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Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS): The [Entry] of a New Director of Schools

As his 100th day as the new director of schools for Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) came to a close, Dr. Shawn Joseph wrapped up his final interview with the third media outlet for that November day already thinking ahead to his next day's schedule. In his hand, he had the updated report from his 47-person transition team (See **Exhibit 1**), who had spent months doing a deep-dive analysis on the strengths and challenges present within MNPS. This report would serve as the foundation for the district's new strategic plan, and Joseph knew that garnering the support of both the school board and the community would be critical in the months ahead for his long-term success as "director of schools" (the district's title for its superintendent). Tomorrow would be the first time the community would hear his reflections and learnings from the first 100 days of his tenure since he started in July 2016.

Metro Nashville Public Schools

As the nation's 42nd largest school district, MNPS entered the 2016-17 school year with 86,000 students enrolled across 166 schools in Tennessee's capital. While several other similar urban school systems had experienced declining student enrollment, MNPS had recently faced *increasing* student enrollments, including an English language learner population that doubled in a decade (from 2004 to 2014), ultimately reaching 16% at the start of the 2016-17 school year with as many as 120 different languages represented. Additionally, nearly three out of every four students qualified for free or reduced price lunch, and 69% identified as students of color, which was in contrast to the metro area's population of 60% white residents.¹ Most significantly, 60% of MNPS students attended a school in 2015 that ranked in the bottom quartile of all public schools in the state of Tennessee.

The First Search (February - July 2015)

MNPS began its search for a new director of schools in February 2015 after director Jesse Register had announced his plans for retirement at the end of his contract, set to expire on June 30, 2015, following six and a half years at the helm. After a review of four finalists for the open position in July 2015, the school board voted in favor of offering the role to Mike Looney, director of nearby Williamson County Schools. In a move that surprised both the board and the contracted search firm, Looney

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ultimately declined the final offer choosing to remain at Williamson, and MNPS entered the 2015-16 school year with Chris Henson, the district's chief financial officer who had been with MNPS since 2002, as its interim director.

The Second Search (August 2015 - May 2016)

Disappointed with the outcome of the first search, the school board unanimously agreed at their fall retreat to a significantly different search process by firing the contracted search firm and by bringing in Shannon Hunt, president of the Nashville Public Education Foundation (NPEF), and newly elected Mayor Megan Barry to co-chair a "very aggressive national search"² that would heavily involve the community. Barry, elected in September 2015 as the first female mayor for Nashville, ran on a platform focused on improving public education, and she demonstrated follow through on that priority by meeting with the school board during her first day in office in order to kick off the new and improved search process. Under Hunt's and Barry's joint leadership, a 17-member community advisory committee began its work by seeking to answer three questions: What does Nashville need? Who might fit that profile? Are we competitive enough to attract high-caliber candidates?

After twelve weeks and a community survey that garnered 5,000 responses, including responses from one-third of MNPS teachers, the community advisory committee put forth a report that outlined a set of recommendations to the school board, which still maintained the final decision-making authority. In reflecting on the significance of the task force, Hunt shared, "While we may quibble over some of the details, this group has agreed around ten recommendations (See Exhibit 2) that provide a really solid road map. We have not had that kind of road map in any search in the last decade here."³ Most notably, an overwhelming sentiment that came through in the community outreach was the deep desire to bring in someone who would "bring new ideas" and "be a change agent."⁴ By May 2016, six finalists had been selected from a pool of over 90 candidates.

