



**Belmont Public Schools**

---

Superintendent Report of  
Entry Findings



**Superintendent Jill Geiser, Ed.D.**

**December 2023**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Entry Plan Process</b>	<b>2</b>
Data Collection Process and Analysis	3
Stakeholder Interviews	3
Materials Review	3
Observations	4
Analysis and Sharing	4
<b>Findings</b>	<b>5</b>
Strengths	5
Areas for Growth	8
Theme 1: Meeting the Academic Needs of All Students	8
Elementary and Upper Elementary Literacy	8
K - 12 Mathematics	9
World Language	12
Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)	13
Vision of a Graduate and Post Secondary Readiness	14
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)	15
Leadership	16
Professional Development	18
Theme 2: Meeting the Social Emotional and Mental Health Needs of All Students	18
Student Wellness	18
Wellness Leadership	19
Theme 3: Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities	20
Special Education	20
Theme 4: Coordinating Data and Information Systems	21
Theme 5: Maintaining Collaborative Family Partnerships	22
Theme 6: Adequately Resourcing the District	23
<b>Concluding Thoughts</b>	<b>24</b>

# Introduction

I am pleased to present this Report of Entry Findings to the Belmont community. I started my entry planning process with the support of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents' (MASS) *New Superintendent Induction Program* as a systematic form of inquiry into the Belmont Public Schools. I presented my [Superintendent's Entry Plan](#) to the School Committee on September 5, 2023, which outlined the steps and process I would be using to guide my learning about the district and Belmont community as the new Superintendent.

The beliefs in which I anchored my entry plan continue through this report of entry findings:

- *Strong relationships and collaboration are essential to the success of any district.*
- *It is our collective responsibility to bring quality educational experiences and supports, based on high expectations, to all students, no matter their background or learning profile.*
- *Student learning and development is always at the center of our decisions.*

Over the past several months, I have been engaged in a process of gathering and analyzing information and data to identify themes and patterns that emerge about the Belmont Public Schools. This report is a synthesis of information from stakeholder interviews, observations of schools and classrooms, and a review of key documents and data. It describes the information and data collected and how that has led to identification of strengths and opportunities for growth. Areas for growth are organized by theme, spanning the areas of inquiry that guided my entry planning.

---

## Entry Plan Process

The entry plan followed an inquiry process that led to this report of entry findings, with data and information gathered from multiple sources.



## Data Collection Process and Analysis

### Stakeholder Interviews

Beginning in May 2023, I have been reaching out to and meeting stakeholders in the community and have spoken with people serving in a range of roles.

- *Students*: I have met with several groups of students at the CUE, BMS, and BHS, including students who identify with student council, Metco, English Learners, and Black and Brown in Belmont (a student group at BHS).
- *Leadership / Administrators*: I met with 37 district, school, and department leaders and 7 administrators in the School Administration Building.
- *Staff*: I spent a day in each school where I was able to hear from many staff members across educator roles. I also met with a group of 15 educators in August that was organized by the Belmont Education Association (BEA).
- *Families*: I held 5 Meet and Greet events in Belmont, including 1 at the Beech Street Center, with over 60 families attending, representing different populations of Belmont. The School Committee meeting held at Metco Headquarters on October 17, with over 30 families attending, was an opportunity for me to hear from families of Metco students.
- *PTOs/As / SEPAC*: I attended 7 PTO/A meetings (1 at each school) held in October and November. I also attended a SEPAC meeting in June.
- *Town Leadership*: I met with 10 elected/appointed town leaders.
- *Town Department Leadership*: I met with 9 town department leaders.
- *Community Leadership*: I met with 20 community leaders along with community groups such as the Foundation for Belmont Education (FBE), Wellness Coalition, and Belmont Against Racism.
- *School Committee*: I started individual meetings with School Committee members in May 2023 and continued communication with members individually and through workshops in the summer and at bi-weekly School Committee meetings.

These conversations yielded important perceptual information about how stakeholders were viewing the school district in terms of how well the schools are serving the students. As I was receiving information, I started to identify common areas of strength and opportunities for growth that multiple people across stakeholder groups mentioned. It was important that I look for consistent perspectives among different stakeholders that revealed common themes for me to examine further.

### Materials Review

The materials review part of the entry plan entailed looking at various sources of information that would tell me about the general operations and culture of the district and how students are performing with current practices. The documents I reviewed included the following:



- Academic Performance Data (Aggregated and Disaggregated)
- Discipline, Attendance, and Advanced Course Enrollment
- Curriculum Materials
- Instructional Policies, Programs, and Budgets
- Educator Evaluation Documents
- Equity Report Audit
- YRBS Report
- Staffing Information
- Hiring Protocols
- Professional Development Documents, Policies and Budgets
- Collective Bargaining Agreements
- Non-Union Contracts
- School Improvement Plans
- Special Education and EL Policies, Programs, and Budgets
- Tiered Focused Monitoring Report
- MTSS Study Report
- Family Engagement Policies
- Budget and Financial Policies
- Budget Development Process and Timeline
- Past Budget Documents
- Transition Plans for Grade 4 Move to CUE
- School and District Safety Documents
- Website
- Videos of Town and School Committee Meetings

These materials helped me to understand which areas of practice are strong and what needs attention. The materials also helped me to triangulate the perceptual information I was receiving in my interviews.

## Observations

Throughout the fall, I visited classrooms to see the instructional practices in the district. Many of these visits were with the Principal of the school in an effort to support their instructional leadership. During my time in schools, I observed operations of schools to look at the overall environment for students. I also was able to see summer programming in action. I have attended athletic, music and performing arts events as well as curriculum nights. These observations have helped me to understand the opportunities students have for activities outside the school day, the overall culture of the district, and the instructional practices our students are receiving in schools.

