Dear Lawrence Faculty,

I hope this note finds you well and that you’ve had a chance to rest and recharge for the start of the 2014-15 school year. Here at central office we have been busy preparing for the opening day of school.

I wanted to share with you my thoughts on the vision for the Lawrence Public Schools and the support I need from you to make us successful. My hope is that this bit of “summer reading” will orient you as to where we have been and, more importantly, where we are going as a school district.

I am truly excited about the coming year. I look forward to seeing all of you in the Lawrence High School Field House on August 19th for opening day commencing at 8:30am. Until then, I hope you enjoy the remaining days of summer with your family and friends.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey C. Riley
America prides itself on being a meritocracy: the idea that anyone who works hard enough can do or be anything. The American dream. But this idea only works if all kids start in the same place. The reality is they do not. Many children, especially in urban and rural communities, have for decades received a substandard education. As a result, we have wasted generations of talent.

But the problem has not gone unnoticed. And how to solve this problem has become a national issue. Unfortunately, this issue has devolved into warring camps (charter/choice systems versus traditional, unionized school districts) that spend an inordinate amount of time fighting over the “right” policy, the “right” structure, the “right” governance...when the focus should be only on what happens in the classroom.

So in Lawrence we have decided to move beyond this battle to focus on what matters most: our children. Our “open architecture” model represents not just a rejection of the polarized educational dogmas espoused by both sides, but a declaration of a third way of educating our students. We operate under a pretty basic premise. We have seen great traditional public schools. We have also seen great charter schools. Parents don't care about the debate—they just want a great school for their kid. And we believe we can create the conditions within a unionized public school system for great schools of many types to flourish.
The View from the District: Open Architecture

In the turnaround plan for Lawrence, we called out the need to empower those at the school level while providing schools with the support necessary to succeed. Since then, we have begun to reorient the entire district around these ideas. The result is a new concept for how a district organizes on behalf of its schools.

Open architecture is fundamentally about differentiation. If differentiated instruction allows us to customize teaching to individual students’ needs, open architecture allows us to customize supports to individual schools’ needs. Our model provides broad autonomy for schools that are excelling and more intensive interventions for those schools that are not. Indeed, we recognize that the performance of our schools is on a continuum and can vary from year to year. As such, the top-down, one-size-fits-all set of policies traditionally imposed by central offices or union contracts must be made more flexible. Only then can progress be made at each school.

When I first came to the district, I was focused on three things: 1) opening up “white space” for schools by clearing out former top-down policies; 2) identifying what was working in the district and expanding on it; 3) introducing schools to new practices I had seen work effectively to lift student achievement. These supports include extended time used well, including high-quality student enrichment and teacher collaboration time; using student data to drive instruction; and targeted interventions that meet individual students where they are, such as acceleration academies.

This year, through the planning process that many of you worked on with your principals, we opened up more white space for schools to propose which of these or other strategies to pursue to raise student achievement. We’ve also asked every school to set its own hours and calendar for the year, create its own plan for developing common core-aligned curricula, and design its own professional development for educators. Our new teachers’ contract provides for teacher voice as a key component of this process, where Teacher Leadership Teams at each school work with the principals to set school policies. This is the core of open architecture—each school team designing the program and plan that will accelerate achievement for their students, based on the unique factors at their school.
Now, this doesn’t mean that any proposal will fly. We maintain strong recommendations that schools choose strategies we have seen work well—whether that be sending students to the LPS acceleration academies over February and April breaks or an extended day in K-8 schools. However, if principals and school teams want to propose an alternative plan that will deliver better results for students, we support and encourage that. And centrally, we provide schools with advisors who support them in making these decisions and help them look for ways to learn from one another about what is working.

Where we are now is a district where schools set their own course. And I need each of you to be active participants moving your school forward in the coming years.

Now, to be clear, there are times where I will intervene centrally if a school is not headed in the right direction and I do not see a clear plan in place to reverse course. When I arrived in Lawrence there were a few schools where drastic action was needed to improve student performance. And I cannot rule out that this could happen again, particularly with schools that fall to Level 4 status. In these cases, we’ve turned to innovative school models like the Oliver Partnership School, which is run in collaboration with the local and national AFT, or non-profit management organizations like Unlocking Potential or The Community Group.