Shawn Joseph

Described as a collaborator by his colleagues at Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS), Shawn Joseph had built a reputation of remaining calm, cool and collected in the number two position of deputy superintendent for the 127,000-student district in Maryland when he was recruited to consider the superintendent openings at MNPS and at Guilford County Schools in North Carolina in the spring of 2016. For 41-year-old Joseph, this opportunity was not going to be his first superintendency; for two years, Joseph served as the superintendent for Delaware's Seaford School District, which served 3,400 students, before he returned to Maryland for the PGCPS deputy role in 2014 in order to be closer to his wife and two children. Prior to that, Joseph had worked in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), where he started as a teacher in 1996 and progressed his way up through the system, eventually winning Maryland's middle school principal of the year award in 2009 and becoming the district's director of school performance. Joseph's career took off at the same time that MCPS flourished under Superintendent Jerry Weast, who became Joseph's mentor. When asked by *The Tennessean* whether Joseph was ready to lead a large district like MNPS, Weast replied, "There's not a shadow of a doubt in my mind that he is ready. Frankly, I would say he is too ready. Most people haven't gone through the steps of his career as thoughtfully as [he has]."⁵ The director of schools position piqued Joseph's interest in part because of the draw of Nashville itself, a city that Joseph noticed was led by an education-focused mayor, a pro-education chamber of commerce and a school board that Joseph thought of as "sophisticated." The alignment of the city's political leadership with MNPS appealed to Joseph despite the fact that he had no previous ties to Nashville, and he was unsure whether his family would be able to relocate with him.

The Final Decision

After two weeks of interviews with three finalists, all men of color, Joseph was selected as the new director on Friday, May 13th by a unanimous school board decision after just 30 minutes of deliberation. Joseph verbally accepted the four-year contract over the phone. More significantly, Joseph became the first African American leader to be tapped as the director of schools for Metro Nashville. Board chairwoman Sharon Gentry noted the significance of Joseph's appointment stating, "It says a lot about where Nashville is and how far we have come, not only in being able to do things in how we worked out the process, but also in being able to recognize talent is talent. The fact is we didn't shy away from a slate that had three minorities."⁶ That following Monday, Mayor Barry rolled out a \$475 million capital-spending plan that she dubbed as "an investment in Nashville's future," the largest designation (\$150 million) of which was allocated to public education.⁷

At the time, Nashville had few leaders in the city who were black so Joseph's appointment also made him the highest-ranking black leader of any public institution in the city. Within Nashville's majority white population, there was an underlying, persistent perception that previous public leaders who were black did not do "as well" -- referring to the financial woes affecting some of the city's four historically black colleges and universities or the recent scandals that had plagued some council members of majority black districts.⁸ Joseph received advice early on from other public leaders to not draw attention to his race and to ally himself with influential leaders in the community -- most of whom were white and male. Just days before his hiring though, the Metro Nashville Human Relations Commission published a report highlighting the stark contrast of the demographics between the district's teachers and student population. While black students represented the largest racial group of the district (42.2%), nearly 74% of all MNPS teachers identified as white.⁹

The Transition

While his tenure did not officially start until July 1st, Joseph realigned the organizational chart, decreased the number of positions on the executive leadership team from six to four (chief academic officer, chief operating officer, chief of schools and chief of staff) and named three members of his team by early June (See Exhibit 3 and Exhibit 4 for the changes in the organizational chart). Joseph brought on Monique Felder and Sito Narcisse, both black leaders from PGCPs, to serve as his chief academic officer and chief of schools, respectively. Felder was the executive director of teaching and learning and Narcisse was the associate superintendent for PGCPs. Joseph also broadened the responsibilities of former interim director Chris Henson by tapping him as the chief operating officer to oversee both the finances and operations of the district. With the chief of staff position still open, Joseph turned to Barry for counsel, who recommended a national search. By late August, Joseph named Jana Carlisle, the chief strategy officer at the New York City Leadership Academy, to the role. Though Joseph had initially planned for all four chief roles to be filled by his July 1st start date, the executive leadership team was set by mid-September when Carlisle officially started at MNPS.