## Analysis and Sharing

Throughout the data collection process, trends and patterns started to emerge, which allowed me to begin seeing the larger themes. As I encountered new information, I adjusted the themes as needed to better reflect the information I was receiving in aggregate. Once I started to identify the themes and findings, I vetted them through members of the central office leadership as well as other leadership personnel by department.

The information shared here is a result of a process intended to hear the thoughts and perspectives of different stakeholders, to understand educator practice throughout the district, and to know the overall health of the system, in order to see how well our students are served by and performing in Belmont Public Schools. The information is global in nature highlighting a district level focus, with district- and school-based themes.

---

## Findings

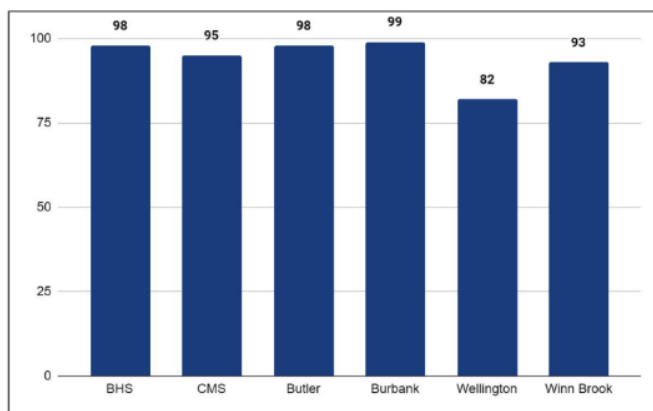
### Strengths

Belmont Public Schools teachers are dedicated to the learning and development of their students. This came through comments from stakeholders, who consistently noted teachers as a strength of the school system. Teachers are caring and attentive to the needs of students and are committed to continuous learning of instructional practice. Teachers are highly valued by staff, students, families and community members and are seen as the aspect of our school system in which we need to continue to invest.

There is pride in the community in the schools, with many noting that people move to Belmont for the school system. High expectations of academic performance has been a part of the fabric of the school system as it is an important value that the community holds for its students. This is reflected in high levels of achievement as shown in assessment data in the aggregate across the content areas. Many students overall are showing academic strength to prepare them for a robust academic experience in higher education.

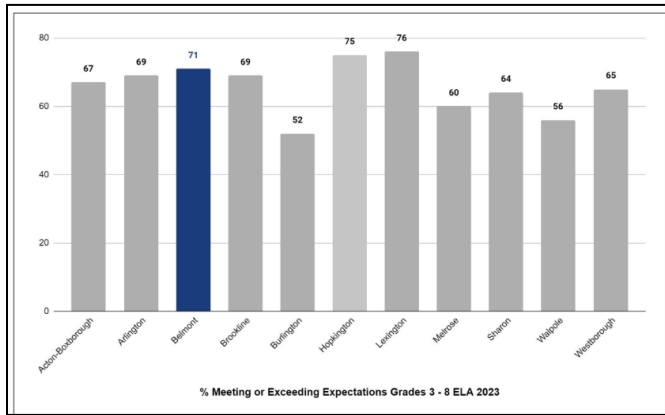
One place where we see this achievement is in MCAS. On the spring 2023 MCAS, all Belmont schools are meeting or exceeding performance targets. A district or school is identified as meeting or exceeding targets if it has a criterion-referenced target percentage of 75 percent or higher, and all schools in Belmont have exceeded that target.

#### Spring 2023 Accountability - All Schools



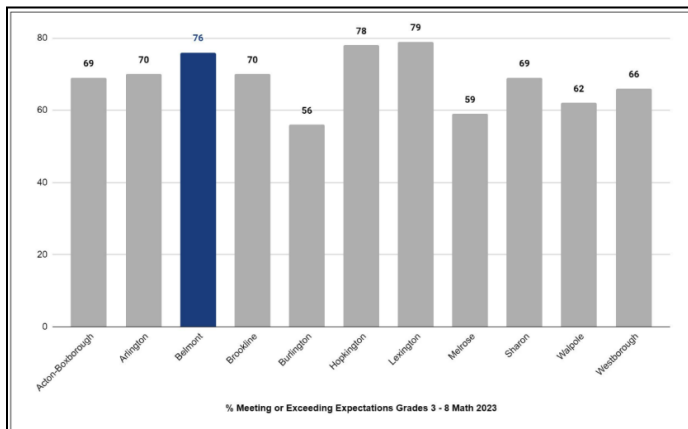
Compared to similar districts, Belmont is performing above in ELA and Math for students in grades 3 - 8. Namely, in ELA, 71% of students in grades 3 - 8 in Belmont are meeting or exceeding expectations. This is above most other comparison districts in the graph below.

**Spring 2023 ELA MCAS % Meeting / Exceeding Expectations - Grades 3 - 8**



Similarly in Math, 76% of students in grades 3 - 8 in Belmont are meeting or exceeding expectations. This is above most other comparison districts in the graph below.

**Spring 2023 Math MCAS % Meeting / Exceeding Expectations - Grades 3 - 8**



In grade 10, Belmont students are also showing high performance in both ELA and Math. This chart shows the percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations over the past 3 years.

**Spring 2023 MCAS % Meeting / Exceeding Expectations - Grade 10**

	2021	2022	2023
ELA	88	84	85
Math	85	81	84

In addition to academic performance, the high school has a program of studies with a wide range of course offerings across all departments. There are 150 unique courses, reflecting a high number of electives that are opportunities for students to interact and learn content in the various disciplines in multiple ways. With 21 Advanced Placement courses, there are numerous avenues for students to participate in advanced learning. There are 3 integrated studies / co-taught courses, which are interdisciplinary models for students to learn across content areas. These are a few of many examples of the rich academic programming that is offered at the high school.

