


**DEEPENING OUR WORK:**  
***Excellence for Every Child***

**KNOX COUNTY SCHOOLS**  
**FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN**   
**2014 - 2019**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Knox County Schools is a school district with a clear track record of delivering high quality educational experiences for students. We have done this by faithfully implementing the strategies delineated in our first strategic plan, *Excellence for All Children*, which was adopted by the Board of Education in 2009. The innovative and research-based improvements outlined in the 2009 plan have been powerful vehicles for systematically and substantially enhancing the learning opportunities for our more than 57,000 students. Over the last five years, we have made tremendous strides in improving the quality, rigor, and diversity of instructional programs so that our students can achieve in both academics and life.

As a large metropolitan school district, and the third largest district in the state of Tennessee, we are privileged to serve an urban, suburban, and rural student population that is defined by the full range of race, culture, income, language and ability. We are proud of our record of strong academic progress and impressive student success. The Knox County Schools has consistently outperformed all comparable districts with similar demographics, as well as the state as a whole.

Over the past few years, the Knox County Schools high school graduation rate has increased from 79% in 2008 to 88% for the class of 2013. We have seen consistent increases in student academic proficiency in virtually all subject areas as measured by outcome scores on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) and state End of Course (EOC) assessments. For the 2012-13 school year - the most recent academic year for which data is available - the Knox County Schools scored a level 5 composite growth index on the Tennessee Value Added Assessment System (TVAAS), the highest level attainable. Perhaps most remarkably, this past November, the Knox County Schools earned straight A's in student achievement on the state report card – for the first time ever!

Our success, however, did not happen by accident. It happened as a result of the strategic instructional investments we, as a community, made to improve student learning:


- As part of the state Race to the Top (RttT) Scope of Work, we proposed a district-wide magnet STEM high school and envisioned becoming one of the regional STEM hubs for the

- state of Tennessee. After pursuing the funding from the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), in December 2010, we were awarded the opportunity to be among the first STEM high schools as contemplated in the state RttT grant. Our district worked to identify a location, developed an instructional model, and, in an extremely compressed timeframe, successfully opened the school in August 2011. ***The L&N STEM Academy*** was launched in partnership with the City of Knoxville and the County and utilized private funding to support a 1:1 technology initiative for its students. The school leveraged this technology-rich environment to incorporate problem-based learning as the centerpiece of its instructional program. This success led to us being awarded a competitive grant to serve as the regional STEM hub for east Tennessee, drawing on over 100 higher education partnerships, as well as institutions such as Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the University of Tennessee, and serving 13 surrounding school districts. After only its second year of operation, the L&N STEM Academy was recognized as a Tennessee Reward School based on academic achievement in the top 5% of high schools in the state.
- We have also worked in partnership with Pellissippi State Community College and the Knoxville Chamber of Commerce to develop the ***Career Magnet Academy at Pellissippi State***, a career academy/early college magnet high school housed on the community college's campus. It will open in fall 2014 and offer rigorous college and career pathways for students within four themed academies. By leveraging opportunities for acceleration through dual enrollment and meaningful internships supported by industry partners, our students will have access to robust learning experiences beyond the traditional high school classroom.
  - As part of our strategy to cultivate innovative instructional programs, ensure high quality, rigorous curriculum and instruction that leads to academic success, and reduce minority and economic isolation we have expanded magnet school options to include an ***International Baccalaureate Programme at West High School*** and ***the School of Communications at Fulton High School***.

- Recognizing that traditional school settings may not adequately serve all students, our district has continued to seek alternative pathways to graduation. The **Dr. Paul L. Kelley Volunteer Academy** opened in 2010-11 to provide a safe, nurturing environment for high school students across Knox County to learn, grow and advance both socially and academically through individualized educational programs, career initiatives and community partnerships. Since its inception, the Kelley Volunteer Academy has successfully graduated 185 students who may not have otherwise graduated in a traditional classroom setting.
- In our middle schools, we developed the **Summer Bridge program** as an intensive, eight-week instructional period for eighth grade students who had not demonstrated mastery of essential skills needed for success in high school. Our most effective teachers, as identified by our TEAM evaluation process, teach these courses and, as a result, our students have been overwhelmingly successful. In the second year of this initiative (2011-12), 91% of the enrolled students successfully completed in summer 2012 and matriculated to high schools across the district, with 71% of these students successfully completing their freshman year (earning 5 or more credits) in 2012-13. For summer 2013, 92% of participating students were successful in Summer Bridge and were promoted to high school.
- With an emphasis on increasing academic rigor at all levels in middle school, a **comprehensive honors initiative** was launched during the 2012-13 school year. This new initiative was expanded into all four core content areas (i.e. language arts, math, science, and social studies). As a result, we increased the number of students in middle school honors math by 18%, while also improving the percent of those honors students who were proficient or advanced on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) from 94.5% to 97.8%. We also increased the number of middle school students earning high school Algebra I credit by 22%, with over 99% of those students scoring proficient or advanced on the state End of Course (EOC) assessment. Similarly, we increased the enrollment of middle school students earning high school Physical Science credits by 77% with a success rate of 99.5%.

- In elementary school, with the support of the Board of Education and Mayor Burchett, we launched an **early literacy initiative** in five of our high poverty schools funded by the Great Schools Partnership (GSP). The initiative features highly skilled literacy coaches who work primarily with first grade teachers and students to develop proficient readers. In 2012-13, this initiative was expanded to 10 additional high poverty schools through funding from the United Way and an additional appropriation from the Knox County Commission.
- In addition to the early literacy coaches, the KCS implemented a **Birth to Kindergarten Initiative** to provide support to parents of at-risk children in facilitating foundational skills for school-readiness and connecting with other service providers to meet family needs. This is our effort at building parental capacity as the “first teachers” of their children in order to close existing opportunity gaps. The Birth to Kindergarten Initiative, which has now been renamed Parents as Teachers, is also funded by the GSP.
- To advance student learning and achievement, and to comprehensively enhance the quality of teaching and learning, we have aggressively sought to develop our **district's talent initiatives** and build the capacity of our workforce. First, we transitioned to the new Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM) annual evaluation model, which earned us recognition from the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) for its fidelity of implementation. Second, we applied for and won \$25 million of competitive grant funding for a Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) Grant, in partnership with the National Institute on Excellence in Teaching (NIET), which expanded Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) from four to 18 schools. NIET recognized us as a TAP District of Distinction at the March 2013 annual conference based on our success in implementing the TAP system effectively. And third, we were awarded an additional \$4.7 million from the state Innovation Acceleration Fund (IAF) Grant to implement strategic compensation plans. The strategic compensation system, APEX (Advance. Perform. Excel.), includes a unique individual scorecard that incentivizes and rewards teachers based on effective instruction and student academic outcomes (TEAM), teacher leadership, and stable, effective instruction in a high need school. After three years of implementation of both TEAM and APEX, our student growth outcomes

revealed our teachers were improving their teaching and students were achieving higher levels of learning. These trends support our contention that a robust evaluation model grounded in research-based instructional practices, combined with a compensation strategy tied to student performance and teacher leadership yield gains in teaching and learning.

As we look ahead to the next five years, we will work with our talented educators, dedicated staff, strong leaders, engaged parents, supportive community and visionary School Board to deepen and accelerate  this incredibly important educational work, in order to prepare each of our students for a bright, competitive and successful future, and to ultimately benefit our wonderful community.



**WHO WE ARE**

Our Vision: The Knox County Schools will be a system where all students achieve at high levels and every school is a school of distinction. Children will begin their education at an early age, and high quality instruction, rigorous curriculum, and high standards will permeate the educational landscape from early education to graduation. Innovation and creativity will be the hallmarks of our school district: in teaching, in management and particularly in student learning. In short, we envision a future where we will achieve academic excellence for every child.

Our Work: We will advance student academic development and achievement. Each student must be challenged academically and graduate fully prepared for post-secondary learning opportunities, a rewarding career, a meaningful role in the American democracy, and an enlightened and fulfilling life. To enable our work and realize our vision, we offer our strategy and our Commitments to Our Community.

Our Strategy:

**If we:**

- Ensure effective, engaging, and personalized instruction (Goal 1);
- Support, guide, and develop our staff to ensure strong and consistent teaching in all classrooms (Goal 2); and
- Earn and enlist broad community engagement to help every student come to school excited and ready to learn (Goal 3);

**Then, we will create a Culture of Excellence that will enable us to:**

- Significantly and universally enhance student learning and academic success;
- Close achievement gaps; and
- Realize excellence for every child!

Our Commitments to Our Community:

In the Knox County Schools, we always...

- Do what is **best for students**
- Ensure that our **high expectations for student learning drive all of our work** and decisions
- Act as a **community of learners** who are supported and empowered to professionally grow and innovate
- Act as a **community of leaders** where each one of us purposefully models excellence, courage, service, and humility
- Build **trusting relationships with all of our stakeholders** by speaking honestly and respectfully because collectively, we achieve more for students




**GOAL 1: FOCUS ON EVERY STUDENT**

**prom-ise** |ˈpräməs| *n.* **1:** a declaration or assurance that one will do a particular thing or that a particular thing will happen. **2:** the quality of potential excellence.