While Joseph was confident in his choices and did not allow the skepticism of others to distract him, many started to take notice of the increasing number of hires from outside of MNPS. This led a MNPS parent to file for a Freedom of Information Act request for all spending by central office since Joseph's start date; the parent then wrote a blog post to raise the issue of the number of new "out of state" hires and to highlight the twelve central office staff members who were now receiving salaries that exceeded \$154,000 a year, the salary that the previous "number two person in the district" made prior to Joseph's arrival.¹⁰ The post was then shared on the national blog of Diane Ravitch, a New York University professor and self-proclaimed "anti-reformer," who referred to Joseph as an "autocratic, power-

hungry, tone-deaf bureaucrat.”¹¹ While the school board stood unwaveringly behind Joseph’s decisions, this narrative of “outsiders” now running Metro Nashville schools persisted in some media outlets during Joseph’s first 100 days.

The First 100 Days

At the start of his tenure, Joseph named a 47-person transition team (See Exhibit 1) comprised of both local and national experts to identify the district’s current strengths and challenges as a way to shape Joseph’s vision and strategic plan for MNPS. The team was split into four sub-committees that focused on the following areas: *student achievement*; *school choice*; *human resources and talent management*; and *communications and community engagement*. Each sub-committee’s in-depth analysis would culminate in a final report that would cap off Joseph’s 100th day on November 18th and serve as a roadmap for him going forward. Joseph noted,

The Transition Team has helped me conduct a deep analysis of the district in a way that I, by myself, could never have done in this short period of time. ... Not only am I getting the observations of some of the nation’s best education experts and our community’s most engaged advocates, but these team members also share the lens of parents, principals and school partners. Their insights will be threaded throughout our strategic planning work in the months ahead.¹²

From the start, Joseph held 11 “Listen and Learn” community meetings in July and early August 2016 as a way to get to know families and students quickly and with the purpose that the concerns raised at these meetings, along with the Transition Team’s recommendations, would serve as the foundation for the new strategic plan. Nearly 2,000 parents attended those meetings. As he made the rounds, Joseph also tasked the central office team to visit every school the week and a half leading up to the first day of school on August 3rd, as a way to ensure a strong start.

By the time MNPS kicked off the new 2016-17 school year, roughly one-fifth of all schools in the district opened with a new principal. The number of principal vacancies that Joseph inherited on his first day generated a sense of urgency within central office to focus on a new and improved system and structure for principal hiring. Joseph updated the hiring process for principals by adding a community panel, comprised of staff and families, to engage in the vetting of principal candidates. Each community panel made a principal hiring recommendation to Joseph, who held the final decision-making power. In the end, 100% of the principal hires Joseph made came from recommendations by the community panels.

In addition to focusing on principal hiring, Joseph eliminated the network principal role and repurposed the funding to double the number of “executive leadership principals” (ELPs). Originally, ELPs managed the network principals who supported school leaders. Eliminating the network principal role enabled Joseph’s leadership team to work more directly with principals and decreased the number of schools each ELP was responsible for so that ELPs could provide more support. Before Joseph, there was one ELP for every 25 to 30 schools; Joseph changed that ratio of support to one ELP for every 10 to 12 schools. His rationale was to “reduce the span of control for principal supervisors to provide more support and coaching [in order] to build school leaders and increase teacher support.” On his school visits at the start of the year, Joseph made it a point to ask his principals how the new structure of ELPs was or was not working for them. An elementary school principal later reflected, “Dr. Joseph made us feel comfortable. His leadership team does not invoke *fear*.”

At the same time Joseph was changing the principal support structure, he leveraged consultants from Gallup Strengths Center and the Arbinger Institute to support a range of leaders within the district - including the school board, central office and school leadership - as a means to “facilitate a transformation of the district’s culture.”¹³ As stated on the MNPS website,

This leadership development – along with other capacity building for principals and those who support and develop them – is squarely focused on bringing central office staff into buildings to support school leaders and educators and to align the district’s collective efforts and culture with teaching, learning and organizational culture priorities.¹⁴