But unlike in other districts, these schools are not given special treatment. They are not charter schools. They are in-district, unionized, neighborhood schools with no lottery. The leaders and teachers of these schools are excited to be part of a new type of district where they have the flexibility to design their school around proven practices, but are on a level playing field with all other schools. This will become more evident in the coming years, as School Redesign Grant monies go away and artificial enrollment caps are lifted.

Open architecture is what unites us as a district, while still recognizing that each school is unique. It sets up a common model of ground rules for all schools in the district, but allows both the district and the schools to take a differentiated approach to setting each school’s program.
The View from Central Office: A Culture of Support

What does central office look like in an open architecture system? At its core, central office becomes about serving schools, not the other way around. This means first and foremost we have adopted a customer service culture in which central office is highly responsive to school needs and requests. You should also expect to see more of us in your buildings to meet with school teams and visit more classrooms, where the real work is unfolding.

Our goal is to take non-essential work off of schools’ plates so principals and teachers can focus on what is most important—improving teaching and learning. This means clearing out bureaucratic policies, minimizing requests we make of schools, and taking care of operations and compliance tasks.
The View from the School: The Four Pillars

The premise of open architecture is that the real work happens at the school level, and the entire system is focused on making each school successful. We now turn to the view from the school.

Our ultimate goal is for each school to give Lawrence students a high-quality education that mirrors the experience of kids in the suburbs. We understand our students often face more challenges than suburban students, and therefore have much ground to make up to achieve this goal. But we know that great teaching can—and does—change lives.

We believe there are four pillars of high-quality teaching and learning. We believe schools that embrace these pillars are on a path to providing students with a great education. In the end, we want our students to graduate from college, enter the workforce or join the military at comparable rates to their suburban peers.

1. Rigorous Standards

Prior to the education reform act of 1993, individual communities in Massachusetts could decide what standards to teach their students. While some communities promulgated high standards, urban districts often did not. Our children were not always presented with challenging work or high expectations. It was not uncommon for principals or central offices to rate city teachers merely by their ability to maintain an orderly classroom rather than their ability to teach. But the 1993 act changed all of this, requiring that all students be held to the same standards, which would be monitored through annual standardized testing. This was a critically important first step to ensuring that all students were provided a rigorous education, with accountability for schools that were not meeting the bar. Rigorous standards are the first pillar of high-quality teaching and learning.

But this remains only a first step. Recent history shows that some urban schools have begun to compete with—and in some cases outperform—the wealthiest suburban school districts on state tests. Unfortunately, students in these high-performing city schools do not always graduate from college at comparable rates to their suburban peers. So something is still missing.
II. High-quality Enrichment

In their drive to prove city kids can outperform their suburban peers, some city schools turned their programs into test prep factories. Curricula were narrowed or schools would add periods for test prep while eschewing the arts, athletics, and extra-curricular programs.

This is not what we believe is best for our students, nor does this narrowing represent the experience of suburban kids. But neither can enrichment opportunities come at the expense of rigorous academics. A longer school day for our K-8 schools has enabled more schools to add arts and enrichment opportunities while maintaining focus on core instruction. The opportunity to engage in activities like robotics, musical theater, and step dancing have taken root in many of our schools. District-wide, we also established a large intramural sports pipeline at the middle school level.

High-quality enrichment is the second pillar. The thinking is simple. The skills these opportunities teach may or may not show up on a standardized test, but we know they show up later in life. Putting in hours of practice to master a new technique, performing before an audience, and engaging in creative problem-solving are skills and experiences suburban kids take for granted. Our students deserve the same.
III. Effort / Mindset

When I first came to Lawrence, I handed out copies of Carol Dweck’s book *Mindset*\(^1\) to our principals. In every great school I have seen, the entire school—from principal and teachers on down—embraces the view that hard work matters. Too many of our students come to school with a “fixed mindset,” believing that intelligence is something they are born with and that it cannot be altered. In contrast, great schools impart a “growth mindset” to students, in which intelligence is malleable and achievement is a result of effort, not innate ability. Effort / mindset is the third pillar.