**Introduction:** Our passion for student learning is our primary focus and drives all of our work.

When making our daily decisions – those big and small – we consistently ask ourselves, “What is best for students?” We do this for the simple reason that we want every student to be academically successful, college and career ready, economically competitive, and personally fulfilled in our increasingly complex world; to accomplish this, we must focus on every student. We promise to do everything we can to ensure that all students receive rigorous, relevant, engaging, diverse, and personalized learning experiences that propel them to reach their highest potential and become life-long learners.

**Objective 1: Guarantee excellence in teaching and learning**  Our students need to be sufficiently prepared to not only to live, but also to thrive in an increasingly complex world. In a knowledge-based economy, where individuals are asked to solve problems, think critically, collaborate, and communicate effectively, we must ensure that all of our students have the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies to be successful. We believe that all students, regardless of the classroom or school they attend, deserve to experience universally high academic standards so they can be appropriately supported and challenged to reach their highest levels of learning. Therefore, we, as a school district, need to provide rigorous, relevant, and engaging learning experiences for all of our students so they can be successful in academics and life.


**Initiatives:**

- 1. Maintain high universal standards for every student** – While Tennessee, and the Knox County Schools, have adopted rigorous academic standards, we must continue to faithfully and consistently enact these standards in every classroom throughout our district. We must be clear

and unequivocal about uniformly high and comprehensive expectations regarding teaching and learning. These expectations, and the necessary supports to reach them, must be in place for every student in every classroom and in every school throughout our district. We make this commitment because we believe every child can learn and has the capacity to achieve his or her fullest potential, regardless of income, race, geography, disability or language. To us, this means enhancing cultural competency, continuing to broaden inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education setting, and focusing resources to support schools with a high proportion of low-income students. We may also need to provide more clarity and guidance about how our rigorous academic standards translate to student mastery, and ensure that a grade of an “A” in one classroom is the equivalent of an “A” in another classroom.

**2. Strengthen students’ academic foundations** – For all of our students to acquire and master the appropriate skills and knowledge to become creative, critical thinkers and problem solvers, they must first establish solid academic foundations. These strong building blocks allow each student to master more complex academic and non-academic tasks throughout their school careers to become successful 21<sup>st</sup> century learners.

- a. Focus relentlessly on attaining literacy and numeracy proficiencies for every child in every grade. Increasing student achievement cannot be accomplished without focusing on these two critical areas of learning. We must ensure that every student can read proficiently by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and continue to consistently read at or above grade level throughout their entire academic career. Literacy is not only critical to a student’s academic success, but also to his or her lifelong ability to learn and grow as a citizen and participate in our society and economy. Focusing on mathematics and incorporating it into a larger STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) curriculum will give students important foundational knowledge and access to rich future learning opportunities.
- b. Ensure that all elementary teachers are effective teachers of reading. All of our elementary students simply must be proficient or advanced in reading; it is the gateway to their future academic success. This means that every elementary school teacher needs to be

knowledgeable about and skilled in the complex science of teaching reading. They need to be able to effectively diagnose individual students' needs, prescribe aligned interventions and enrichment opportunities, and move all students forward. We must support our teachers in developing this expertise. 

c. Provide students with rigorous learning experiences that are more authentic and relevant (e.g. applied mathematics, reading scientific texts). Learning, at its core, should be exciting and fun! We want all of our students to be skilled and voracious learners, which means providing them multiple opportunities to access course offerings, instruction, and educational experiences with content relevant and engaging to them.

**3. Cultivate the “Whole Child” by providing diverse learning opportunities**– It is not sufficient for our students to have only strong foundational math and reading skills; we must also ensure that we are developing well-rounded, happy, life-long learners. We want to increase their exposure to new activities and experiences, including those in the arts, music, leadership, wellness, cultural awareness, and community service so they can develop into curious, enlightened, well-rounded and fulfilled individuals.

a. Promote inter-disciplinary project-based learning so students can explore their curiosities and learn through doing. Authentic problem solving can be messy and our students will need to creatively and collaboratively determine how to identify, approach, and solve challenges, both in classrooms and in the real world. This will require them to make connections across content and grade levels and be actively involved in managing their own learning.


b. Broaden academic and non-academic opportunities for all students so they can have exposure, as early as elementary school, to classes and extracurricular experiences that are most interesting to them. This will include academic courses, such as art, music, and foreign language, as well as more non-traditional learning opportunities such as service learning and internships.

c. Expose students to broad and varied perspectives - so that our students and staff can appreciate diverse viewpoints to enrich their learning experiences. As a district, we


value all forms of diversity as we believe that recognizing and appreciating difference is a critical mechanism for creating the self-awareness, empathy, and collaboration that we value as critical to student learning and development. This is why we want to embrace the importance of promoting diversity within our schools and district so that we, as an organization, continue to benefit and grow from the rich tapestry of culture, background and perspective in our school system.

**4. Improve district-wide systems to monitor student learning**  As educators, we need to know

how well each of our students is learning what we are teaching. This cannot be done without assessment and close monitoring. Assessment may take the form of a written standardized test required by the state, or it may be as simple as a quick verbal check for understanding executed by a teacher in her classroom. While we all want to avoid any situation where students might be assessed more than is necessary or appropriate, it is important to recognize that on-going, authentic and aligned assessments are critical components of the teaching and learning cycle. Having this information will allow us to continually adjust our instruction to maximize student learning, and make good educational decisions for our youth. Therefore, we need to have comprehensive progress monitoring systems so that all of our stakeholders – parents, students, teachers, principals, and community members – can speak the same language and know how well a student is progressing through his or her academic career. This detailed level of data is essential if we are to successfully provide every child truly personalized learning experiences.

a. Design district-wide student monitoring system  It are aligned, informative, and clear. This will likely require us to construct an infrastructure in which several sub-systems “speak” to each other so that data can be effectively linked, easy to understand, and use. This will empower teachers to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning, and address them in real time.

b. Re-examine the assessment landscape to ensure purpose and coherence. Our students should only take assessments that are either required by state and federal policy or are valuable in that they provide the right type of data to inform and support teaching and

learning. Our assessments should be primarily driven by teachers' need for information, and must be streamlined so that they are not duplicative. 

c. Continue our commitment to collaborative student progress monitoring. We must embrace and enhance our Professional Learning Community<sup>1</sup> (PLC) structures, as they are one of our primary mechanisms for carefully monitoring student learning on a regular basis. For our PLCs to be as robust and constructive as possible, we need all of our school principals and other instructional leaders to deeply understand their purpose. This means clearly articulating PLC expectations and providing teachers the tools, support, and time to work together effectively.

d. Continue to build the capacity of our educators to make student-centered data-informed decisions so our students receive personalized learning plans. As a district, we need to continue to clarify expectations and processes on how to collect and use data for our staff and provide the requisite support. We also recognize many educators are doing an exceptional job of effectively using student data to inform instruction and we want to highlight their work, too.


**5. Demand operational and administrative excellence to enable effective education** – With nearly 8,000 staff members, we, as Knox County Schools, do much more than educate children. We also have a host of administrative responsibilities. Whether we're managing school buildings, budgets, or buses, we must be respectful, responsible, and responsive. We believe that classroom instruction can be significantly enhanced when these operational responsibilities are done well. Therefore, we will hold ourselves to the highest standards and be accountable to attaining this level of organizational excellence.

a. Evaluate educational programming, and allocate our resources to most effectively bolster student learning. To secure the highest levels of student learning, we need to know what is working. Through program evaluation and return on investment analysis, we will be

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<sup>1</sup> Professional Learning Communities – Developed by renowned educational researcher, Richard DuFour, are school-based structures that allow teachers to work collaboratively to inform and improve their instructional practice on a weekly basis. Teachers use inquiry, data analysis, model lessons, collaborative planning and sharing of research-based best practices and effective pedagogical strategies to seek to improve and enhance their instructional practice together.

able to understand at the effect of our educational spending on improving student outcomes, which will influence how we allocate future resources. This data will help us determine what initiatives we need to continue, stop, or start. Additionally, we must continue to carefully watch over our operational and administrative expenditures, which are influenced by full-time equivalent (FTE) positions, school Average Daily Membership (ADM), , as well as personnel salaries, utilities, and other operating costs. As part of our last strategic plan, we designed and created a data warehouse, which has been instrumental in facilitating a high level of transparency in our district’s processes, practices, and initiatives, and has allowed our school system to carefully measure and report on the return on taxpayer’s educational investments. The public and school leaders now have fiscal information available by school, including actual expenditures for regular K-12 instruction, instructional support, pupil support, and building administration.

b. Ensure operational alignment and coherence – We need to ensure that all aspects of  our instructional work are supported and reinforced by our administrative and operational work; in other words, “our right hand needs to talk to our left.” This means clarifying roles and responsibilities, empowering all of our people to speak up and ask questions, and providing all of our stakeholder the “big picture.” All of our staff members, including those in central office departments, will need to very clearly understand how their work enables and supports the critical work of teaching and learning that is happening in our classrooms.

c. Maximize efficiency and effectiveness in operational functions to support the classroom - Transportation, facilities, technology, finance, payroll, human resources, food services, and security are all examples of operational functions that, if done effectively, can enable and support teaching and learning in our schools. We must develop measures of effective management in each of these functional areas – key performance indicators – and work diligently toward achieving these levels of efficiency, so that we might maximize the resources and levels of service that are dedicated to supporting the educational work in our schools.