This kind of work seemed to have made an indelible impact on the school board, which had three “intensive” retreats in the first four months of Joseph’s tenure. The board unanimously committed to professionalize its operations and streamline its processes. Board chairwoman Anna Shepherd later remarked, “We may not have always made headlines in the past for agreeing on things, but that changed the day we voted unanimously to hire Dr. Joseph. Since he arrived, we have worked as one team to improve this district.”¹⁵

In a memo by Joseph after the first day of school, he gave MNPS and himself a letter grade of a B. Joseph shared, “[We] have high expectations of ourselves, and we need to live up to and exceed them. That includes giving schools everything they need to serve students. Right now, we’re falling a little short. We need to acknowledge it, fix it and move forward in the school year.”¹⁶ Though the Transition Team was deep in their analysis on the four areas, two priorities emerged for Joseph at the start of his entry: *literacy* and *customer service*. Joseph noted, “We do not work right now from a clear framework of teaching and learning. ... [There is] too much autonomy with too little results.” There were various literacy initiatives in place before Joseph’s tenure and some teachers questioned how they all worked together. One such initiative was a partnership with a faith-based focus, United4Hope (Helping Others in Public Education). At the time of Joseph’s arrival in Nashville, the city boasted 900 churches, an asset that Joseph believed could be leveraged in service of MNPS’s goals. At the time, United4Hope served as “a primary conduit for church volunteer partnerships”¹⁷ by partnering churches with schools through one-year commitments. Initially, United4Hope launched in 2011 as a way for churches to partner with schools that did not meet AYP (annual yearly progress) standards. Within Joseph’s first 100 days, he challenged United4Hope’s executive director Stan Weber to “consider a reachable goal of one or more church(es) for every school in Nashville.”¹⁸ From Joseph’s perspective, schools and faith-based communities were the two spaces that could unite people across race and class around a common goal, the results of which could be transformative for the city.

Looking Back

Upon reflecting on his first 100 days, Joseph recognized both the quick wins and challenges that led him to stay mostly on course with his entry plan. He recognized that he needed to give people the structures and opportunities to articulate what they wanted; he noted how much communication and conversation constantly needed to happen at all levels, from the school board down to community stakeholders at these “Listen and Learn” sessions, in order for his team to be able to make the kind of changes he knew he wanted to outline in the strategic plan. Second, he knew he could not underestimate the power of the noise from the people who were looking to distract and detract from his work. Relatedly, he recognized the need to identify and nurture talent from within the district. Newspaper headlines from Joseph’s entry conveyed a strong and persistent narrative of his hiring “outsiders” causing Joseph to reflect later whether or not he had done enough to encourage his chiefs to look within the district to determine who could be promoted to the vacancies he was looking to fill

as a way to appease the fear of change and to invoke goodwill. Additionally, local news organizations investigated Joseph's decision to have a private driver and to get maintenance on his house done by a MNPS employee, prompting school board chair Anna Shepherd to declare, "It's time to put an end to the media madness" in November, defending Joseph's decisions on behalf of the entire board.¹⁹ Joseph later reflected, "Any new superintendent has to understand the *cultural context* of the environment that they are working in... and I underestimated those nuances." Fortunately, because Joseph had focused much of his entry on getting out into the community through the "Listen and Learn" sessions and consistently having the full support of a united school board, much of the negative press did not gain momentum. A political ally quipped, "Welcome to the South," and then assured, "Keep doing what you're doing."