Belmont Public Schools also offers a rich array of opportunities for students to engage in extracurricular activities. The programming spans the areas of athletics, performing and visual arts, music, as well as a range of clubs, many of which are student-initiated. These are essential activities for students to develop their talents and interests, which in the end, support their overall academic learning and personal growth.

There is a strong commitment to student wellness, best practices, and equitable access to educational opportunities for all students. The partnership with the Wellness Coalition is a testament to the importance student wellness has in the community. Families, staff, and students understand that these areas impact student learning and development and would like to see continued attention on them in BPS educational programming.

There is a strong commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the schools and the larger community. With several organizations in the community as well as educators in BPS actively working to promote anti-racism and equitable practices and structures, there is support and needed collaboration around efforts to ensure equity and inclusion are integral to how we educate the students in Belmont.

The community made a significant investment in the education of Belmont students with the new BMHS campus, which houses the Belmont High School alongside the newly-established Belmont Middle School. This campus brings state of the art facilities that offer collaborative learning spaces with the latest instructional technology, professional studio spaces for music, performing and visual arts, and a media center with digital production resources. With its environmentally sustaining design features, this campus gives educators the tools to bring creativity and innovation to the classroom, putting students at the center of learning.

Belmont is a community where stakeholders deeply care about and value public education in Belmont. This is evident in the organizations that work to support schools with time and resources. Namely, the PTOs/As of all the schools along with the Foundation for Belmont Education engage in fundraising efforts in order to funnel needed resources to the schools. Their time has been valuable in equipping educators with what they need to serve Belmont students. The town and community organizations' collaboration and partnerships (e.g. Wellness Coalition, Belmont Against Racism, Recreation Department, etc.) have been, and will continue to be, essential to the school system as a whole.

## Areas for Growth

These areas for growth are organized around themes that center on student learning and development and encompass the areas of practice around which the inquiry for entry planning was organized. Noted above are overall strengths of the district. Within these areas for growth, strengths continue to be identified, along with opportunities to further strengthen programming and services for students.

### Theme 1: Meeting the Academic Needs of All Students

#### Elementary and Upper Elementary Literacy

Overall, there is high literacy achievement among students. However, there are gaps in performance among different populations of students, with White and Asian students showing higher performance than African American / Black students and Students with Disabilities.

- [Student Learning Data from 10.31.2023 Data and Accountability Presentation](#)

In addition to these disparities, item analysis on writing for grades 5 and 6 in aggregate reveal that improvement is needed for all students in the area of idea development.

- Grade 5: Students scored 46% of points in the ideas category for one writing essay item and 36% for a second writing essay item.
- Grade 6: Students scored 39% of points in the ideas category for one writing essay item and 36% for a second writing essay item

The district currently uses the following curricular resources:

- Heggerty in kindergarten and grade 1 for (phonemic awareness)
- Foundations (phonics) in grades K – 2 with piloting in grade 3 with Words their Way
- Units of study for Reading and Writing Grades K-4
- There are some trained staff in specialized reading techniques and approaches across elementary schools: OG, Wilson, LLI, Visualizing and Verbalizing, RAVE-O, Reading Recovery, Lindamood Bell LIPS

The Foundations curriculum is used to provide explicit phonics instruction for students and Heggerty for phonemic awareness, two critical areas of reading instruction. There has been inconsistent implementation of Foundations due to variability of training among the educators and lack of coordinated system-wide professional development prior to this year. This year (23-24), the district has increased training, which is resulting in more effective and explicit phonics instruction. More work though is needed to support teachers' use of Foundations.

Teachers are currently using the Units of Study as the curriculum to implement the readers' and writers' workshop model. Although this has been in the district for a while, the implementation is also

inconsistent here due to the disruption of the pandemic and a lack of coordinated system-wide professional development. A further review of the literacy curriculum is needed to establish a more specific vision and to examine curricula and instructional approaches that enable the district to address the opportunity gaps in literacy. Because the Foundations curriculum covers the phonic instruction, this review of curriculum would be focused on other areas of reading instruction as well as writing instruction.

There is some staffing for reading support in elementary schools. In spring 2023, the Reading Aides (4.0) were eliminated from the elementary schools. This left the following for the 2023-2024 literacy specialist staffing and caseloads:

- Burbank – 1.0 Teacher & 1.0 Professional Aide (53 Students)
  - When the Intervention Aide was eliminated in spring 2023, the school assigned a Professional Aide to provide these needed interventions.
- Butler – 2.0 Teachers (47 Students)
- Wellington – 3.0 Teachers (82 Students)
- Winn Brook – 1.5 Teachers (40 Students)
- CUE - 2.0 Teachers (time split between classroom teaching and interventions for 55 students)

While the district is able to serve many students with this level of reading staffing, there are still students for whom intervention in reading is needed to strengthen their reading skills to access the classroom curriculum.

*(Upper) Elementary School Literacy Priorities*

- Continued support for implementation of Foundations
- Continued support for specialized literacy instruction
- High-quality literacy curriculum for elementary and upper elementary
- Reading specialist staffing for tiers 2 and 3 interventions and supports

K - 12 Mathematics

In math, there is overall high achievement among BPS students at all grade levels. However, disparities persist among subgroups, with White and Asian students showing stronger performance than African American / Black students and Students with Disabilities.

