

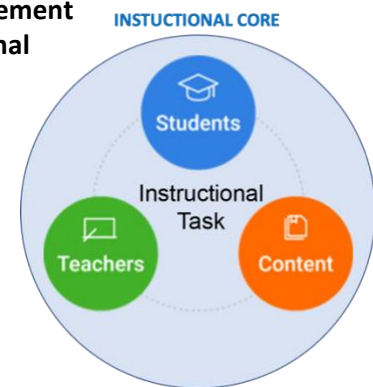
A Case for Elevating Instructional Leadership through Strategic Restructure in DeKalb County School District

*Our vision is to inspire a community of learners to achieve educational excellence.
Our mission is to ensure student success, leading to higher education, work, and lifelong learning.*

District Improvement Research

Research on district improvement makes clear that student achievement improves as a direct result of improvements in *student engagement*, *rigorous content*, and *teachers' knowledge and skill*. These three elements are referred to as the instructional core. **A strong district improvement strategy leverages ways to provide capacity and support to the instructional core system wide** (City, E. A., et al., 2009).

The role of the principal is vital to district improvement efforts (Grissom, J., Egalite, A. & Lindsay, C. 2021). Research suggests the principal role to be a critical factor in improving student achievement across a school. Further, ensuring that a highly effective principal leads every school is a cost-effective strategy for sustained district-wide improvement (Gates, S.M., Baird, M.D., Master, B.K., & Chavez-Herrerias, E., 2019).



Districts that successfully center the support of principals in their improvement strategy have several important system-wide characteristics.

1. **They create systems that protect time that direct-line instructional personnel (teachers, principals, principal supervisors) spend on high-impact instructional activities** (Curtis, R. E., & City, E. A., 2010). As such, systems allow principals to minimize the time they spend directly managing operations and compliance-based concerns.
2. **Principals are supported by Principal Supervisors (PS) who prioritize the growth of principals' instructional leadership** by taking a mentor and coaching approach to principal supervision, opposed to authority and compliance (Honig, M. & Rainey, L. 2020).
3. **They create talent pipelines of principals as instructional leaders.** This requires coherence between systems that hire and select, develop, support, and retain high-quality principals (Gates, S. et al., 2019).

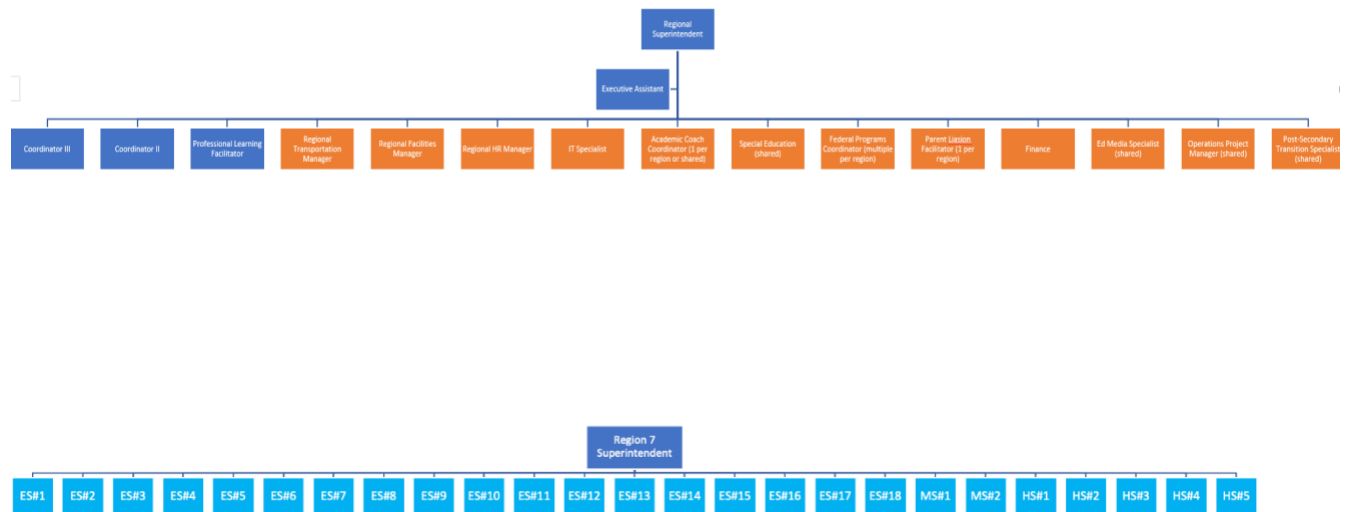
Principal Supervisors have emerged as a critical role in district improvement efforts (Goldring, E. et al., 2018). PSs are best positioned to effectively support the development of principals when they themselves bring expertise to the context in which they are supporting. For example, a supervisor with elementary experience may be better suited to support elementary principals than high school principals. Related, **districts that see success are more likely to group principals by grade level**, opposed to other factors, such as region, experience, or feeder pattern. These districts also **reduce PS's span of control** by decreasing the number of principals that directly managed by PSs, so **PSs can spend more time at school sites, working side-by-side with principals, and nurturing trusting relationships** (Goldring, E. et al., 2018).