**Objective 2: Personalize learning** – Each of our over 57,000 students is unique and deserves learning opportunities tailored to meet his or her individual needs. We believe this is critical to ensuring that every student graduates with the skills, knowledge, and mindset to be college and career ready, economically competitive, and personally fulfilled. Additionally, in order to effectively personalize learning we must actively engage students and incorporate their voice and choice in helping to determine what they want to learn and how they want to learn it.

**Initiatives:**

**1. Design technology-enabled personalized learning** – Technology, and in particular instructional technology, has seemingly limitless potential in providing our students the opportunity to engage in learning outside the confines of the four walls of the classroom and at any time. It allows students to be in the driver’s seat as they navigate a virtually infinite number of resources “on demand.” This, in turn, will elevate their curiosity, accelerate their learning, and situate them as confident and capable 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. Instructional technology also has the potential to transform teaching. Our educators can utilize technology to provide even more creative, engaging and rigorous instruction for students, and leverage today’s incredible technology tools to help differentiate their teaching. With these tools inside and outside of the classroom, our students will transition from consumers to producers as they actively synthesize content, apply knowledge, and make connections to what they already know. We have already begun this exciting work. In fall 2013, we implemented a groundbreaking Personalized Learning Environment (PLE) pilot program in eleven of our eighty-nine schools, which we branded the School Technology Challenge. Looking forward to the next five years, we aim to:

- a. Provide appropriate instructional technology to every teacher and every student.

We believe that every child deserves access to effective, personalized instruction and the opportunity to be successful. Therefore, our goal is to provide a high quality PLE that will effectively enable, teach, support, and challenge our students so that each has the opportunity to be successful. This is why we must embrace a full-scale district-wide implementation of personalized learning supported by technology for all students. In grades

4-12, we envision a full 1:1 deployment of technology: one digital device (laptop or tablet) for each student and one for each teacher. In the lower grades, comprehensive instructional technology would be deployed in a “blended learning” model<sup>2</sup>. At all levels, technology would be used to facilitate personalized student learning through challenging and age-appropriate educational activities.

b. Design the requisite technology environment that includes high quality and high functioning hardware, software, infrastructure and support. We are proud of the investment we have made in comprehensive job-embedded teacher support in the form of Technology, Pedagogy, and Content Knowledge (TPaCK) Coaches. These are full-time teacher leadership positions filled with experienced and excellent classroom teachers who lead and support their colleagues in making the transition to technology-enabled PLEs for students. They are invaluable and our goal is to have one full-time TPaCK Coach assigned to each PLE school. We also have invested significantly in technical support personnel and physical infrastructure (such as wireless networks) to support the integration of instructional technology into the classroom. All of these components are critical to ensuring the effective use of technology as a teaching and learning tool in our schools.

c. Learn from our School Technology Challenge schools’ innovative practices and incorporate those lessons learned into our future strategies and initiatives. We are proud of the district’s eleven PLE pilot schools that were selected based upon their articulated vision of PLE. Throughout the 2013-14 school year, we solicited their feedback regarding their experiences, and how we could continue to improve our use of technology to create effective PLEs. With 11 schools, 34 administrators, 600 teachers, and 6,000 students involved in this exciting pilot, we learned much about the joys, challenges, surprises, and accomplishments that accompany any new initiative. As each school had the autonomy to define its implementation process in support of our district’s overarching vision, we have the benefit of eleven unique models with which to identify and learn from their best practices to improve student outcomes.

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<sup>2</sup> Blended learning refers to the combination of online and face-to-face learning

- d. Develop a sustainable replacement schedule for instructional devices – As we move toward developing goals and strategies to enhance the capacity of our instructional staff, we must make sure that our equipment is appropriately deployed, repaired, and replaced. We cannot afford to lose the momentum of an exciting, well-prepared lesson to the lack of access to instructional tools. Therefore, we aim to develop a sustainable strategy for the procurement and replacement of instructional technology devices.
- e. Maximize the functionality of our learning management system. We want our district’s Learning Management System (LMS) to seamlessly deliver content, promote robust and authentic digital interaction and collaboration; and use a cloud-based repository to store digital resources. We will launch our district-wide adoption of a new LMS, *Canvas*, in the 2014-15 school year. It will allow teachers to manage student learning through assignments, activities, and educational experiences that can differ for each individual student or for each group of students who are at the same level of mastery. We want our LMS to work in conjunction with enhanced professional skill in differentiated instruction to enable our teachers to simultaneously support students who are struggling, facilitate accelerated academic growth in students who are on grade level, and truly challenge students who are excelling.
- 2. Differentiate instruction to meet student learning needs** – Every student has different strengths, interests, learning preferences, and areas for growth. They also all learn at different rates. Therefore, we must enhance our use of data and research-based methods to identify what makes every child a unique learner and provide him or her personalized learning experiences. As educators, we must support students who are struggling, challenge those who are succeeding to do even better, and enable all our students to reach their full potential.
- a. Continue to support our educators as they differentiate their core classroom instruction for their students. Great teachers have always provided excellent instruction that is responsive to and tailored around the individual needs, learning styles, personalities and strengths of their students. Expertly differentiating teaching, effectively grouping

students, using collaborative problem-based and project-based learning, integrating technology, drawing upon deep pedagogical skills all the while building and maintaining meaningful student relationships is tremendously challenging! Therefore, we will need to provide all of our educators access to high quality supports and resources in implementing effective strategies for differentiation, and provide constant, accurate, and helpful feedback. This will allow them to continuously build their capacity to individualize instruction that allows students to work at their own pace (accelerate/remediate) and explore instructional concepts through areas of personal interest that ensure engagement and deep learning.

b. Expand opportunities for advancement upon mastery. Personalizing learning means that students should be able to progress through the curriculum at a pace best suited for them. This is why we want to explore the potential benefits of transitioning (or partially transitioning) from a traditional grading scale to standards-based grading<sup>3</sup>. Ideally, students could then move to either the next course – or to a different course, altogether – once they had mastered a course’s curriculum regardless of when that mastery occurs during the school year. In other words, a student should be able to progress independently of “seat time” (i.e. how many hours they log in a particular class) and instead, based on when they have mastered the course material.

c. Effective implementation of appropriate academic interventions. The goal of effective learning supports is to align all resources within a school and a district in a collaborative manner to create a single, well-integrated system of instruction and intervention that is informed by student achievement data. Students who are not making adequate academic gains are identified through a universal screen early in their education so that progress can be frequently monitored, academic skills increased, and the negative effects of academic failure lessened. The district will support and provide resources for

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<sup>3</sup> Standards-based grading: This alternative grading system does not separate out tests, homework, or projects. All of the student’s work is used to assess the student’s mastery of the essential standards, providing a detailed picture of which standards a student has mastered. Many researchers and practitioners believe standards-based grading is more accurate, more consistent, more meaningful, and more supportive of student learning.

appropriate and effective academic intervention in all schools (e.g. tutoring, academic recovery programs).

d. Ensure that all students are challenged – We must provide rigorous educational experiences and activities for all students, including those who are excelling at the highest levels of learning. Students who are able to achieve in advanced concepts and content must have access to challenging and enriching instruction to support them in continuing to accelerate their learning. In short, we must continue to challenge, push, and support students who are excelling academically, so that all our students might reach their full and unique potential.

**3. Structure our schools to best meet the learning needs of students** – We must not fall into the trap of passively agreeing to “do school as it has always been done.” Instead, we should challenge traditional assumptions and conventional wisdom so we can craft learning environments that prioritize improving student achievement, above all else. This will likely require us to investigate many of the long-held formal structures that are deeply rooted in our society’s conception of school and schooling.

a. Modify time in schools, both in terms of the school day and the school year, to maximize student learning. We will examine how the school schedule and the academic calendar may be used to maximize student learning. We will explore the feasibility of transitioning from a traditional school calendar to a “Balanced Calendar”<sup>4</sup>, which can provide students more immediate intervention and enrichment opportunities. Additionally, we will also investigate transitioning our high school schedules away from a block schedule back to a six or seven period day to increase the amount of time students spend on core instruction. Lastly, we will continue to encourage our schools to develop innovative school schedules based on the needs of their students, families, and communities.

