficult and usually takes time for buy-in from staff and the community. However, a skillful leader will embrace the challenge and look for opportunities to grow the organization. Serving as a change agent takes courage and commitment. I am committed to the following:

**Providing the Vision** – Through a strategic planning process, we will begin identifying our core beliefs and values which will provide a clear vision. This process will afford the school district a firm foundation and a road map to the future.

As the superintendent, I will begin articulating this vision to the community and staff. Once the vision is understood and accepted by administrators, teachers, and patrons they will begin to soar as a community. Providing structure while allowing autonomy will be an important key to moving forward. Most everyone welcomes structure as long as it does not smother or hinder creativity.

**Building an Ownership Culture** – Developing an ownership culture must be defined through collaboration, respecting input of others, and providing the highest level of professionalism. As the superintendent, I must provide a consistent and coherent belief system for everyone in the organization.

This culture will allow administrators to think creatively and strive toward innovation. A culture of mutual respect gives people the room to dream without fear which engenders greater innovation. Internal stakeholders must feel comfortable to stretch beyond their limits to reach excellence.

**Hiring the Right People** – “Human capital” is one of the most underrated resources required for a successful organization. I am always looking for the “right fit” for each position in the district. Management author Jim Collins states, “you must get the right people on the bus and then place them in the right seats.” A skilled superintendent has an eye for talent and then empowers them to do their job.

Administrators are in a position to be change agents. Selecting site principals is one of the most important decisions made in a school district as they provide leadership on the front lines, make decisions, and develop school culture. I will personally be involved in the hiring of every new principal and administrator in the school district.
This executive summary is meant to provide the Board of Education with a document of the current findings of the school district and provide action steps toward improvement throughout the organization. It is the first step in the process of developing a vision and providing a direction for the school district.

Muskogee Public Schools is fundamentally a good school district with many positive assets, the most valuable of which is the incredible students and talented staff. I believe the biggest challenge will be to move beyond being a good organization to one which is truly outstanding.

As we move toward the next phase in the planning process, the executive summary will serve as a valuable document for a district strategic plan. This process will begin within the next few months and the intent is to involve over 100 community members. It will be imperative that all community stakeholders are involved so that all voices heard and considered.

To achieve the kind of excellence that is expected from the stakeholders in the community, it will require everyone to dream bigger and reach further than ever before. I have been very impressed with the passion and enthusiasm of the community during this process and look forward to our next steps toward making Muskogee Public Schools the best it can be.

Respectfully submitted,

Jarod Mendenhall, Ed.D.
Superintendent
Muskogee Public Schools