Driving district-wide improvements in teaching and learning necessitate substantial engagement of the Central Office to help schools build capacity for improvement (Goldring, E. Clark, M. and Meyers,

2020). In large districts with evidence of sustained success, Central Office personnel are clear in their purpose: support improvements in high-quality teaching and learning (City, E. and Curtis, R.E., 2009). This is a drastic change in the traditional function of many central offices; it calls for Central Offices to fundamentally rethink their orientation to schools and often shift current practices (Honig, M. et al., 2010). Some comparable districts that have undergone district improvement work with notable evidence of success include: *Long Beach Unified School District (CA)*, *Baltimore City Schools Public Schools (MA)*, *Gwinnett County Public Schools (GA)*, *Broward County (FL)*, and *Minneapolis Public Schools (MN)*.

DeKalb County School District Current Context

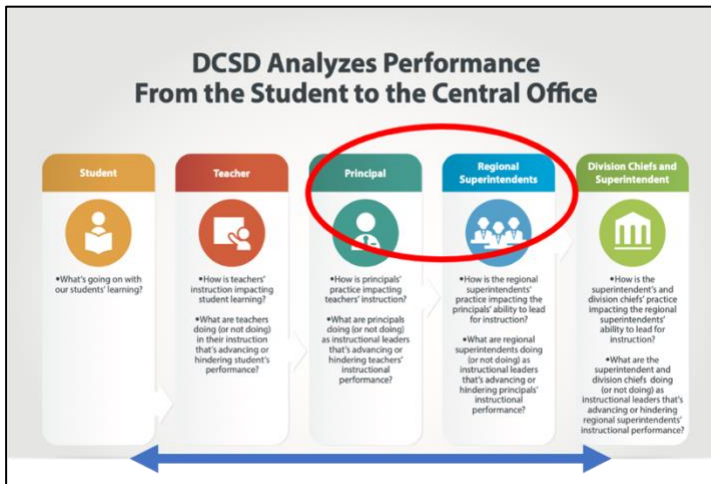
DCSD is home to approximately 86 elementary schools, 20 middle schools, and 29 high schools. It is organized into seven geographic regions. Each region is led by a Regional Superintendent (RS) who is supported by a micro-cabinet. A graphic representation of a single RS and their micro-cabinet is below. (Note that the same RS directly or indirectly manages (referred to as a “dotted line”) all personnel represented below. Two rows have been used for space purposes).



DCSD’s current school improvement strategy is two-pronged. It aims to:

1. Standardize how schools are evaluated to best understand how to differentiate support.
2. Provide decentralized support and resources to schools in service of teaching and learning.

The success of DCSD’s improvement strategy ultimately rests on ensuring highly effective principals lead each school with ample support. This is aligned with current research and is represented by a graphic utilized in DCSD, pictured below.



However, the current design of the system is not set up to provide principals with the support necessary to drive system-wide improvements in student achievement. Namely...