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<sup>4</sup> A Balanced Calendar reduces the long summer break and simply apportions these days throughout the school year, producing more frequent breaks, called intersessions. Intersessions can be structured various ways, which range from 3 weeks of pure vacation to providing academic programming (both interventions and enrichment opportunities) for two of those three weeks

- b. Enable departmentalization of upper-elementary grades so those teachers can focus on building their expertise in a few subject areas rather than serve as “generalists.” Traditionally, elementary school teachers are expected to be “jacks of all trades,” responsible for delivering all core instruction (e.g. math, reading, science, and social studies) to all of their students. This arrangement, however, can limit elementary teachers’ abilities to truly master certain content areas, particularly in upper elementary grades (i.e. fourth and fifth grades), where the standards are significantly more complex and rigorous. By providing elementary schools the opportunity to departmentalize, which would reassign upper-elementary school teachers to focus on one or two content areas, they could build the instructional expertise of their staffs.
- c. Re-examine and possibly expand the role of summer and out-of-school time. We believe that in today’s hyper-connected world, learning can happen anywhere anytime and we want to maximize the number of opportunities we provide our students to learn outside of the traditional school day. Therefore, we want to explore the possibility of expanding the role of summer and out-of-school time learning. This may lead us to partner with nonprofits, community organizations, and industry so we can diversify our programmatic offerings and provide these opportunities to more students.
- 4. Continue to provide multiple pathways to success** – We believe strongly that all students can be successful, but we recognize that not all students may find success in the same way or the same learning environment. We have been committed to providing a variety of educational options for students (in particular, choices besides the traditional comprehensive high school at the secondary level) so that each student might find success in the setting that makes the most sense for him or her. We will continue to provide diverse educational opportunities so that every student can take advantage of new and interesting experiences, which include Advanced Placement (AP), honors courses, International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, multiple magnet school options, dual enrollment and dual credit experiences, and other specialized programming.
- a. Continue to design innovative and non-traditional educational models that were either outlined in the first strategic plan, *Excellence for All Children*, or will be developed in

the next five years based on research and best practices. In the past five years, we have opened three innovative high schools (the L&N STEM magnet academy, the Paul L. Kelley Volunteer Academy, and the Career Magnet Academy at Pellissippi State), created a School of Communications magnet at Fulton High School, a STEAM pathway at Greene Elementary School and Vine Middle School, established an International Baccalaureate magnet program at West High School, and applied for an International Baccalaureate magnet program at Bearden Middle School. We want to build upon that momentum and continue our commitment to providing our students with attractive educational options where they will experience success. This also includes designing engaging middle grades and elementary options that will provide students choice and support their academic achievement.

b. Think strategically about the role of charter schools – Charter schools are almost inevitable in Tennessee’s current education policy landscape. **Our community does not necessarily have a philosophical opposition to, or fear of, charter schools.** It is clear, however, that we will insist that any charter schools authorized within Knox County be high quality and offer a viable education to our children. We will carefully consider the collaborative and supportive partnerships our district can forge with these new educational entities, as they may become part of the education portfolio in Knox County, so that our children are the ultimate beneficiaries.

c. Realize the full potential of distance-learning and digital learning opportunities as a mechanism to provide students and families more choice in selecting academic courses. We believe that technology can be a cost effective and powerful tool for equity as it provides our students more access and opportunity. They would no longer be limited to the programs within their “home” school, but would be able to take advantage of a broader array of courses and experiential learning opportunities.

d. Continue to promote and provide high quality Career and Technical education (CTE). We believe that CTE courses are powerful and engaging tools to effectively prepare our students for community colleges, technical schools, four-year colleges and universities, and more broadly, for meaningful and fulfilling careers. These programs are uniquely

designed to broaden our students' experiences by demonstrating the relevance of academic content through real-world application. As a result, we will redouble our commitment to providing all of our students access to rigorous, engaging, project-based opportunities that occur in authentic learning environments.

**Objective 3: Facilitate high-quality student supports** – We recognize that for some of our students there are factors and dynamics happening outside the classroom which can affect their performance inside the classroom. We know that robust health and wellness supports and broad access to social services can promote children's overall well-being so they can come to school ready and excited to learn. It takes a committed, well-trained, and coordinated support team to ensure the highest levels of student learning. While we cannot necessarily provide all the services required to address all outside distractions to learning, we have a responsibility to offer, facilitate, leverage, and/or broker a range of strong supports for the students who need them the most. Collaboration with families and governmental and community entities will be key to ensuring all students and staff are physically and emotionally healthy enough to participate in the learning process.

**Initiatives:**

- 1. Strengthen and scale Community Schools** - We see schools as integral parts of a community and are proud of the Community Schools we have launched in the past five years. These schools have an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, and youth and community engagement that lead to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. They address challenges to student learning through access to services and supports, extended learning opportunities, and partnership with families and neighborhoods. Our Community Schools have grown and developed beautifully over the past several years, and offer insights into how to refine and expand this important strategy for further strengthening student supports.
- 2. Identify barriers to learning and provide timely and appropriate interventions** – Our students deserve every opportunity to become their best selves and in order to come to school



ready and excited to learn, they may need some additional social and emotional supports. The first step, however, is diagnosing what factors may be holding students back from learning.

- a. Ensure a systematic identification process for all at-risk students. Our district needs to have one comprehensive identification process, so that the same protocol and the same terminology are utilized by all of the adults involved (e.g. educators, service providers, government agencies, etc.). This diagnostic protocol, which was discussed previously in terms of academically at-risk students, will also be used to help behaviorally at-risk students. It will support our efforts at implementing a district-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) initiative that provides intensive and intentional supports for behaviorally at-risk students. Moreover, PBIS will also create an opportunity for our district to meaningfully partner more closely with outside agencies and service providers. We will also redouble our efforts to maximize the effectiveness of Professional Intervention Teams (PIT) and School Support Teams so that more attention can be paid to students who have social, emotional, or other barriers, which may not have yet been identified.
  - b. Develop, communicate, and oversee a portfolio of effective student supports. We need to select and faithfully implement student supports that are research-based and have been shown to positively improve student learning and wellbeing. To do this we will need to:
    1. Provide consistent and high-quality training to those responsible for delivering these supports and interventions;
    2. Develop program evaluation systems to gauge how effective these initiatives are, so that we can course-correct in a timely fashion when necessary;
    3. Transition to digital student case files so that all service providers are aware of a student's academic, social, and emotional history.
- 3. Expand high quality early-learning opportunities** – Research consistently shows the value of exposing children, as young as three years old, to rich learning environments to develop their academic, social, and emotional well-being. Investments made in early childhood education provide a significant return on student learning in a child's elementary years and throughout his or her academic career. We want to do everything we can to ensure that our youngest students

arrive in kindergarten ready to learn. To do this, we want to first examine our early-learning curriculum to ensure appropriate rigor and alignment to our state's K-12 standards. Second, we aim to assess and select a robust, research-based early childhood assessment that secures valuable student learning data but is also appropriate for young children and sensitive to their cognitive, social, and emotional needs. Lastly, we will continue to maintain, and possibly increase, the several early childhood education programs we already offer and ensure that all available capacity is utilized.

**4. Ensure that all students have a safe, healthy, and inviting learning environment – To**

ensure that all students and staff come to school each day excited and ready to learn, we must provide an instructional setting that is conducive to student learning.

a. Safe – While each of our schools has both a security system and a school safety officer onsite, we want to strengthen our efforts over the next five years. To do this, we aim to develop and implement more robust tracking systems, encourage our stakeholders to more regularly report their concerns (as that signals a high public confidence in our security services), and to continue to improve our customer service. It also means that our students and staff feel a sense of belonging – emotional, physical, and academic – with their schools and communities.

b. Healthy – We are proud to serve 53,000 meals every day to our students. We see this work as critical to promoting student learning and wellbeing so we need to strengthen our efforts at providing affordable, nutritious, and delicious meals in friendly, safe, and sanitary environments. In addition, we must continue to adhere to our exacting standards in school environmental safety and air quality, and actively promote student and staff wellness.

c. Inviting – As cornerstones of our community, our schools must be clean, comfortable and inviting to all the children and adults who walk their hallways. While we have a dedicated staff committed to overseeing the appearance and functionality of each of our buildings, we need to maximize our resources in this area of our work. This means guaranteeing that all maintenance requests are handled in a timely and professional manner,

satisfactorily resolved, and diligently documented. It also means that our schools have appropriate quantities of instructional materials, furniture, and supplies.

**5. Provide intensive support for high-needs schools** – We recognize that in order to achieve academic success for every student, we may need to provide some additional support to schools that have struggled with acute challenges. Schools with high concentrations of students in poverty, those that have had difficulty securing exceptional talent, or those schools where student academic outcomes are not reflective of their full potential may require additional resources and concentrated support in order to maximize student success.