Looking Ahead

With the first 100 days (the so-called "honeymoon" period) coming to a close, Joseph also knew the level of accountability was about to increase, not only for the schools but also for his leadership. The transition team outlined four key areas (See **Exhibit 5**) that would aid the creation of the new strategic plan in early 2017, which was going to be critical for the long-term success of MNPS:

1. The strength of the people and the community to do the work;
2. The benefit of diversity and the challenge of achieving equity;
3. The need for clear district vision and unity of direction; and
4. [The] establishment of clear structures and processes to guide the system's work.²⁰

The transition team made clear that the lack of an existing, clear and coherent vision for MNPS "has resulted in a multitude of improvement efforts being pursued by various offices and even by individual schools, with little accountability for results and few ways to measure the impact of these efforts."²¹ While the transition team's final report was not going to be made public until February, Joseph sensed their recommendations were going to push the district for major changes in order to achieve greater coherence and accountability. Joseph's report of the first 100 days would be one of the first signals to the broader public of what was to come. As he reread the 100-day report in preparation for his community address the following day, he wondered, *how do we keep this momentum going in the community while holding ourselves to high expectations and accountable for our results?*

Exhibit 1 Transition Team Members

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT COMMITTEE

- CHAIR: Michael Casserly, Council for Great City Schools executive director
- Jarred Amato, Maplewood High School English teacher
- Michael Carter, Sr., Pinnacle Construction Partners managing partner
- Dale Farran, Vanderbilt University Peabody College teaching and learning chair
- Dorsey Hopson, Shelby County Schools superintendent
- R. Milton Johnson, HCA chairman and CEO
- Kristin McGraner, STEM Preparatory Academy founder
- Candice McQueen, Tennessee education commissioner
- John Morgan, Tennessee Board of Regents chancellor
- Rose Salavert, former New York City Schools Community Superintendent
- Kimberly Statham, Montgomery County Public Schools deputy superintendent
- J. Stephen Turner, MarketStreet Equities Company founder
- Robbin Wall, McGavock High School principal

SCHOOL CHOICE COMMITTEE

- CHAIR: Maree Sneed, Hogan Lovells International Law Firm partner
- Barry Barlow, Metro Schools parent
- Todd Dickson, Valor Collegiate Academies founder and CEO
- Richard Dinkins, Tennessee Court of Appeals judge
- V.H. Sonnye Dixon, Hobson United Methodist Church pastor
- Natalyn Gibbs, Shwab Elementary principal
- Tony Heard, InfoWorks Inc. partner
- John Ingram, Ingram Industries chairman
- Ed Kindall, Metro Council representative
- Aaron Spence, Virginia Beach City Public Schools superintendent
- James Williams, former Howard University Department of Education professor
- Tonja Williams, Head Middle Magnet principal

HUMAN RESOURCES AND TALENT COMMITTEE

- CHAIR: Susan Marks, Montgomery County Public Schools human resources chief
- Maura-Lee Albert, Service Employees International Union Local 205 member
- Susan Blankenship, Waverly-Belmont Elementary teacher
- Shani Dowell, Relay Graduate School of Education
- Segun Eubanks, National Education Association director of professional educator supports
- Erick Huth, Metro Nashville Education Association director
- Elissa Kim, Nashville schools board member
- Michael Merchant, Arbinger Institute senior executive consultant
- Leticia Skae-Jackson, Martin Luther King, Jr. Magnet
- Deborah Story, former St. Thomas Health human resources executive

COMMUNICATIONS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT COMMITTEE

- Chair: Shannon Hunt, Nashville Public Education Foundation president and CEO
- Angie Adams, PENCIL Foundation CEO
- Aggie Alvez, Discovery Education vice president of marketing and communication
- Dallas Dance, Baltimore County Public Schools superintendent
- Laura Moore, Mayor Megan Barry's education liaison
- Kent Oliver, Nashville Public Library director
- Tara Scarlett, Scarlett Family Foundation CEO
- Renata Soto, Conexión Américas co-founder and executive director
- Katy Varney, McNeely Pigott and Fox partner
- Bishop Joseph W. Walker, III, Mt. Zion Baptist Church of Nashville pastor