Current Structural Challenges

1. **The size of the regions** (12-26 principals per RS) limits RSs ability to spend adequate time with each principal.
2. **The wide range of grade bands (PreK-12)** presents a challenge to targeted content standards, assessment data, and curriculum implementation –all of which are necessary for continuous improvement.
3. **RSs' scope of responsibility** conflicts with the protected time necessary to focus sufficiently on Instructional Leadership matters.
4. **Hiring and selection practices** for Principals and Regional Superintendents are not designed to prioritize candidates with strong instructional leadership.

The current model helps RSs to be knowledgeable about vertical alignment between grade levels and specific demands of their regional clusters. However, there is no research basis supporting regional grouping for Principal Supervision. Evidence from DCSD RS and Principal surveys in the 2021-22 Superintendent's Evaluation and numerous Principals Round tables conducted by the Superintendent highlight concerns associated with structure. Specifically...

Impact

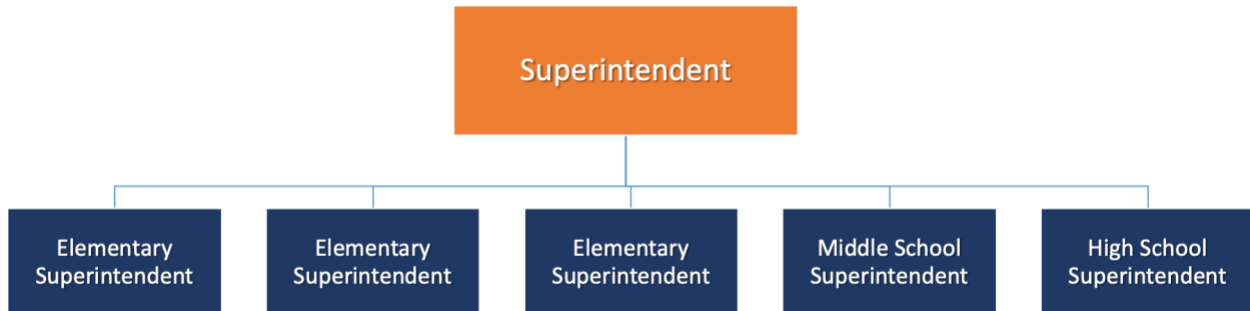
- **RSs report being overwhelmed with managing non-instructional matters**
- **Principals report not feeling clear on instructional priorities** and desire more support in growing as instructional leaders.
- **Structures for principal professional learning do not prioritize grade-level specialization**
- **Principals report that communication from administration is unclear.**

Ultimately, student achievement at scale, as measured through student content mastery on standards-based assessments, has not demonstrated evidence of improvement within the current structure. Any effort to improve teaching and learning system-wide must take these challenges into account.

Proposal for Regional Superintendent Restructure in DCSD

The following draft proposal is based on the aforementioned school district improvement research in light of DCSD's current context and challenges.

Proposed Change #1: Reorganize the current Regional Superintendent structure by grade level (note: for clarity, this figure does not include other cabinet positions)



Rationale & Benefit: Grade-level superintendents can narrow their focus to specialize on grade-specific issues. Currently, the system does not set principal supervisors (RSs) up for success. For example, the current structure demands that a RS simultaneously manage results in 3rd grade reading and High School graduation. Each of these student-achievement-centered priorities requires deep expertise, focus and coordination to realize satisfactory results. This structural change creates the opportunity to place attention towards what matters most.

Proposed Change #2: Introduce Principal Supervisor roles (PS) as direct reports to each Grade-Level Superintendent.