- a. Targeted support for Focus and Priority Schools. Through our Office of Innovation and School Support, we will continue to provide targeted and intensive support for schools that have been identified by the Tennessee Department of Education as Focus or Priority Schools. This significant level of support includes leadership coaching and close supervision, thought partnership, assistance with data analysis and effective strategy development as well as regular, in-depth progress monitoring.
- b. Staffing support for high needs schools. Our goal is to have an effective educator in every classroom. Some of our schools, however, continue to struggle with identifying and securing top talent; these schools require additional assistance. For this purpose, we commit to providing deeper and year-round staffing support to these struggling schools by making early hiring contracts more lucrative and effective, by assigning them a human resources staffing specialist to help fill vacancies whenever they arise with high quality candidates, and regularly meeting with the principal to identify new school and programmatic needs.

**GOAL 2: INVEST IN OUR PEOPLE** 

**ca·pac·i·ty** |kə'pasitē| *n.* **1:** the maximum amount that something can contain or produce. **2:** the ability or power to do, experience, or understand something.

**Introduction** - We recognize that our students can only achieve at their highest levels when our people – each a leader in his or her own right – also excel in their work. We are fortunate to have people within our organization who work tirelessly to **make our district great** and we want to continuously support them by providing high quality and ample professional growth opportunities that allow them to strengthen their skills and to also learn new ones. We, as an organization, commit to encouraging our staff every step of the way and, as our hard work pays off and student outcomes increase, we will celebrate and recognize these accomplishments.

**Objective 1: Build and support our community of continuous learners** – To ensure all of our students are effective learners, our staff must continue to be learners too! **After all, we are in the business of learning. In order to become an effective learning organization, we – the Knox County Schools – must recognize that continuous learning must happen, not only for our students but also for all of our staff.** This means creating organizational norms that celebrate curiosity, appropriate risk-taking, and saying “I don’t know but I’ll find out.” While learning can be invigorating and exciting, it can also be uncomfortable and challenging. As a result, we want to set the expectation – to all of our students and staff – that we are a part of a broader community of continuous learners and that it is expected for everyone to adopt a “growth mindset.”<sup>5</sup> To encourage everyone to learn, our district will provide differentiated and multiple professional development opportunities for all of our people, both in the central office and at schools. These opportunities must be relevant, timely, and engaging so everyone can continue to grow and improve their practice.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Stanford University psychologist, Carol Dweck, a growth mindset is defined as one in which people believe that new intelligence, knowledge, and skills can be acquired through learning and resilience.

*Initiatives:***1. Continually support and build the instructional capacity of our educators –** The

cornerstone of our work is to ensure that great teaching is happening in every classroom every day, in every school across our district. We owe it to each of our students to provide consistent high-quality instruction that is grounded in proven research identifying pedagogical best practices.

a. Ensure access to high-quality instructional supports – We want all of our educators to consistently draw upon research-based instructional strategies, advocate and receive targeted support when needed, faithfully implement our curriculum, and receive timely and accurate feedback for continuous improvement. This means we need provide resources (e.g. curriculum frameworks, content-specific materials) and people (e.g. teacher-leaders, instructional coaches, lead teachers) that are high quality and readily accessible. While each school will have the opportunity to self-determine the type and level of support for maximum instructional improvement, the rigorous standards and curriculum under which all the Knox County Schools operate, will be constant. As a district, while we have built a repository of resources, such as content area webpages, we need to do a better job of advertising these materials and inviting educators to engage, while further expanding our district's **knowledge base**. By having all of our instructional resources in one place, we will relieve our educators of the unnecessary burden of reinventing the “instructional wheel.”

b. Deepen, extend, and expand our educators’ content knowledge and pedagogical practice. Our educators need to be deeply fluent in their content so they can provide effective instruction. Therefore, as a district we need to intensify and personalize content-specific professional development opportunities to encourage them to continually strengthen their level of understanding. Additionally, our educators need sufficient opportunities to practice these new instructional strategies and receive timely and constructive feedback.

**2. Improve teaching quality through collaboration –** We are fortunate to have tremendously talented educators in our classrooms and schools! We know, however, that we are more

successful together than we are alone, and that teachers are more effective educating children when they benefit from the support, collaboration and expertise of their colleagues. We view collaborative efforts such as TAP cluster meetings, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and cooperative professional development as important structures that further develop the instructional capacity and effectiveness of all of our educators. To strengthen these efforts, we aim to clarify the overarching expectations of these strategies, rather than focusing disproportionately on the processes that define them. We believe that if we do this well, collaboration will be a powerful lever for continuous adult learning and instructional improvement in all of our schools.

- 3. Ensure that all staff members receive calibrated, timely, and meaningful performance feedback** - If we ask our students to rise to the challenge, we – as Knox County Schools’ staff members – must do the same. As professionals entrusted with the care of over 57,000 children, our work is too important for us to not do it well. Just as we provide all students feedback on their progress, we also want to hold that same expectation for all of our staff. We can only do better if we first, know better, and then are given ample opportunities to practice. Performance feedback is a powerful tool for professional learning and growth when it is **high quality and actionable**, which is why we must ensure that all staff receive timely, appropriate, and actionable feedback to continuously improve. To ensure value and integrity to our district’s performance management processes, we will:

- a. Clearly articulate the expectations for all staff members – Over the past five years, we have worked to articulate what our people should know and be able to do in their various roles. We need to deepen and broaden these efforts such that we include every staff member across our district, those at schools and those within the central office. For our teachers, we have codified these expectations in our TEAM and TAP instructional rubrics, for our principals we continue to refine our principal competencies, which are aligned to the Administrator Evaluation Rubric and Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards, and for our central office staff members we have identified six competencies to which we hold all central office administrators accountable. Moreover, we have redesigned performance

appraisal tools for instructional assistants, secretaries, and other classified staff such that they are competency-based for the specific role. We commit to continually refining these expectations so that all staff members have a clear understanding of their role and how it directly impacts student achievement. We do this because we want all of our people to understand, internalize, and enact these competencies, as we believe maintaining these performance expectations will help us create the Culture of Excellence that we, as a district, strive to achieve

b. Maximize effectiveness of evaluation systems and ensure they are consistent, calibrated and developmental. We have a set of performance evaluation systems in place, which we commit to continuously refine for maximum effectiveness, but also want to expand these systems so that all of our staff members will receive developmental feedback.

1. For our teachers: We will intensify our efforts to provide our teachers with impactful professional development regarding the purpose, process, and substance of the evaluation systems. We want our teachers to understand our evaluation tools as holistic and developmental supports rather than strictly compliance checklists. The 2014-15 school year will mark our district's fourth year of implementation with either TEAM or TAP. We have found that a deep understanding of these observation tools often leads to more effective instruction and increased student learning<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, we must collectively continue to learn and grow in our understanding. In the coming years, we will sustain and amplify our concerted efforts to provide high quality professional development to our educators on the evaluation rubric and its components. We will do so in order that these best practices become embedded in how we educate students and professionally develop adults. Additionally, we must ensure that we go beyond understanding these valuable instructional tools and ensure that they are faithfully implemented in all of our schools. This means providing our observers and school leaders deep professional development and robust support so they have a shared understanding of the instructional rubric, what constitutes best instructional practices,

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<sup>6</sup> 2014 Educational Return on Investment Report and Parthenon analysis as part of *Smarter School Spending* initiative.

and how best to deliver actionable and helpful feedback. And lastly, we want to strategically connect our evaluation systems to other elements of our district's instructional practices. Our evaluation systems reflect best research-based instructional practice, and those expectations need to be consistently reinforced in all aspects of our instructional work, whether that be within team PLCs or individual lesson planning. In short, we want to ensure that all of our educators – observers and those being observed – are fluent in identifying and recognizing strong instructional practice.

2. For our principals: The Tennessee Department of Education will launch a revised evaluation rubric for principals in the 2014-15 school year. In alignment with this new tool, our district has developed the School Teams Achieve Results (STAR) Plan, which charges principals, their instructional leadership teams, and their staffs to work collectively to improve student outcomes. This performance plan is aligned with the Principal Performance Contract and with the goals and objectives outlined in this strategic plan. This alignment is intentional; as we want all of our schools working towards our district's overarching vision. We believe that this coherence will bring greater clarity and focus regarding implementation of our strategic priorities and commitments.

3. For our central office staff members: We have already embedded six core competencies and additional role-specific competencies into our Central Office Performance Evaluation System. This performance management tool allows our central office staff to set professional goals, self-assess how they have done in meeting those goals, and have frank developmental performance-based conversations with their supervisors. In the next five years, however, we aim to continually refine this evaluation system so that it consistently provides high quality and actionable feedback for professional growth.

- c. Develop, implement, and monitor formal feedback loops throughout all levels of our organization – Our goal is to gather feedback beyond just traditional supervisory structures. We believe all feedback is a gift, especially when that feedback is critical or constructive,




because we know that is the only way we can improve. As such, we want to create additional feedback loops so that our stakeholders can regularly offer their perspectives on a variety of issues. We will create formal feedback loops throughout all levels of our organization because we believe that together, as the broader Knox County Schools community, we make better decisions for students when we have more and better information. By embracing the idea of continuous improvement, we are setting the expectation that all aspects of our work – both in the central office and at schools – can be refined. This means embedding feedback mechanisms throughout every central office department, at every school, and broadly across the district so that stakeholders have multiple opportunities to share their input.