- [Student Learning Data from 10.31.2023 Data and Accountability Presentation](#)

The disparities of math achievement among subgroups is reflected also in the placement of students in high school courses. There are multiple math levels, including College Prep (CP), Honors 1 (H1), Honors 2 (H2), and Advanced Placement (AP), with disparities of enrollment for specific populations of students. Namely, African American students show a lower representation of enrollment in advanced courses than what we see in their representation in the overall student population.



This chart shows each subgroup at BHS as a percentage of the whole school population. This is used to understand if there is disproportionality of representation in courses.

Race	% of School
Native American	0.14%
Asian	22.22%
African American / Black	3.43%
Hispanic	6.24%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.14%
White	61.04%
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	6.79

This chart shows the enrollment of these populations across math courses, reflecting a trend where more African American and Hispanic students are enrolled in college prep classes compared to their White and Asian peers, who have a larger representation in the advanced courses of honors and AP.

Race	HS Course				
	College Prep % of Students	Honors % of Students	Honors 1 % of Students	Honors 2 % of Students	Advanced Placement % of Students
Native American	0.16%	0.00%	0.72%	1.04%	0.46%
Asian	9.42%	24.56%	40.43%	17.71%	36.87%
African American / Black	7.95%	1.07%	0.36%	2.43%	0.92%
Hispanic	11.53%	3.91%	2.17%	4.17%	2.76%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.16%	0.00%	0.00%	0.69%	0.00%
White	66.23%	65.48%	48.74%	66.32%	51.15%
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	4.55%	4.98%	7.58%	7.64%	7.83%

Similar enrollment patterns exist with Students with Disabilities. Students with Disabilities are 9.4% of the student population. This chart shows that of the students enrolled in college prep courses, 24.18% are Students with Disabilities. This does not account for the different learning profiles of students, so it may be worth examining this data through the lens of how disabilities impact students' learning progress.

	HS Course				
	College Prep % of Students	Honors % of Students	Honors1 % of Students	Honors2 % of Students	Advanced Placement % of Students
Students with Disabilities	24.18%	2.00%	0.70%	4.50%	0.40%

In addition to support needed for students who struggle in math, there is a need identified by the community to provide challenging math learning experiences for students. For some, this is defined as acceleration through the grade level curriculum, which is mirrored in the significant number of students who are seeking such acceleration in math activities outside of school. For example, in a recent survey of students in grades 5 - 12, 56% of the 1,189 respondents indicated that they do math outside of school other than homework. These activities include doing math with family, going to an extra math class (e.g. RSM, Mathnasium), doing math with a tutor, doing extra math through a school sponsored activity. Similarly, 63% of elementary students responded that they also participated in these same outside math activities.

The district has responded to the need for challenging math learning with the following:

- Accelerated middle school course sequence of Grade 7 Compact and Grade 8 Algebra 1
- Challenger Math program where grade 8 students take Geometry outside the school day
- Building capacity among teachers to build in challenging math work for students in their lessons
- After school math challenge through AMC (American Math Concepts) at BMS and BHS
- After school Math teams/clubs at CUE, BMS, and BHS
- Providing a path to accelerated courses in high school by crediting students' outside math activities as prerequisites to enrolling in courses
- Dreambox and iReady adaptive math programs where students are challenged at their level of their math learning (elementary)

While acceleration is one way to advance learning, another view of rigorous math instruction as expressed by others in the community, includes deep conceptual understanding and math reasoning. In the end, many staff and families agree that there is a lack of vision around math learning K - 12 that articulates what quality math teaching and learning looks like.

One significant aspect of math instruction is the curriculum used in classrooms. The district currently uses the following curricular resources for math, with supplementation of other various materials:

- Envisions in elementary schools
- Big Ideas in middle school

The math curriculum used in grades K - 8 was adopted by the district about 10 years ago and is now out of date. The online element is no longer supported. Over the years, there has been much supplementation and rewriting of lessons in order to fill in gaps that are left by these resources.

In addition, resources to provide tier 2 interventions for students in math are few with 2 Math Specialists at elementary, supported by ARPA funds that expire in FY26, and 1 at the CUE. This is not sufficient to support students who are having difficulty accessing the core curriculum in classrooms. As noted in the data above, there are students who are performing below grade level at the early grades, which mirrors the disparities in course enrollment in the upper grades.

In developing K-12 Math programming, attention is needed on all students, regardless of where they are on the math learning continuum, and should focus on ways to engage all students in deeper learning of math. This programming should consider how resources are distributed and how all students are prepared early on in order to access advancement and challenge opportunities later in their K-12 education.

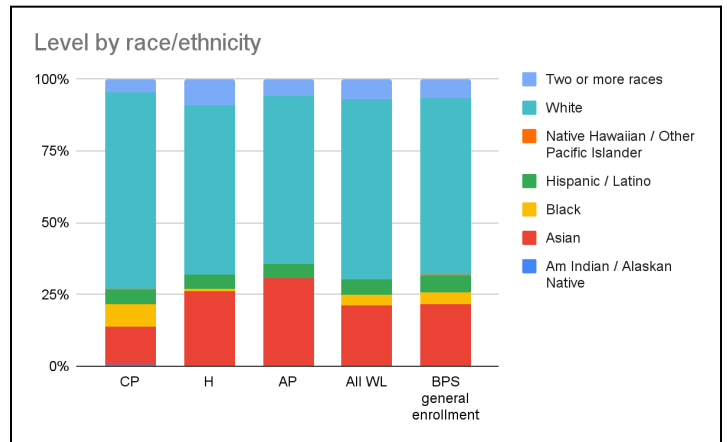
*K - 12 Mathematics Priorities*

- High-quality math curriculum that serves the needs of all students, including the need to challenge students from where they are on the math learning continuum
- Maintaining the current opportunities for challenging math learning, and continuing to gather feedback from students and families
- Continued development of challenging learning experiences in math for students, including programs such as the Calculus Project.
- Math interventions for students who need additional support beyond the classroom

World Language

In spring 2023, the world language program was eliminated from grade 6, leaving World Language starting in grade 7. Up until that point, world language was offered at the Chenery MS starting in grade 6, with language options of Spanish, Chinese, French, and Latin. Feedback from the community indicates a strong interest in providing world language learning experiences for students in the earlier grade levels, before they reach grade 7 at BMS. The Belmont community is rich with languages as much of the population have moved here with multiple languages spoken in their homes. There is wide recognition that learning other languages earlier benefits students' overall learning and development.