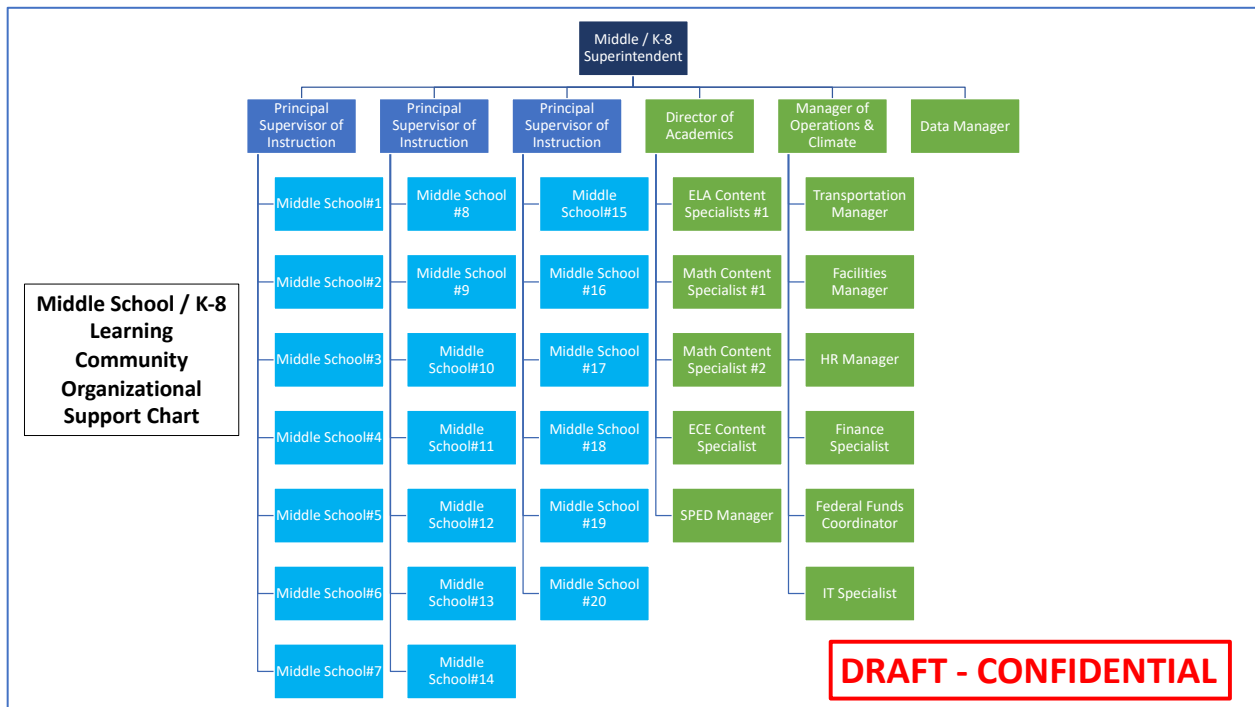
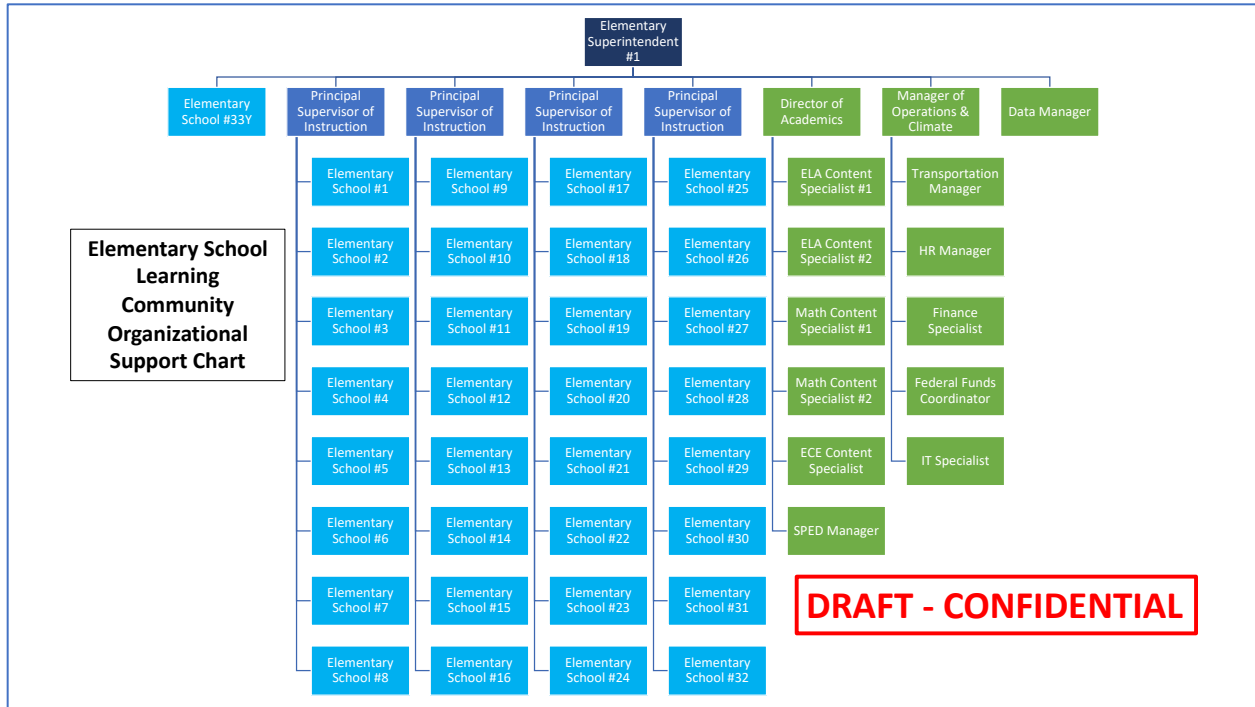
Rationale & Benefit: Direct-line instructional personnel, such as teachers, Principals, (and Principal Supervisors) are responsible for driving student learning outcomes. These positions require continuous coaching and support, in addition to accountability. Creating the Principal Supervisor role narrows the span of control by decreasing the RS's direct reports. It enables a clear focus for district leaders directly responsible for developing and managing Principals.