- 4. Build capacity of our staff through high quality, tailored, and relevant professional development opportunities** – We encourage and expect all of our people to proactively seek professional growth opportunities so they can continue to be challenged by their work and improve their performance. To reinforce our district’s commitment to be a community of continuous learners, we aim to provide everyone with robust and high quality professional development opportunities. This expectation extends beyond our schools and into our central office, as we all have a professional responsibility to better ourselves, and, in turn, better student learning.

**a. School-Based staff:** Our school-based staffs interact with students and families each and every day. Therefore, we, as a district, have a responsibility to ensure that high quality and sufficient supports are made available to them. Just like our students, our school-based staffs are unique and require different types and levels of support and we must encourage and authorize them to seek out the types that are most effective for their development. We will continue to provide a menu of high quality professional learning opportunities that are aligned with the identified and articulated needs of our school-based staff. It also means, however, that school-based staff will need to take initiative to seek – and possibly leverage their expertise to create – these professional development opportunities.

**b. Central Office staff members:** Every action we take in the central office has an effect on schools and student learning. This means that everyone in the central office, regardless of

the specific department in which they work, has a responsibility to learn and adopt best practices. It also means: 1) cultivating and maintaining close relationships with school-based staff and other stakeholders support faithful implementation of initiatives, 2) receiving regular performance-based feedback, and 3) proactively seeking opportunities for learning and improvement. We will need to design professional development modules that are aligned to the Central Office Performance Evaluation system. Our goal is to provide all of our central office staff members access to high-quality and relevant professional development so they are supported in their work.

5. **Create a regional school support structure**  We believe in the tremendous power of school leadership and want to provide our principals with the supports they need to accelerate student learning. Our principals have articulated a need for a more robust, regional supervisory and support structure to facilitate and assist with the important work we are doing in schools. Transitioning to a regional support structure will reposition many support services to better serve our principals, and enable educational decision-making closer to the local school level. This will promote timelier and deeper levels of support, and increase vertical alignment throughout our district as elementary, middle, and high schools would be served within the same support region. The regional school support structure will ultimately provide more customized and convenient professional learning opportunities for our school leaders and their staffs.

**Objective 2: Build and support our community of leaders** – We recognize that every adult in our school system can be – and should be – an educational leader. From principals and supervisors, to custodians and food service workers, to teachers and aides, we all have the ability to positively impact the educational life of our students. Every day, each of us must take ownership and do the right thing, make the right decisions, demonstrate leadership to move our schools and our school system forward in support of our children. We continually want to build the capacity of our workforce and, as a result, ensure they are provided challenging opportunities to grow, learn, and do their job effectively. In part, this means we need to facilitate the growth and development of our

people, as well as create more robust and specific career pathways for upward and lateral mobility. Thus, our staff members can leverage their strengths and follow their passions, while they can stretch their leadership by gaining new knowledge and skills.

### Initiatives

#### **1. Encourage and authorize staff to be educational leaders and creative problem-solvers -**

Our staff are knowledgeable practitioners who understand first-hand the challenges and realities of educating children well. This is why we want to encourage and incentivize our people to use their expertise and creativity to improve our district and the learning opportunities we provide our students. We want to consider piloting KCS Innovation Labs to arm our staff with the necessary resources to innovate, design, prototype, and iterate their solutions to our district's challenges. This would allow us to create a comprehensive process for brainstorming and invention. In the spirit of innovation, this concept could encompass physical labs (both in schools and across schools) or virtual collaboration. It could also leverage the brainpower of individuals, cohorts of individuals, or already formed teams within schools. The sky is the limit! Ultimately, our aim is to build the capacity and efficacy of our staff and catalyze new and better ways of organizational thinking and being. Additionally, it also means building our collective knowledge-base as it is not enough to develop new and great ideas; the knowledge must be stored, organized, and made accessible to the rest of our staff. We are, after all, a community of learners. To maximize our effectiveness, we are going to need to design and implement systems that can disseminate our collective knowledge base so that we can share ideas, best practices, and resources easily and often.

**2. Develop and articulate robust career pathways -** We pride ourselves on being innovative thinkers. This allows us to creatively develop new and different roles within our organization that map to our needs and to the talents of our workforce. To ensure that our staff members' strengths and talents are matched with our greatest educational needs, while acknowledging that many of our most effective educators want to stay as close to the classroom as possible, we must define roles and responsibilities for leadership positions throughout our organization.

Additionally, we must also identify robust career pathways -- including non-administrative instructional leadership roles -- that leverage and maximize the abilities of our people. Some ways we might do this are to:

- a. Differentiate school administrative roles to make them more reflective of the various responsibilities that fall under their purview. For example, consider developing quasi-administrative roles in schools that support necessary non-instructional functions such as facilities, discipline, and athletics, which may be a more cost effective position than an Assistant Principal, and could allow school leaders to dedicate more of their time to instructional leadership.
  - b. Clearly communicate the roles and responsibilities of all KCS positions to ensure best fit. We want all our people to be in the roles where their particular skills and talents are best utilized to achieve our vision of *Excellence for Every Child*. Therefore, we will make sure that everyone is aware of the roles that exist within our school system, from instructional coach to payroll clerk, and from technician to teacher. This way, all of our staff members, and those who seek to join our district, will be able to seek the position that best aligns with their abilities and maximizes our collective success.
  - c. Explore the possibility of creating new teacher pipeline programs for hard-to-staff subject areas and/or schools. Having more viable pipelines for highly effective teachers in mathematics, special education, foreign language, and other high needs areas would be very beneficial to our school system and ultimately our students. This may require us to form strategic partnerships with outside agencies or schools of education so that we provide the highest quality professional development to those seeking a teaching license or an additional teaching credential
- 3. Develop mid-career leadership academies** – We are proud that many of our outstanding school leaders are “home grown” and understand our community and our local context. In our last strategic plan, we committed to creating a leadership preparation program to purposefully grow the next generation of great school leaders. Our incredibly successful Leadership Academy (a partnership with the University of Tennessee) has become a nationally acclaimed model for

principal development. To continue growing a robust leadership pipeline, we want to both build the capacity of our current principals and other administrators, who may want to acquire new knowledge and skills in a collaborative setting, and build their instructional leadership capacity. We will seek to create a Leadership Academy for mid-career administrators to sharpen their skills, learn the latest research, and become better equipped for success as a principal in the new reality of instructional leadership and accountability.

- 4. Articulate clear and explicit expectations for school principals** - We ask much of our principals and need to ensure there is a shared language and understanding regarding the expectations we have of them. To do this, we must clearly articulate our expectations of the principalship (perhaps through mechanisms such as a Principals Handbook), which would clarify the knowledge and skills we expect of all principals, and delineate decisions that are made at the district-level versus those made at school sites.
- 5. Formalize autonomy structures for teachers and principals based on effectiveness**- We want to foster innovation and creative thinking and leading in our district. For those teachers and principals who have a proven track record of success, we will explore the possibility of providing some formal and explicit autonomies and flexibility. This concept of “earned autonomy” would both recognize the terrific work of our most effective educators and leaders and also serve as an opportunity to foster even greater innovation, as some of our best people will have the freedom to explore new educational strategies and practices.



**Objective 3: Value our hardworking people** - Achieving excellence is neither easy nor convenient and it should be recognized when achieved. Our people have done - and continue to do - great work in the service of improving student achievement. We recognize that it is our people – all of our staff members – who are responsible for our educational success. We, as a district, aim to make a more concerted effort to consistently and sincerely appreciate, compensate, incent and reward our people. Furthermore, we want to ensure that all new staff members who join our district meet our standards of excellence. We do this because we want to honor the expertise and professionalism of our workforce and will not compromise our standards when hiring new staff members. Great people

want to work alongside and for other great people and every new member of the Knox County School's team must be able to define, defend, and contribute to our vision of *Excellence for Every Child*.

**Initiatives:**

- 1. Recognize and respect our educators as professionals** – Our district is built on the talents, expertise, dedication, and passion of our educators. Our successes these past five years have been a direct consequence of their sense of possibility that all students can and deserve to learn, their relentless pursuit of excellent teaching, and their unwavering commitment to do what is best for students and student learning each and every day. We salute and deeply value their efforts and want to always treat them with the respect they deserve. Our educators are valued professionals, and we want to enable them to appropriately exercise their professional judgment and ensure that their voices are heard and reflected in district decision-making. While our teachers certainly have a responsibility to continue to embrace and ensure professionalism, more actively leveraging their experience, expertise and unique perspectives will undoubtedly lead to more personalized and effective instruction, and allow us to make better educational decisions for our students.
- 2. Secure competitive wages for all staff** – While we need to be mindful of our current fiscal realities, we must also strategically allocate our funding to our most valuable resource: our people. If we are to sustain the strong academic progress our students have made, we must prioritize securing a more competitive and professional level of compensation for our educators and all our staff members in the next five years. In order to retain our terrific teachers and recruit the next generation of talented educators, it will be imperative to invest in enhancing salaries. In developing this strategic plan, we heard a strong mandate around this issue: our community *demands* significantly better compensation for our teachers and staff. Therefore, in the next five years we work diligently to increase teacher compensation so that by the year 2020, our average base salary for teachers is either in the top 20 school districts in Tennessee (we currently rank 37<sup>th</sup>) or has been raised by 20 percent from its current level. We call this goal the


2020 Pay Plan. This translates into an annual average increase in Knox County Schools' staff salaries of at least 3-4% in each of the next five years. In addition, we may also need to create a more rational salary structure for those positions beyond that of classroom teacher. The current compensation structures for principals, central office administrators, and non-administrative or classified staff are often confusing. We need to explore revamping our salary schedules they ensure competitive compensation and are easier to understand for current staff members and new applicants.