We have shown students the importance of hard work through our acceleration academies. Nearly 2,000 students gave up their February vacation this year to get extra help in school, and another 2,000 did so in April. And we are seeing the results. A study from Harvard indicated that students who participated in the math acceleration academies narrowed the achievement gap relative to the state average by half.\(^2\)

In the classroom, it is critical for educators to create a safe space for students to venture a guess and not be worried if they are wrong. We must instill in our children that it is ok to make mistakes and that this is how we learn best. And we must show them that hard work over time will yield results.

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IV. Critical Thinking and Fluid Reasoning

The final pillar—and what I believe is the next frontier in education—is honing our ability to impart deep critical thinking skills in our students. A standards-based education requires our students read and write well, know their mathematical formulas, understand scientific theory, and grasp the significance of historical events. If our students perfectly master the standards, they will have developed a strong crystallized intelligence—the ability to employ knowledge and skills learned to solve problems they have already encountered.

However, to succeed in college, as citizens, and in life, students must be able to create original thoughts that are greater than the sum of these building blocks. Fluid reasoning is this—the ability to use logic and reasoning to solve problems in new and different situations, where accumulated knowledge can only serve as a starting point. To the best of my knowledge, no one has a developed a recipe for teaching fluid reasoning. But I believe Richard Elmore’s work at Harvard University on “task predicts performance” is probably our best place to start.⁴

All the work described above is about creating the right conditions and setting the right expectations for both students and adults. We’ve come a long way. And now our focus must return to the classroom.

As a district, we must renew our focus on the quality of our lessons. Are we teaching state standards? Is the objective posted in your classroom reflective of these standards? Are the lessons taking students to the edge of their abilities? Are they engaging? Do they promote critical thinking? Are students actively engaged in the learning process? Will they stick in students’ minds after the lesson is over? How do you assess students’ work at the end of the lesson?

Take a minute to look at the following example, provided by Professor Elmore, of two educators teaching the same standard and ask yourself: Which class would I rather be in?

*Standard: Slope of a Line*

**CLASSROOM 1:**
Students are sitting in groups, facing each other. The teacher begins the lesson by introducing students to the difference between linear equations and linear inequalities. She demonstrates how to graph a linear inequality for students using the following example:

\[ y > ax+b \]

The teacher passes out a worksheet with five examples of linear inequalities that follow the form of the example, and she instructs students to graph them following her example. Some students complete the worksheet before others. The teacher circulates through the room answering students’ questions. Other students ask the teacher to explain the difference between an equation and inequalities, to which she responds by repeating what she said earlier. At the end of class, she assigns eight more examples like the ones she asked students to do in class for homework.
CLASSROOM 2:

Students are sitting in groups facing each other. The teacher briefly presents the difference between a linear equation and a linear inequality. The teacher then distributes a scatter plot of data showing the relationship between the level of hydrocarbons in the atmosphere (x-axis) and the prevalence of respiratory disorders in the human population (y-axis). She instructs students to find a line that represents the “best fit” for the data in the scatter plot, to write an equation that describes that line, and to explain what the line tells us about the relationship between hydrocarbons and respiratory disorders. She circulates through the groups answering questions about the problem.

The teacher then asks two groups, with different answers, to present their work, and asks the class to critique their solutions and explanations.

The teacher then asks, “Suppose you wanted to restrict respiratory disorders by controlling air quality. Can you represent what that might look like using a linear inequality expression? Can you use the relationship between the linear equation and the inequality to discuss how much it might cost to reduce respiratory disorders?”

Students graph and write various inequality expressions in response to the teacher’s question. The teacher asks two groups to present their work, and invites the class to critique their solutions and explanations.

The homework assignment is to write a two-paragraph explanation of the relationship between atmospheric hydrocarbons and respiratory disorders, in the form of a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, and to explain how the evidence might be used to estimate the cost of reducing respiratory disorders. Students will present their explanations at the beginning of the next day’s class.

*The two examples below are printed verbatim from Elmore’s online presentation cited above.*
“Task predicts performance” means that the work we ask our students to do predicts the results they will show us. If our students are filling out worksheets, or memorizing facts, or repeating calculations on the same math problem, we should not expect them to later demonstrate complex reasoning abilities. Students in the second classroom above are asked not only to understand the slope of a line standard on a theoretical level, but also to apply their knowledge to understanding a practical problem, present and discuss it with peers, and later connect it to a social action issue. I hope you will agree that the second classroom is more in line with what our students need.