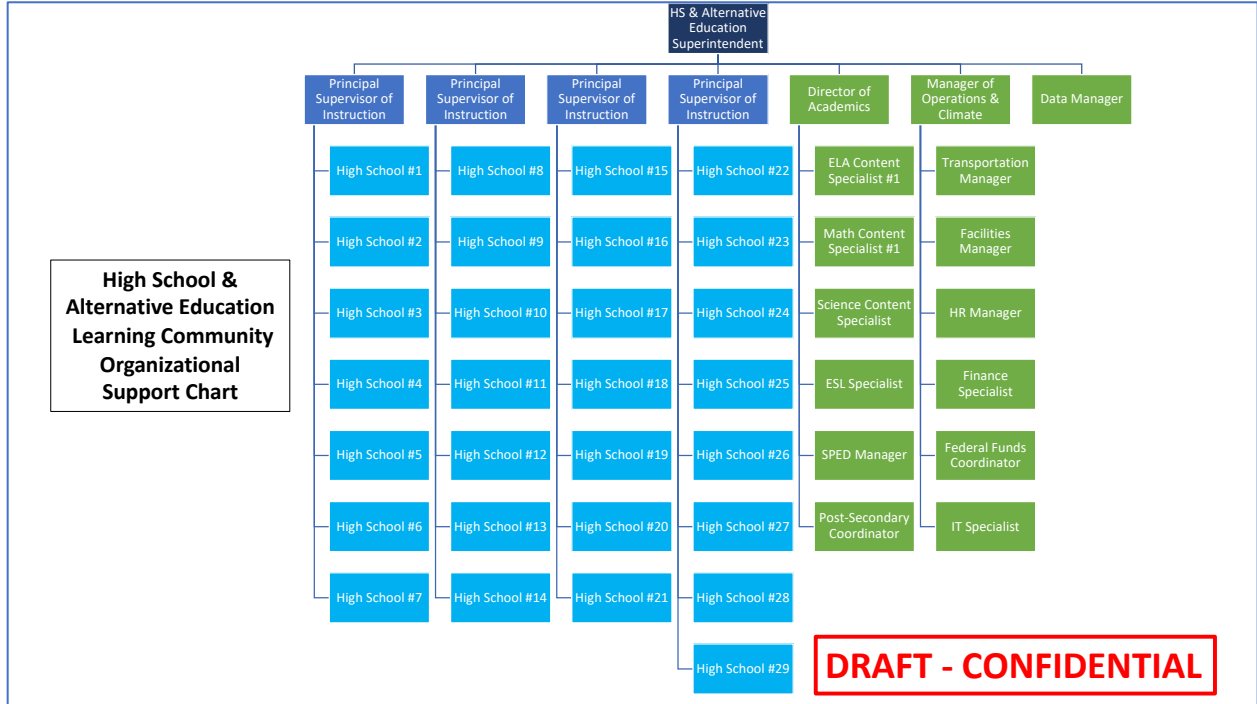
Proposed Change #3: Reconstruct the current Regional micro-cabinet...