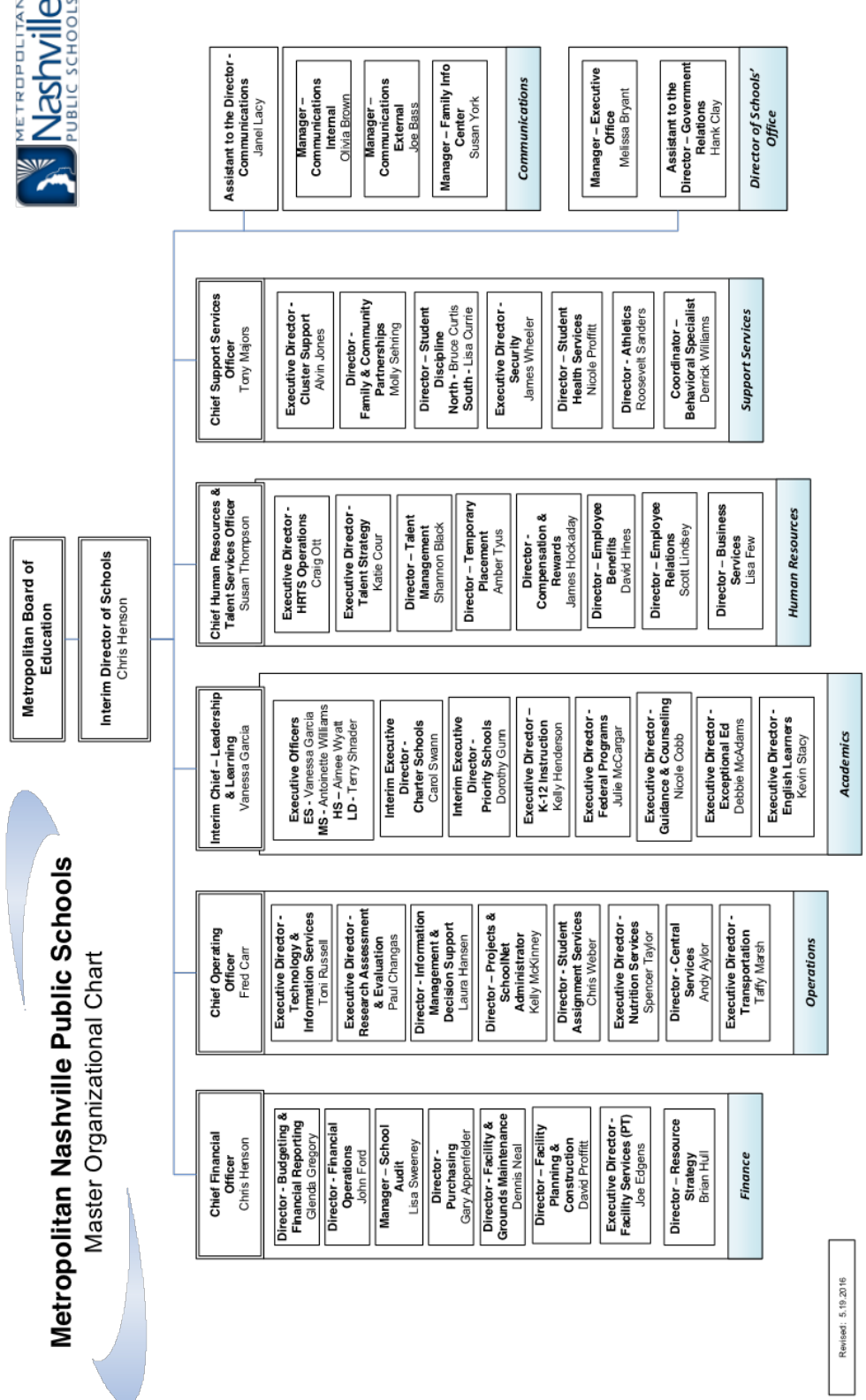
Source: Metro Nashville Public Schools.