**3. Revisit and redesign our strategic compensation program**  Our previous strategic plan set a goal of developing a strategic compensation plan to incent and reward the types of inputs and outcomes that best support and reflect student learning and success. With a tremendous amount of teacher and community input, we designed and implemented such a system, called APEX (Advance. Perform. Excel.), which we launched in the 2011-12 school year. Through APEX, we have distributed nearly eight million dollars in additional compensation to teachers based on great teaching, student results, instructional leadership and/or sustained work in high needs schools. We have heard from some stakeholders, however, that we need to revisit and redesign APEX to create a different strategic compensation structure  Just like our previous effort, we will solicit high levels of input from our teachers and staff so that we can create a new system that is transparent and equitable, which continues to reinforce the behaviors and outcomes that positively influence student learning and success.

**4. Create a teacher, leader, and staff appreciation initiative** - We are incredibly fortunate to have talented teachers, great leaders, and dedicated staff. We need not only to celebrate our successes and improve compensation, but also simply – and frequently - say “thank you” and “we appreciate you” to our extraordinary team of educators. A robust but inexpensive staff member appreciation program will help ensure that our teachers and staff understand how much their hard work means to our school system and our community. Additionally, we also will consider launching a “Keep the Great Going” positive community campaign so that our staff recognize and have a shared appreciation for the good work that we, as a district, are doing.

**5. Transform Human Resources into a talent management partner for schools** – Our goal is to have an effective person in every job throughout our district. This means capitalizing on the outstanding talents of our current staff members and expanding their impact as well as ensuring that all new staff members who join our district meet our standards of excellence.

a. Explore the possibility of developing and implementing a Strategic Staffing Initiative to accelerate improvement in our most challenging schools. Our most effective educators are a gift and their talents can be leveraged to create more outstanding schools. Many of our high performing schools can easily attract top instructional talent, but some of our highest needs schools routinely struggle with teacher turnover and hard to staff positions. Given the richness and diversity of our school system, and the enormous talent pool from which we have to draw, we should explore the possibilities of a strategic staffing initiative. One potential model may ask teams of highly skilled principals and teachers to work in targeted low-performing schools – with the help of additional resources and autonomies – to effectuate significant improvements in student learning over the course of three years. Such a model would place the responsibility for designing and implementing an improvement plan in the hands of school leaders and recognize the power of professional collaboration, stable, trusting relationships, and time.

b. Examine the benefits of consolidating recruitment and screening of all new staff members to ensure consistently high-quality candidates  Every new staff member that joins the Knox County School team must be a leader and take responsibility for moving our district forward. We heard, however, from our district’s leaders, particularly our principals, that it can often be overwhelming to recruit, screen, and hire new staff. We can only be an outstanding school district and realize *Excellence for Every Child*, by having an effective person in every position. This is why we would like to consolidate the early phases of this screening process to simultaneously increase efficiency and quality control while also reserving our school leaders’ valuable time for final hiring decisions. This means that the central office will be responsible for recruiting new staff members to the district leveraging traditional means (e.g. job postings, career fairs) and non-traditional means (e.g. social



media, webinars) by creating a well-coordinated and high-energy recruiting program and developing and implementing a rigorous and comprehensive screening process that matches to specific job competencies. All candidates who have passed the centralized screening process would be passed onto hiring managers (i.e. principals and central office directors) for further interviews and to make hiring decisions. Hiring managers will then be assured of a high quality applicant pool without spending hours of their precious time identifying applicants and screening them directly.

### GOAL 3: PARTNER WITH OUR STAKEHOLDER

**team** |tēm| *n.* two or more people working together. *v.* come together as a team to achieve a common goal

**Introduction:** We believe that our district is better positioned and more capable of achieving our ambitious goals when we leverage the talents, resources, and support of our broader community and all the stakeholders within it. We want all of our stakeholders - our parents, students, staff, and community members - to feel invited, welcomed, and engaged in our district’s work. This means that we, as a district, need to thoughtfully and strategically design, develop, and implement the structures, conditions, and opportunities to maximize meaningful and sustainable stakeholder engagement. We know, however, that we need to extend this behavior and our thinking so that our stakeholders can regularly know the “why,” the “what,” the “how,” behind our work, and so they may join and support our efforts. Our students depend on all of us – KCS staff, parents, families, and community members – to work together in a coordinated manner with a laser-like focus on student learning – so that they can reach their highest potential.

**Objective 1: Build and strengthen our “one big team”**– In our community, we are fortunate that there are so many individuals, nonprofits, institutions, and community organizations that share our commitment to serving our young people and their families. They have deep and long-standing ties to the community and have forged close and trusting relationships with diverse groups of stakeholders. We believe there is a tremendous opportunity to more intentionally collaborate with our partners in the future so that we can harness our collective resources, energy, and talents for the betterment of student achievement. In essence, by working as one big team to support the whole child, we will accelerate student learning and success.

#### Initiatives:

- 1. Develop a robust community relations function** - Partnerships, like all relationships, require diligent care and effort and need to be thoughtfully cultivated and maintained. To ensure that we


continue to prioritize collaboration with our community stakeholders, we intend to create a community relations function that will focus on designing and implementing a district partnership, advocacy and engagement strategy. Part of this work will be assessing and managing the status of the district's current partnerships, forging new relationships with organizations and individuals, working with schools to determine how partners and stakeholders could best assist with their educational work.

**2. Share our district's exciting work with all stakeholders** – With nearly ninety schools, our district –on any given day – is taking bold and creative steps in educating our students. We are tremendously proud of our progress and want to share our work with those in our community by opening our “schoolhouse doors” and inviting stakeholders to learn more about our organization's vision, mission, and strategic priorities. This means:

a. Educating our community about the power and purpose of the high academic standards we have for all students – Our district has been a leader at the regional, state, and national level due to our relentless pursuit of rigorous academic excellence. We have embraced Tennessee's rigorous Common Core State Standards and have delivered substantial professional development to support our teachers in making the necessary shifts in their instructional practices. Our staff has continued to exceed our expectations and risen to the challenge! In fact, their knowledge and expertise is highlighted by the number of them who have been selected to serve in leadership roles on several state boards and committees including the state's Common Core Leadership Council and content area sub-committees. We are tremendously proud of these accomplishments and aim to better communicate their significance to our stakeholders. It is important that everyone in our community understands and recognizes the importance of adopting and enacting these higher academic standards. They are critical to ensuring that all of our students attain the deeper conceptual knowledge that is necessary for a successful high school graduation and readiness for post-secondary opportunities.

b. Inviting our community to more district-wide activities - We plan to do this by building upon current initiatives (e.g. Principal for a Day), and developing and piloting new

engagement and communications opportunities so that all of our stakeholders are informed and feel welcome by us. Ultimately, our goal is to build trusting relationships within and outside of our organization, and we believe this can only be done by intentionally promoting and providing opportunities to listen to, learn from, and understand one another.

**Objective 2: Invite and Earn Stakeholder Feedback**  a public agency we have a responsibility for creating a shared public value with our stakeholders. To invite their feedback, we need to provide multiple opportunities for them to share their perspectives. To earn their feedback, people need to trust us and trust that we want their input and will use it to inform our decisions and actions.

### Initiatives:

- 1. Develop and promote differentiated stakeholder engagement opportunities** – Our stakeholders, like our students, are unique with different needs and levels of understanding. In order to be an inclusive organization that values, seeks, and uses stakeholder voice, we need to strategically employ a variety of engagement opportunities so that people can choose how they want to participate. This means strengthening our traditional engagement mechanisms (e.g. community meetings, teacher talks, feeder group meetings), and bolstering our efforts by leveraging new engagement formats and experiences.
- 2. Broadly utilize advisory groups to inform district decisions and actions** - We make better decisions when we hear diverse opinions and want to encourage our staff – both at schools and in the central office – to assemble informal and/or formal advisory groups. This will not only strengthen our district’s ability to make thoughtful and strategic decisions, but will also help us develop a cadre of district ambassadors that can disseminate information throughout our community. This will mean formalizing the district’s Teacher Advisory Committee<sup>7</sup>, creating advisory groups for functions within the organization where there is a need but no advisory group currently exists, and encouraging schools that do not currently have such a structure to develop one.