- **Replace Academic Coach Coordinators and Professional Learning Facilitators with Math Content Specialist (x2), ELA Content Specialist (x2), and an ESL Specialist**
- **Add a Director of Operations & Climate**
- **Add a Director of Academics**

Rationale & Benefit: The title and functions of the current micro-cabinet communicate a generalist approach to improvements in student achievement; they fail to emphasize strategic support for mastery of reading and math content standards across the system. While these content-focused positions will still engage in adult learning, they will foremost specialize in core content. Adding an EL Specialist provides in acknowledgement of the diverse linguistic opportunities within DCSD. Finally, adding

Directors of Academics and Operations & Climate provides each Grade Level Superintendent with additional coordinating personnel to better support schools. This support minimizes the number of RS direct reports, which protects their ability to lead and support Principal Supervisors. Operations personnel within the micro-cabinet will report to supervisors within their respective divisions (“solid line”), with a “dotted-line” to the manager of Operations and Climate role. Organizational charts illustrating these changes appear below.



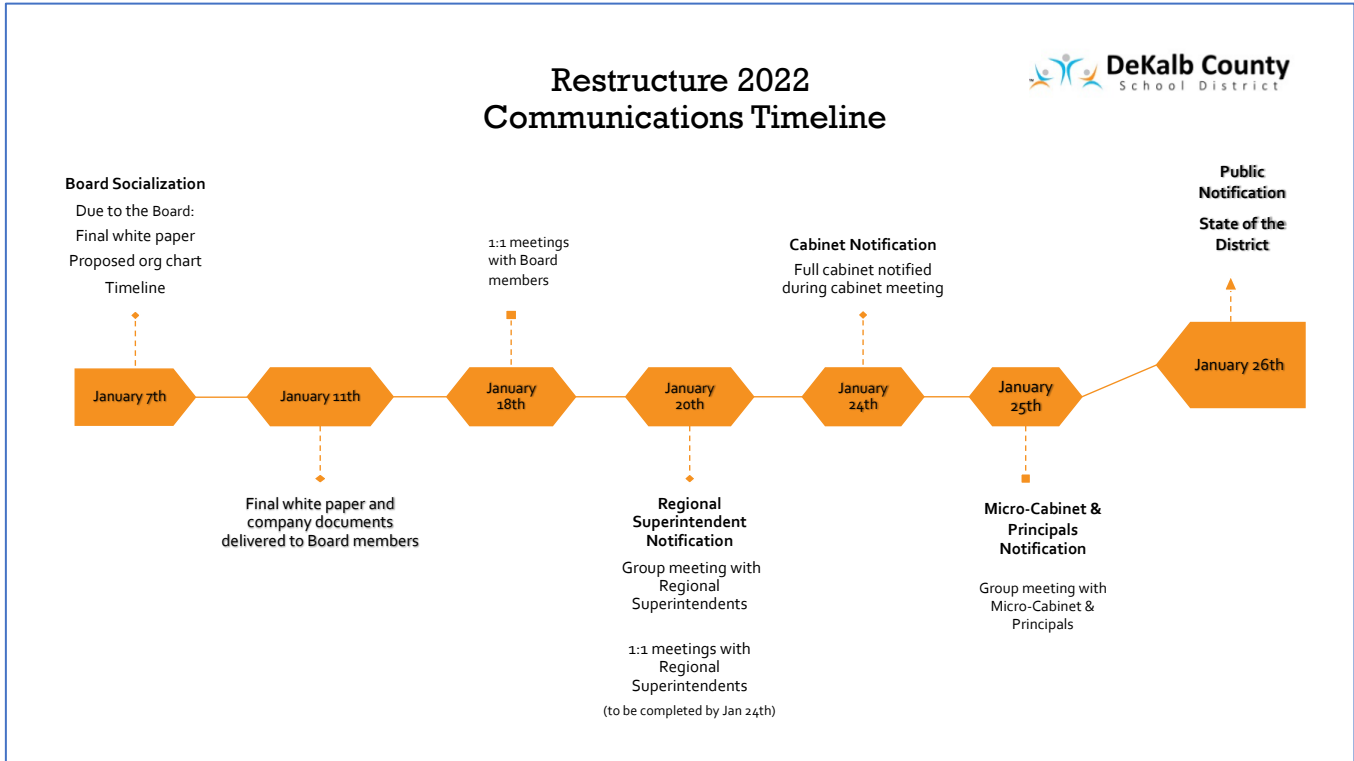


In addition to the core micro-cabinet positions listed, prioritizing by grade level enables each Learning Community to further specialize the micro-cabinet as necessary.

A complete analysis of the impact on Human Resources and finances is pending. However, the goal is to balance creation of a model that best supports principals and schools, while minimizing disruption to finances and human resources, wherever possible. Additionally, DCSD leadership must think strategically about how divisions will reorient themselves to maximize compatibility with this service delivery model.

Following the initial RS restructure, attention must be given to divisions and how they will adjust to support the Grade Level Learning Communities. A communications timeline and the first six months of a high-level timeline of the proposed restructure process is below.

Appendix



High-level 6-Month Project Timeline for Restructure

| <i>Jan - Feb (Discovery)</i> | <i>Feb - March (Design)</i> | <i>April-May (Align)</i> | <i>May-June (Launch)</i> |