Exhibit 2 Recommendations by Community Advisory Committee

1. The net for this search should be cast wide and focus more intently on recruitment.
2. This search must be grounded in a sense of clarity about what we are seeking with the full commitment of the Board to be open to different types of candidates who could fill the agreed-upon profile.
3. Recruiting efforts should concentrate on finding candidates with demonstrable expertise in four primary areas:
 - (a) Community-building and vision-casting capacity,
 - (b) Expertise inspiring leaders throughout the district to own and implement that vision across the organization (i.e., system and organizational culture change),
 - (c) Knowledge/ expertise of student populations like ours, and
 - (d) Innovative approaches to talent and turnaround.
4. An overarching interest of the search should be to find someone who will bring a fresh approach to our challenges – one with more innovative, outside-the-box ideas.
5. Recruiters should be directed to think beyond the traditional set of candidates (i.e., sitting superintendents from like-sized districts), but to also contemplate other, less-traditional candidates.
6. Recruiting efforts should not focus solely on like-sized districts, but also on innovator districts and aspirational districts.
7. Interviews of finalists should build on successful hallmarks of the last search.
8. If we are serious about finding a topnotch leader, we must be competitive with the marketplace to attract that talent. Given this analysis and the imperative to be highly competitive for topnotch talent, there are four things the Board should consider:
 - (a) Salary should not be an impediment.
 - (b) Address the risk associated with the proximity to elections with strong contractual terms.
 - (c) Actively consider other more creative compensation package elements.
 - (d) The search must remain a united, citywide effort.
9. A strong leader is only part of the equation. For the city to move forward in a meaningful way, there must be a strong, public and unequivocal commitment to a transition process for a new leader:
 - (a) Support for development of a comprehensive, citywide strategic plan.
 - (b) Strengthened working relationship between Board and administration.
10. Do not compromise on candidate quality.

Source: Metro Nashville Public Schools.

Exhibit 3 MNPS Organizational Chart (before Joseph)