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<sup>7</sup> Launched in December 2013 with roughly twenty educators throughout the district

**Objective 3: Improve Customer Service and Communication** – We are a large organization that has many moving parts and often times it can be difficult for our community – including our staff members – to understand the various initiatives that are unfolding within each of our schools. This is why we must enhance the quality and frequency of information provided to our stakeholders so they can be updated not only on what is happening at their neighborhood schools but also at the district level by providing the “big picture.” This must be done with the highest levels of professionalism and customer service as every stakeholder must feel like a valued and respected partner at all times.

**Initiatives:**

- 1. Ensure high levels of professionalism and customer service** - Whether a parent is walking into a school, or a community member is calling an office to seek information, the “stakeholder experience” associated with this interaction must be both positive and beneficial. The primary face of the school system is typically the person one interacts with on the phone or in the school office. Regardless of the communication, engagement and outreach efforts outlined above, if a stakeholder has a bad experience interacting with the school system, their impression of the district and our work will be a negative one. Positive stakeholder experiences are important not only in their own right as a responsibility of a public institution, but these experiences will also influence the perspective of our community regarding the Knox County Schools, and may make stakeholders more likely to be supportive of our work with children. Ensuring a positive stakeholder experience at all levels of interaction with the school district will be an important priority in this strategic plan.
- 2. Diversify and streamline external communication channels** – In addition to fostering collaborative dialogue with our stakeholders by providing differentiated engagement opportunities, we also recognize that there are situations in which information needs to be quickly and accurately relayed in a format that is accessible and easily digestible. For this purpose, we aim to develop a diverse menu of communication options so that our stakeholders can determine how they prefer to receive information regarding our district’s work. This will

include developing an easy-to-navigate website that is clear, approachable, and interactive, more proactively providing regular updates on our interesting and positive work through print and visual media, and building a robust social media presence as many stakeholders are electronic consumers.

- 3. Research and explore the utility of a Parent Resource Center**  We see our parents are our most critical partners in achieving our goals and need to invite and encourage their engagement. One promising possibility is to research and explore the creation of a Parent Resource Center, which would serve as a “one stop shop” for parents. This Center could not only provide information on a variety of issues (e.g. transfers, vaccinations, student support services), but could also deliver additional services such as translators, connections to other government and/or local agencies, and relevant workshops and trainings.
- 4. Strengthen internal communications** – We are fortunate to have a staff of over 8,000 people who are committed to bettering the lives and learning of our students. Like many other large organizations, we are the most effective when all of our staff members are appropriately informed about our district’s current work and future priorities. This is why we aim to create an internal communications strategy that ensures that all of our people receive timely and accurate information so that they can do their important jobs well and also create a culture where we all “speak with one voice.” 
- 5. Develop and disseminate messaging toolkits for schools** – We recognize that many of our stakeholders regularly interact with our schools and approach our school-based staff with their questions and concerns. To better support our school-based staff in confidently and accurately relaying information, we aim to develop and disseminate toolkits, both in paper and electronic formats, which will provide tactical resources on a variety of common topics (e.g. Common Core State Standards, PARCC testing, CTE programming). Our hope is that by providing our staff easy access to high-quality information, they will not only build their capacity to become knowledgeable communicators, but they will also ensure that everyone is organized around unified, timely, and accurate messages.

## OUR FUTURE – A CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE

**ex·cel·lence** |'eksələns| *n.* the quality of being outstanding or extremely good.

**What is a Culture of Excellence?** We believe that our strategy, as defined by our three goal areas (Focus on Every Student, Invest in Our People, and Partner with Our Stakeholders), will help us create a Culture of Excellence that will ultimately lead to us meeting our ambitious vision of *Excellence for Every Child*. To us, a Culture of Excellence is exemplified by:

- **Every school is a great school:** A system of great schools where any student, family, or community member would be excited about and proud of the quality of education offered in each of our schools.
- **Every student is nurtured and academically successful:** Every student believes he or she is smart, cared for, and belongs, and, above all else, they are learning at high levels. That, on any given day, our students have numerous adults and role models to turn to, and they have the opportunity and support necessary to succeed.
- **Every staff member is a steward of excellence:** Every person within our district will understand and embody our Commitments to Our Community; we must all enthusiastically embrace our collective responsibility to do what is best for students.
- **Every stakeholder is invested and productively engaged:** Every stakeholder will feel they are a valued and contributing member of our district's work and have a responsibility to not only their neighborhood school but also to the success of the district as a whole. Every stakeholder will believe that our most important work is to meet the needs of every student in every school... one student at a time.

**Why is this important?** We are proud of the strong progress our district has made in the past five years. In order to realize *Excellence for Every Child*, we must build upon that momentum; this will require the collective commitment of all of our stakeholders to create and embrace a Culture of Excellence. We fundamentally believe that our school system's success will significantly impact the

future vitality of our community, and we therefore want to invite and enlist the talents, passions, and dedication of every individual within our community to join us to help elevate our district's performance to the benefit of all students in all of our schools, and the betterment of our community as whole. We are not satisfied with pockets of excellence or a subset of great schools; we aspire to an entire school system marked by excellence. We desire a district where every child has the opportunity to successfully reach his or her highest potential, regardless of which school they attend or whatever challenging circumstances they may face. To realize the full promise of all our students, we will need to call upon the collective persistence and resilience of our community; we must boldly accept this challenge together. It is only through this fierce and committed collaboration – as one big team – that we will be effective in making success contagious, thereby creating our Culture of Excellence.

**How will we know we have accomplished this?** We believe that only by first creating a Culture of Excellence will we reach our ultimate goal of *Excellence for Every Child*. To know that we have achieved this level of district-wide improvement, we have identified four key indicators:

- We will earn a **Level 5 composite in student growth** each year
- We will **double** the number of reward schools
- **At least 70% of our students** will meet our College and Career Readiness Indicator<sup>8</sup>
- We will **cut in half** all achievement gaps<sup>9</sup>

We realize that systemic improvement does not happen overnight. Our district, however, has made strong and steady progress these past five years and we believe we are on the cusp on achieving something truly spectacular for our youth and our community. As we look forward to the next five years, we are committed to accelerating our success, creating a Culture of Excellence, providing a truly outstanding education to our students, and realizing our vision of *Excellence for Every Child*.

***We invite you to join us!***

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<sup>8</sup> Calculated by the percentage of incoming freshmen who graduate four years later with at least an ACT score of 21


<sup>9</sup> Include the four groups of students for all Goal 1 performance targets



**PERFORMANCE TARGETS**

<b>Goal 1: Focus on Every Student</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2025</b>
At least <b>75% of our kindergarteners will be ready for first grade</b> based on our First Grade Readiness Indicator	55%	60%	65%	70%	75%	85%
At least <b>75% of our 3<sup>rd</sup> graders will be proficient or advanced</b> on reading	55%	60%	65%	70%	75%	85%
At least <b>75% of our students in grades 3-8 will be proficient or advanced</b> in reading/ELA and math	55%	60%	65%	70%	75%	85%
At least <b>80% of our high school students will be proficient or advanced</b> in numeracy (Algebra I/II)	60%	65%	70%	75%	80%	90%
At least <b>90% of our high school students will be proficient or advanced</b> in literacy, English I/II	70%	75%	80%	85%	90%	95%

<b>Goal 2: Invest in Our People</b> 	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2025</b>
At least <b>95% of teachers, administrators, and all staff</b> will meet or exceed expectations	91%	92%	93%	94%	95%	95%
<b>Double the number of schools</b> that have an overall Level 5 TVAAS growth composite	36	42	48	54	60	60
<b>2020 Pay Plan:</b> Either our average teacher base pay we will be <b>one of the top 20</b> school systems in Tennessee or we will increase our average teacher base <b>pay 20%</b> by 2020						

<b>Goal 3: Partner with Our Stakeholders</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2025</b>
<b>At 90% of students and families</b> enjoy their educational experiences with their school 	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%
<b>At least 90% of our school-based staff</b> will consider their school a good place to work and learn	80%	82%	85%	87%	90%	90%
<b>At least 90% of students</b> will successfully complete Diploma +2	70%	75%	80%	85%	90%	95%
<b>Double</b> the number of meaningful partnerships	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD

<b>Our Future – A Culture of Excellence</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2025</b>
Our district will earn a <b>Level 5 composite in growth</b> each year						
<b>Double</b> the number of Tennessee Reward schools	6	7	8	9	10	10
<b>At least 70% of our students</b> will meet our College and Career Readiness Indicator <sup>10</sup>	46%	52%	58%	64%	70%	80%
<b>Cut in half</b> all achievement gaps <sup>11</sup>						

<sup>10</sup> Calculated by the percentage of incoming freshmen who graduate four years later with at least an ACT score of 21

<sup>11</sup> Include the English Language Learners, Students with Disabilities, Economically Disadvantaged, and Black/Hispanic/Native American student subgroups for all Goal 1 academic performance targets