This means there is nothing more important than having great teachers in our classrooms…teachers who are prepared to do the tough work of creating rigorous and engaging lessons for our students. I tried to model this concept in my work last year with our Teacher Leader Cabinet members. Starting (as always!) from the state standards, I set out to employ “tasks” that were rigorous, engaging and relevant. To simulate the process of creating Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel, I asked our teacher leaders to paint under a table on their backs. On an engineering standard, the teachers worked in groups to use ordinary household items to alter the trajectory of a Tonka trunk. We used M&M’s candies to estimate, hypothesize and predict. I blindfolded our teachers and led them into a simulated “bat cave” when discussing a fungus that is decimating the bat population to teach a science standard about species extinction. The goal is to create engaging, standards-based lessons that will stick with our students.

Christian Lawrence, Grade 7
What We Can Do Together

Teaching is an incredibly complex job that requires planning and constant revision. I know that teachers, like our schools, are currently performing at different levels. Indeed, research has proven time and again that teacher variation (the distance between the top performing teacher and the bottom performing teacher) is greater in our country than in many other countries in the world. In fact, those countries that are able to reduce their teacher variation outperform us on standardized tests like PISA. We must all work together this year and going forward to support our teachers’ development so we lift up all our educators to perform at high levels.

Will / Skill

I use a very basic tool to think about our teachers’ readiness to do the tough work of creating rigorous, engaging lessons—a diagram called the “will/skill matrix.”

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Footnote:
5This is an oft-used tool within teaching and other professions and is widely cited.

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I believe that when looking at both skill and will, the vast majority of our teachers today—over 95%—are great, good or working hard to improve.

Teachers in each of these quadrants need different types of support. We need to grow educators with high will/low skill—those who are just starting in their careers and need to be developed. We need to re-enlist those with high skill but low will—talented experienced teachers who may have lost some of the zeal that attracted them to teaching. And we need to make sure we recognize, retain, and reward our best teachers—those with high skill and high will. To do this, we’ve created a career ladder with Advanced and Master roles, where great teachers can share their talents with others and earn up to $85,000. We’ve formed a Teacher Leader Cabinet, where teachers advise me on district strategy. And we have the Sontag Prize, where top teachers receive an award, professional development at Harvard, and a significant stipend to teach struggling students over school vacations.

So as a district our job is to move all of our teachers to high will/high skill. Let’s take the fictional Qualter Academy, a K-8 school with the circles representing where teachers currently fall on the will/skill chart.
Our job at the district and school levels is to work with our teachers to move them from the other three quadrants into the upper right-most square. As we work together to develop our newer teachers and re-enlist some of our veteran teachers, we will improve the quality of our teaching and achieve better results for our kids.
Our ultimate goal is to create schools where most if not all teachers have progressed into the high will/high skill quadrant—as shown below—and are mutually supporting each other in continued professional growth.
Now I know this framework may well strike some of you as controversial and even divisive. I promise you that is not my intent. But I firmly believe that making teachers better is the most important work we do, and to make ourselves better we must first recognize where we are. From here, there are many paths to improvement, whether through professional development, peer observations, principal evaluations, or a teacher’s own process of trial, error, and revision. This is the core of the work. And we need our best teachers to share their knowledge and experience with their colleagues.
I believe our teachers are the best in the Merrimack Valley. Just look at what you did last year, when Lawrence was arguably the most improved school district in the state. And when the scores are officially released this month, I think you will see that progress continue. But we must not let up this year and instead work as hard as ever to continue to improve. Our students cannot wait.

I’ve taken you through these last twenty pages because in our open architecture district, you—the educators—are the primary force in driving student achievement at your schools. It is critically important to me that you understand the larger picture of where we are headed. And that does not end today. I look forward to staying connected with you this year through email updates in addition to visiting classrooms throughout the year. As always, you can reach me anytime at Superintendent@lawrence.k12.ma.us.

I am so proud to be your partner in this work. Let’s have a great year.
Karina Gil, Grade 8

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