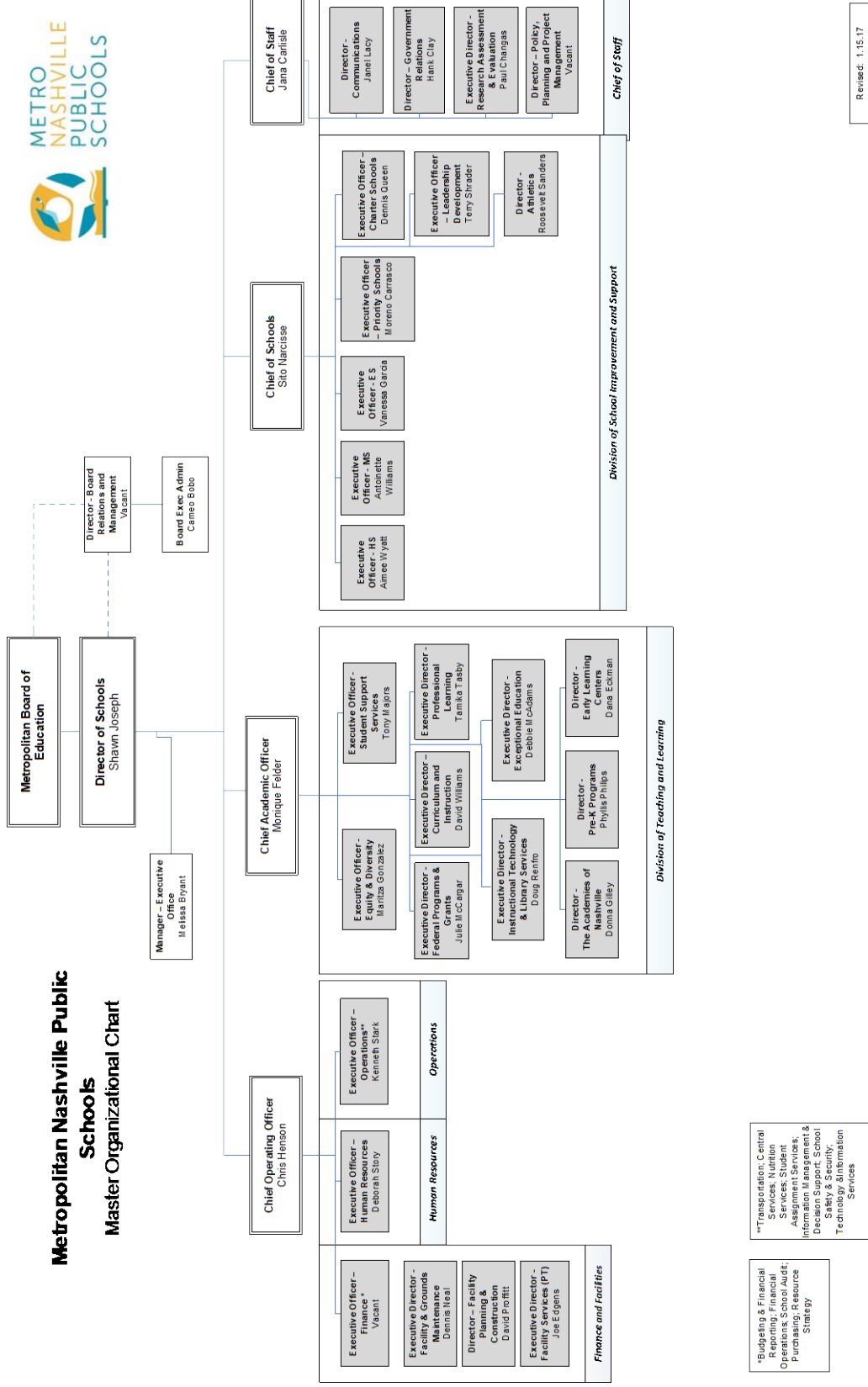


Revised: 5.19.2016

Exhibit 4 MNPS Organizational Chart (after Joseph)



**Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools
Master Organizational Chart**



*Budgeting & Financial Reporting, Financial Operations, School Audit, Purchasing, Resource Strategy

**Transportation, Central Services, Nutrition Services, Student Assignment Services, Information Services, Decision Support, School Safety & Security, Technology & Information Services

Exhibit 5 Findings from Transition Team

1. The strength of the people and the community to do the work. The subcommittees pointed to the commitment and the talent of the staff in Metro Schools and added there is strong community support for public education in Nashville. It found the number of community partners probably exceeds the number found in other districts.
2. The benefit of diversity and the challenge of achieving equity. The subcommittees found that Metro Schools is diverse in its student population, students' needs and the wide variety of school options and opportunities available to students. The subcommittees said that diversity must be accompanied by equity to ensure that all learners have the resources and supports needed to be successful in every classroom, in every school. The persistent gaps in academic performance between student populations are a continued cause for concern in the district, according to the findings.
3. The need for clear district vision and unity of direction. The lack of a clear vision and direction for Metro Schools has resulted in a multitude of improvement efforts being pursued by various offices and even by individual schools, with little accountability for results and few ways to measure the impact of these efforts, according to the report. It goes on to say that while schools need to be provided with clear guidelines and supports to allow them to make some choices to best meet the needs of their student population, the tremendous number of programs and curricula in use, without evidence of their effectiveness, makes it incredibly difficult to support the provision of a high-quality, rigorous education across schools. Establishment of a vision and a strategic plan, accompanied by a clear system of accountability for the central office and schools, is an essential first step for the new administration.

Establishment of clear structures and processes to guide the system's work. In many cases, the lack of clear procedures – and the continued use of outdated processes – serves as cause for confusion among numerous stakeholder groups internal and external to the system, the report found. For instance, there is evidence that applicants for positions, principals who are working to fill positions, and parents who are evaluating school options for their children are all affected by the use of inefficient or confusing processes to achieve intended outcomes.

Source: Metro Nashville Public Schools.

Endnotes

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