|---|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold focus groups • Create Grade Level Superintendent Scorecards • Created Job Descriptions • Determine Budget | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct Interviews • Create Theory of Action • Finalize Org charts and reporting structures • Create and align performance measures and tools • Design & Test PS model | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design structures and processes that will connect Grade Level Superintendents and their teams to DCSD’s strategic work. • Create tools for systems, culture, and instruction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roll out to district leaders and design roll out to principals. |

OVERVIEW OF RECENT DCSD STRUCTURAL PROGRESSION

| | 2004-2017 | 2018-2021 | 2022 & Beyond |
|------------|---|--|---|
| STRUCTURE | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 Region • Vertical Model • Centralized school support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 Region • Vertical Model • Decentralized support – (introduction of micro-cabinets) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 Learning Communities • Grade Level Model (ES, MS, HS) • Decentralized support – content-focused micro-cabinets |
| PRIORITIES | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional familiarity and vertical alignment • Student needs met by region • Equal support for all schools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equitable school support to better meet the needs of schools with high academic needs • Maintain vertical alignment in clusters • Increase regional support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve Principal Support • Support Instructional Leadership • Grade-level content mastery focus |
| BENEFITS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vertical alignment in clusters • Closely aligns with Board Members’ Districts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased RS-to-principal ratio for higher-need regions • Micro-cabinets provided regions with localized instructional and operational support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal Supervisors and RS can focus on Instructional Leadership • Core content-focused support for schools • Improved micro-cabinet alignment and robustness |
| BARRIERS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No differentiated support for high-need schools • Principal-to-RS ratio is too high to adequately support principals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RS, as principal supervisors, are not able to focus on instructional leadership • Support of RS and micro-cabinet is not robust enough to improve schools system-wide | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less regional orientation • Less regional board member alignment • New supervisor-to-principal relationships • Human capital and financial considerations still being determined |

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