One area of World Language to examine is the course pathways for different student populations at BHS. There appears to be some disparity in representation of some populations in advanced versus college prep courses. This chart shows higher representation of Black students in College Prep classes than in advanced language classes relative to their representation in the BPS general enrollment. (See course enrollment disparity discussion above.)



### *World Language Priorities*

- A World language program at the CUE that will help to prepare students for higher levels of language learning at the secondary levels.
- Supporting all students to access advanced world language courses in high school.

### Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

The MTSS is a system of instruction and supports that is designed to target the diverse needs of students. The MTSS is a framework that articulates the tiers of instruction, from core classroom instruction at tier 1, which all students get, to supports and interventions at tier 2, to highly specialized instruction at tier 3. This system is critical in how the district responds to academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students.

The MTSS was just started last year in BPS with the following currently in place:

- Educator data meetings are held for academics, behavior, social emotional learning, and attendance.
- iReady diagnostic is administered in elementary and middle school and is used to inform which students need interventions
- What I Need Now (W.I.N.N.) instructional block for small group started instruction is embedded in school schedules.

Next steps for MTSS include using data to inform decisions, updating DCAP, leveraging the W.I.N.N. block, and aligning attendance protocols across schools. The curriculum for literacy and Math discussed in those sections is a significant part of tier 1 of MTSS (core classroom instruction) and the resources for literacy and math supports and interventions is needed for tiers 2 and 3. The district's MTSS is still formulating with some elements in place and some still to be developed consistently across schools and classrooms.

In addition to the development of MTSS, according to conversations with families and community members, there seems to be a need for greater understanding of the purpose of MTSS as it relates to student learning and development. There is an opportunity to illustrate how MTSS holds together the different profiles of learning across the learning continuum and the resources needed to strengthen this system.

### *MTSS Priorities*

- Expanding MTSS across the district, emphasizing consistency in implementation as a proactive approach for student learning
- Family and the community communication about what MTSS is and how it is designed to respond to students' needs
- MTSS resources for tiered interventions for academic, behavior, and social emotional support

### Vision of a Graduate and Post Secondary Readiness

Staff, students, and families have spoken about post-HS readiness across different areas. Related to high education options, students indicate that they rely on the school to support them in their college application process. Some families have talked about the need for vocational options for students. Staff have highlighted the need to continue the Vision of a Graduate to articulate the competencies and skills students should get from their K-12 education.

Looking at graduation rates over the past 5 years, the graduation rates of all students ranged from 96.6% in 2017 to the highest at 98.8% in 2021. It is clear that Belmont has a high graduation rate when looking at all students in aggregate. We see more variability among graduation rates of other student populations. For example, Students with Disabilities show a low graduation rate of 72.2% in 2020 to a high of 90.6% in 2021, with the in-between years falling within these two percentages. There is opportunity to develop more pathways to graduation that are accessible and leverage students' interests.

The Vision of a Graduate work began several years ago when educators came together to discuss what vision of a graduate would look like in Belmont. This vision would articulate what the community deems as the core values and beliefs about learning that students get in their K-12 education. The educators were about to bring it to the community for feedback when schools closed due to COVID in spring 2020, delaying that part of the process. The Vision of a Graduate work was begun again in 2022-2023 as part of a NEASC accreditation process. The work last year outlined the steps for developing this Vision of a Graduate for Belmont, positioning the district to further those efforts in 2023-2024.

The Vision of a Graduate provides the big picture of learning. There are other areas of post-secondary readiness to examine in terms of how we support all of our students.

- There are few internship and work-based learning opportunities for students at BHS.
- There is a need for more support for students with fewer outside resources around the college application process.
- There is a need for a wider range of post-secondary options for students. High school curricular and extra-curricular programming is tailored to paths leading to competitive colleges and universities. Consideration is needed for vocational technical avenues for students.

### *Vision of a Graduate and Post-Secondary Priorities*

- Continuing the Vision of a Graduate work
- Programming and support for students around post-secondary options and the college application process
- Examining the state of vocational education needs of students in Belmont and identifying next steps

## Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

Diversity, equity and inclusion is about ensuring all students feel a sense of belonging in our classrooms and schools and all students have equitable access to educational opportunities. These expectations are a significant part of students engaging in rigorous academic learning. In this way, academics and equity go hand in hand.

In 2022, the district conducted an Equity Audit, which used survey data, achievement data, and a policy review to examine practices and structures in the district through an equity lens. This Equity Audit revealed some disparities between racial groups. Some of these echo data and findings in other sections of the entry findings report.

