

Final Appraisal

Thomas S. Kingston
Interim Superintendent
Belmont Public Schools

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Self-Appraisal

Standard I: Instructional Leadership: The Superintendent promotes the learning and growth of all students and the success of all staff by cultivating a shared vision that makes powerful teaching and learning the central focus of schooling.

Comments:

Through the agency of excellent teachers and administrators, the vision of the Belmont Public Schools is a vibrant and living guide, honored by the fact that the district achieved Level I status within the Massachusetts state school accountability system. Achievements of the district this year have been listed in the annual report and the report to Town meeting. They include the training of teachers in ESL classroom strategies, the successful implementation of the high school one-to-one iPad initiative, the designation of Belmont High School as #3 in the state, the awards students have earned in art and music, and the commendation from state and federal agencies about the capacity and qualities of the school system and its fiscal stewardship. These achievements are not those of the superintendent alone, but they are real accomplishments that testify to the fact that at least he did not impede their possibility. I take pride in the development of a viable strategic plan, developed my first year in Belmont, and endorsed through two years of implementation. We leave the successor superintendent a working plan, to be completed during the first year of his new administration. The third and final year of implementation will allow a new superintendent to assess strengths and weaknesses and design an inheritor plan to begin school year 2015-2016. Through the excellence and competence of district leadership like that exemplified by Janice, Mary, and Tony—the superintendent’s cabinet—we have been able to implement successfully the new educator appraisal system. Under Janice’s direction, there are emerging district determined measures; and the system as a whole is developing high standards and expectations through the instructional models at each level. I have been privileged to hire two of the six principals—not alone, of course, but successfully within the counsel and direction of good advisors. As well, through the new appraisal system, we have instituted viable performance goals that help give greater direction and purpose to a consistently challenged and high performing professional staff. I have walked the halls and classrooms with all principals to observe effective, mediocre, and ineffective practice; I have enjoyed immensely profitable conversations with leaders about ways to improve instruction and to engage professionals in meaningful feedback and conversations about professional practices.

Standard II: Management and Operations. The Superintendent promotes the learning and growth of all students and success of all staff by ensuring a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment, using resources to implement appropriate curriculum, staffing, and scheduling.

I consider this standard the tactical list of accomplishments for balancing resources, expectations, and outcomes. The strategic plan has clear initiatives that we have been consistently honoring and regularly reviewing. They have guided the extent to which we have directed the common treasure. Certainly this administration could be accused of a failure to anticipate the recent deficit, but I also believe our transparency and good will helped considerably to convince a generally reluctant warrant committee to, in the majority, approve a reserve funds transfer. It did help a great deal to have a strong, confidential, and collegial working relationship with the town administration. As part of the overall need for long range planning to meet needs and justify increased resources, we summoned this year the eight modeling groups that I believe will help significantly in the town's Financial Task Force's efforts to project a five-year funding plan. Challenges regarding increased enrollment and compressed resources are facing the district and remain unresolved. However, the findings of the eight groups do point directions for the subsequent administration to explore. I also believe the district's Leadership Council has matured under Janice's guidance, and its meetings are palpably more productive and probative than was the case three years ago. As well, the professional learning teams model is well in place; and its continued vitality should serve mutual interests of staff, administration, and governance. Finally, I am relieved that negotiations are resolved, even if not to the complete satisfaction of the school committee or, for that matter, the association. Certainly the centrality of budget planning and implementation has been conscientious, transparent, and effective. The district does need in future to develop more effective tracking systems, and Tony and Mary have made great headway in creating a personnel tracking system that will be fully in place this coming school year.

Standard III: Family and Community Engagement: The Superintendent promotes the learning and growth of all students and the success of all staff through effective partnerships and families, community organizations, and other stakeholders that support the mission of the school and district.

Perhaps even more than the Town of Homes, Belmont is the Town of Committees, Organizations, Friends Groups, Boosters, Foundations, Corporate Sponsors, and Interested Parties. Sometimes such groups can espouse diverting interests, but by and large in Belmont these groups are truly assets to be cultivated and prized. I am especially pleased that many leading citizens agreed to participate on the modeling groups, and I am thankful for the interest and generosity of the Foundation for Belmont Education. I have strived to attend at least once each year the meetings of the respective parents organizations and to listen as carefully as possible to concerns and worries about the demands on the system caused by increased enrollment. Events and other social occasions have also provided a hear to the community concerns and wishes. Certainly I have frustrated and foreclosed upon some parents, but I do believe we have strived to be as consumer friendly as we can within our resources. One genuine and very rich asset during my tenure in Belmont has been a school committee consisting of intelligent, committed, and intelligent members. I have learned a great deal from each member, and each has challenged the administrators and other professionals in the district to defend decisions, accept challenges, and strive for ever greater achievement for students and the system. I do worry that in these three years the members have been over-extended, and I encourage the committee to begin thinking about how to alleviate some of the monumental commitments of time and energy.

Standard IV: Professional Culture. The Superintendent promotes success for all students by nurturing and sustaining a school culture of reflective practice, high expectations, and continuous learning for staff.

Receiving the results of the recent MASS TELLS survey for five of the six schools was both encouraging and challenging. For the most part, and despite the acknowledged increased demands upon professionals because of state mandates, funded and unfunded, the district survey results this year showed improvement over two years ago—particularly for the high school and the Wellington. The survey solicits a comprehensive set of reactions from members of the MTA (and, therefore, Belmont Education Association). While the overall percentage of respondents this year was lower than in 2012, the sense of district climate was improved. Certainly, removing worries about finances and layoffs from the plates of the individual teachers is an essential condition for improving morale. Worries abide, but they need to be on the plates of administrators and the school committee. The rise of interest-based bargaining is both promising and frustrating. I do believe the desire of the BEA leadership is to improve relations and school climate. I also believe that regular visibility of central office personnel in the schools is vitally important and has helped significantly to reduce in most quarters fears about the new educator appraisal system.

I would certainly wish to stipulate that my three years in Belmont have been rewarding learning experiences for me: a truly excellent way for me to complete my daily education in school leadership and management and a complement to the challenges I faced as an urban educator. My own work as a coach in the New Superintendent Induction Program has been markedly enriched by being an active practitioner, and I deeply appreciate the willingness of the Belmont School Committee to have agreed to let me continue as a coach in the program.

COMMENT ON PERFORMANCE GOALS:

I believe I have been able to achieve each of the three performance goals, listed on the response template, through the cooperation and assistance of excellent professional and support colleagues.