- African American and Latinx students are underrepresented in advanced courses.
- African American and Latinx students experience higher rates of suspensions than other student populations.
- Black, Native Indian, and Multiracial students report low sense of belonging.
- Most Students of Color have experienced racism / microaggressions
- There is a Lack of diverse representation among staff

As reflected in the Equity Audit, conversations with secondary students who are affiliated with the Metco program and Black and Brown in Belmont confirm a need for more authentic conversation around microaggressions and acts of racism. Students also report a need for more accurate representation of diverse people in the curriculum in terms of which cultures are present in curricular materials and how they are represented. There is an opportunity to examine the curriculum for authentic representation.

Looking at attendance data, the few years leading up to COVID (2017-2020), showed minimal disparities in attendance rates across subgroups. All groups of students' attendance rates fall within the mid-90s percentage range. However, starting in 2020-2021, the attendance rates of African American students and students with disabilities start to lag behind the aggregate as well as other subgroups.

- 2020-2021: African American students and Students with Disabilities have attendance rates of 92% compared to 96% of the aggregate.
- 2021-2022: African American students and Students with Disabilities attendance rates of 89% compared to 94% of the aggregate.
- 2022-2023: African American students and Students with Disabilities attendance rates of 85% and 87% respectively compared to 93% of the aggregate.

Because attendance is a critical element of student learning, it would be important to examine why some students are less engaged in school, in light of the information coming from the Equity Audit.

Some of the initiatives around DEI that have occurred so far include the following:

- Professional development programming includes DEI with a focus on culturally responsive practice, the impact of implicit bias, and anti-racism work.



- The district has brought in outside consultants to help with this professional learning and overall support for the equity work.
- There are the following teams at the district level: Equity Team, Diversity Hiring and Retention Team, Culturally Responsive Practices Team, Community Engagement Team.
- Schools are setting up school-based equity teams.
- The School Committee Policy Subcommittee has been going through a review of policies, which include those that address discrimination and harassment.

Overall DEI is an initiative that is taken seriously and valued by many educators, who understand the importance of professional learning around equity in their work as educators. Many in the Belmont community also see the importance of equity in students' experiences in school. However, for some in the community, there is insufficient clarity around the role of DEI in terms of how it connects to academics. There is more work to be done around dispelling this as an either/or proposition and frame the DEI work in terms of how it supports all students in their learning and development.

#### *DEI Priorities*

- Continued professional development on culturally responsive practice and implicit bias work.
- Culturally responsive practice and equity in future instructional coaching
- Representation in future curriculum review
- Messaging the connection between equity and academics
- Continued examination of systems, structures, and practices through an equity lens

#### Leadership

The district has a leadership team of talented administrators who bring much expertise to their roles. This team includes district leadership, principals, assistant principals, and curriculum directors. While the district has a team of effective leaders, there are gaps in terms of leadership support for specific departments and schools.

Curriculum directors are an important part of the system. They understand what high quality curriculum and instruction looks like and work collaboratively with teachers to continue to build their practice to better serve the needs of students. The challenge in the district is that while there is curriculum leadership from grade 5 up in the form of Unit B director positions, for the content areas of ELA, Math, Social Studies, Science, and World Language, there are none at the elementary level.

Ratio of Curriculum Director (Admin - Unit B) staffing to students:

- 427:1 @ MS and HS
- 357:1 @ 2 CUE (505:1 in FY25)

At the elementary level, there are no curriculum director (Unit B) positions; however, there are 2 Curriculum Specialists (Teacher - Unit A) for a ratio of 752:1 (581:1 in FY25). The primary structural differences between the two roles are the responsibilities and certification requirements where

curriculum directors require administrator certification and have evaluation responsibilities. These curriculum director roles are essential in building high-quality instructional programming across classrooms. Teachers look to these roles to provide insight and support into best practice that will lead to high achievement among all populations of students. In addition to curricular support, as noted above, directors also administer educator evaluation, which is a tool for the district to give oversight to and to set the direction for instructional practice.

Leadership staffing is also limited with respect to assistant principal positions at elementary schools. This year, there is one Assistant Principal shared across the elementary schools, who is currently scheduled to move up to the CUE for the 24-25 school year. With over 1,000 students at CUE and currently 1 Assistant Principal, there is a need for another Assistant Principal at the CUE next year. Yet, removing the sole Assistant Principal from the elementary schools leaves those schools with no operational support.

Ratio of assistant principal staffing to students:

- 487:1 @ BHS
- 667:1 @ BMS
- 714:1 @ CUE (505:1 in GY25)
- 2,234:1 @ ES (No AP in FY25 for 1,162 students (est 300 for K))

The assistant principal positions assist the principals in operating and managing the school to ensure the health and safety of students. With this operational support, principals are more available to provide instructional leadership for the school, which impacts students' learning experiences.

Another challenge in the district is the low retention rate of principals over the past few years. Between 20-21 and 23-24, 9 new principals were hired (including the new position at BMS in 23-24). When resources are low, principals have little time to engage in meetings with their professional colleagues to share ideas and troubleshoot issues. In general, there is an opportunity to build stronger cohesion among the leadership team. Further, there are few professional learning opportunities in the district for instructional leaders. Team connections and professional learning are two factors that could help with principal retention.

*Leadership Priorities*

- Team building among the leadership team through regular meetings and opportunities for collaboration, communication, and school visits
- Professional learning opportunities for leaders in meetings and externally by outside providers
- Leadership positions that provide operational and instructional support for teachers particularly at elementary schools

## Professional Development

Professional development is an important tool needed to support educators' professional growth and build capacity among staff. As noted above, one strength in the district is educators' understanding of and focus on their own professional learning paths. However, the district's structured professional development time is limited.

- 1 Full Day for all staff before school starts in September
- ES, CUE, BMS: 2 Early Release Days (6 hours)
- BHS: 3 Early Release Days (9 hours)

This is low compared to other districts who have on average 3 full PD days and 5 early release days (according to a recent survey of districts with about 80 respondents).

Every Wednesday, educators have about an hour for meetings which fall in one of the following agendas: building/department/curricular meetings, educator generated agenda, and common planning time. These meetings on Wednesday may offer some professional learning, but this is dependent on the agenda and is not a structure of time consistently dedicated to professional learning. This means that schools look to other structures for PD activities to support educators' keeping abreast of the latest professional research and knowledge in their content area. Sometimes this means embedding training in the school day, where substitutes are used to cover classes when teachers are pulled from classrooms.

In addition to professional development programming, instructional coaching is another important part of professional learning. Typically, instructional coaches work closely with individual teachers to develop their understanding and implementation of best practice. In particular, instructional coaches are needed when rolling out a new curriculum. One benefit of instructional coaching is that it tends to help with retaining teachers. Currently there is no instructional coaching program in the district.

### *Professional Development Priorities*

- Leveraging the limited structured professional development time that is available with a focused PD plan
- Instructional coaching program to support the growth and development of educator practice

## Theme 2: Meeting the Social Emotional and Mental Health Needs of All Students

### Student Wellness

Wellness is a key part of students' school experiences and affects their overall performance. The areas of wellness where the district sees challenges is mental health and social emotional learning. There are students at middle and high school experiencing mental health and social emotional challenges. This is reflected in the [2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)](#) data.

- Anxiety, depression and/or suicidal ideation are associated with increased substance use.
- Genderqueer, black and multiracial students have higher rates of mental health issues, substance use, and experiences of bullying.
- Current alcohol use is leveling off for most grade levels, but increasing in grades 9 and 11; current marijuana use is increasing in grades 8, 9, 11, and 12; current vaporizer or vape use is increasing slightly in all grade levels except grade 7.
- Self-harm and depression is showing higher rates in Belmont than Middlesex County as a whole in middle school, but showing similar rates in high school.
- In grade 9, there is a decrease of bullying electronically and on school property. In grades 10 and 11, there is an increase in bullying on school property but decrease in electronic bullying; in grade 12 there is an increase in bullying on school property and electronically.
- School issues, future issues, and appearance issues rank as the top 3 stressors for students in middle and high school.

Consistent with the last bullet above, there is pressure, especially at the secondary level, around academic performance, which is having an impact on students' mental health. When asked the definition of a "successful student" in Belmont, some students at BHS said this included the following: Good grades/GPA, AP classes, extracurriculars / clubs, Harvard Extension on college application - staying on top of school work while balancing schedule and still able to do other things. This definition was noted by some stakeholders as a perception in the community. At the same time, stakeholders noted that success is also about students maintaining a balance in their lives with attention to social and emotional health as well as academics, and are confident around how they feel about themselves and feel connected to their community. There is an expressed need to attend to student wellness while maintaining strength in academics.

Where the YRBS data demonstrates students' needs, the counseling caseloads show that need in terms of counseling services.

Counseling caseloads at the high school range from an average of 1 hour 15 minutes to 2 hours 45 minutes a day for regular counseling services for students on their caseload, with additional students that seek check-ins and counseling support as needed. Counselors also do safety evaluations, support students returning from hospitalizations, and spend time looking for outside services for students. The social emotional and mental health needs of students are significant, leading to a need to access counseling services in school.

### Wellness Leadership

The district currently has no director position for the physical education and health departments, and guidance counselors are in the Student Services department. These areas are critical when it comes to student wellness and need director-level oversight to ensure consistent, high-quality programming and coordinated support for students. This is particularly important with the new state wellness frameworks,

which will necessitate communication with families and curricular guidance and professional development for staff.

#### *Student Wellness Priorities*

- Director-level curricular and programmatic support to wellness teachers and counselors/social workers
- A comprehensive school wellness program that responds to all students' social emotional learning and mental health needs, with identified resources dedicated to this program

### Theme 3: Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities

#### Special Education

The number of students on IEPs has grown over the past few years. Students w/ Disabilities increased from 502 in 2019-2020 to 626 in 2022-2023, which is an increase from 10.7% to 14.3% of the student population in a 3 year span. Special Education Instructional models and services were significantly impacted by the pandemic and exacerbated many student's learning challenges, ultimately requiring more services and supports than were and are available in-district. This has led to a high number of students in out-of-district (OOD) placements. The tuition increase of 14% for OOD tuitions for FY24 has led to a tuition budget of \$8,677,343.

There are also gaps in special education teaching staff and service providers, which impact service delivery and costs of contract services.

- Students need more inclusion support by a certified teacher in order for them to be supported in accessing the core curriculum.
- When caseloads are high among special educators, the district uses contracted services to pay for testing and services.
- The district pays special education staff members overtime to meet the demands of the workload.
- There are only 2 Team Chair positions, which are serving elementary schools. There is no building-based administrative support from grades 5-12 (CUE, BMS, and BHS) to provide oversight of service delivery at the school level.

Belmont families, staff, and community members have expressed concerns related to the quality of special education services as well as the significant impact of the reliance on OOD on the general fund. Of note is that there is a lack of substantially separate programming in the district for students. This, in combination with the nascent MTSS as well as limited special education staffing, may contribute to the high number of students in OOD placements.

There is currently a review of special education programs in the district, by an external reviewer, which will further inform these findings and recommendations.

*Special Education Priorities*

- A review of special education services, with a focus on in-district programming. (Started)
- Strengthening the MTSS system, including more intervention options that address a wide range of needs. (See MTSS Recommendations)
- Administrative support for grades 5 – 12.
- Resources for inclusion opportunities and for educators to meet the workload the demands
- Substantially-separate programming around specific disabilities and needs, based on the Special Education Review

**Theme 4: Coordinating Data and Information Systems**

The district has several data systems that cover a range of domains. The list of systems here represent the larger systems and does not necessarily include platforms that individual teachers use for classroom instruction.

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Data System</b>
Student Information System	Rediker
Financial	Munis (Shared with Town)
Hiring, Staff Attendance, and Professional Development	Frontline Education (AESOP)
Educator Evaluation	Vector Solutions (Teach Point)
Communications	Rediker, Website, Listserv, Blackboard
Academic	iReady, DIBELS, Digital Curriculum (by Subject)

The district keeps data in these systems across the domains. However, because of how these systems are organized, it is difficult to use the data in ways that bring efficiency to the work. For example, staff data is kept in three separate systems: Rediker, Munis, and AESOP. This means that compiling information requires looking in multiple systems for information and compiling data from these systems manually. If the district wanted to look at the years experience of our staff as it relates to evaluation and professional development, that would take time to compile for analysis. Administrators often rely on creating separate spreadsheets to compile the data so that it is meaningful to their work.

From the user side of these systems, comments from staff and family indicate a dissatisfaction with the student information system. Families have reported that the interface makes it difficult to quickly access information. For administrators, Rediker holds a lot of data but that data is organized in a way that is cumbersome to use in order to formulate a picture of students and to identify trends of performance in



schools and the whole district. In general, these data systems are not able to pull together data in a way that reflects the performance trends across groups of students, or that tells the story of any one student around their learning progress.

#### *Data and Information Systems Priorities*

- Student information system that has a higher capability to integrate with other systems
- Data visualization options that pull together data from multiple sources

## Theme 5: Maintaining Collaborative Family Partnerships

Comments from families indicate there is inconsistency around the quantity and quality of family communication. This includes how messages are sent from the district, families receiving the same messages multiple times, making it difficult to know what is most relevant.

The equity audit from 2022 reveals trends around family engagement:

- Families would like more transparent communication during sensitive times (e.g. hate incidents) and clear communication from special education
- Families are not satisfied communication around addressing needs in general education classroom
- Families do not receive enough communication about their child when they are struggling
- There are barriers that METCO families face that impact students' experiences (e.g. social opportunities)

Comments from parents/guardians also indicate that there are families of the school communities that bring specific skill sets that may be leveraged in moving initiatives forward in schools. Currently, volunteers help with areas such as helping to monitor lunches, volunteering in libraries and classrooms, etc, which shows a strong investment of the parent/guardian community in the school. Indeed, the work of the PTO's/PTA's and the FBE has led to funding over the years that has helped to supply schools and classrooms with needed materials and to provide programming for students. These funding efforts have filled in gaps left by a reduced school department budget.

Beyond the support of the PTO's/PTA's, there appears to be a need to continue to formulate strong partnerships with families, who can contribute to the development of school programs and help to increase learning opportunities for students. The School Advisory Councils is one structure already in place where families and educators collaborate on policy and program decisions in each school.

#### *Collaborative Family Partnerships Recommendations*

- Examine communication systems to identify ways to make communication more accessible for all families.
- Professional development opportunities for staff around family communication, particular around culturally responsive communication.

## Theme 6: Adequately Resourcing the District

The budget process along with comments from families and staff have revealed gaps in resources, which are foundational to the functioning of the school system.

- There is no World Language staff below grade 7.
- There are insufficient substitutes at the HS, leaving gaps in students' schedules when teachers are absent.
- There is no director level curriculum support at elementary schools.
- There is no staff dedicated to instructional coaching.
- There is insufficient Assistant Principal staffing at the elementary schools.
- There is no director level curriculum support for the Wellness Department (Phys Ed, Health, and Counseling).
- There is insufficient staff to deliver math interventions at elementary schools.
- There are no building-level special education administrative positions for CUE, BMS, and BHS. (There are 2 Team Chairs for ES.)
- There is one librarian in the district at the CUE. The other libraries are staffed with library aides, who are not required to have library certification.
- There are several staff members currently supported by ARPA funds, which will expire by FY26.
  - 4.0 Social Workers
  - 2.0 Math Interventionists
  - 1.6 Nurse
  - 1.0 Transition Room Educator
  - 0.4 ES Assistant Principal
- There is an enrollment bubble currently moving through the middle and high school, which means we may need to respond to increasing class sizes
- More special education staffing is needed to meet the needs of students on IEP's and to develop in-district, sub-separate programming.

There is a perception among community members that there is insufficient information about how funds are allocated. This could be a question of how information is organized to clearly outline the needs and rationale for decisions around how resources are allocated.

### *Resourcing the District Priorities*

- Communicating budget efficiencies to ensure spending effectively addresses student needs.
- Reallocation strategies to convert positions that respond to the changing needs of students.
- Stabilize resources over the next few years and provide a clear frame of how these resources serve our students and families.

## Concluding Thoughts

This Report of Entry Findings summarizes the strengths and the emerging themes around areas for growth, based on the inquiry of the past 6 months. This inquiry will continue to explore different areas of practice and will be a key part of the strategic planning process that will follow. While these findings start that strategic planning conversation, that process will zoom in on specific areas on which the district will focus for improvement.

The Belmont Public Schools is a high-achieving district with a community dedicated to the success of students. It is important that Belmont continues to provide an education where students' learning can be advanced to higher levels, meeting the expectations of families around educational quality. Building on this, the opportunities outlined here are about ensuring that instructional programming is high-quality and that there is equitable access to that instruction for all students. It is about building a healthy school system that addresses all areas of student learning for all students.