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What's Next
By Dr. Charles J. Pearson

One of the greatest challenges an organization can face is the self-reflection that occurs after a significant victory — “What’s next?”

Asking the question is critical, because significant victories are moments in time, the climax to a major conflict or drama, a bigger-than-life goal that is attained after significant struggle. On December 1, 2017 Pastor Cedric Portis, President of the Joint Executive Governing Board, and I sat at the table as Dr. Chris Neale, Deputy Commissioner of Education for the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education presented the findings on the progress made in Normandy since the district was reclassified in January 2014.

After reviewing all of the 2008 findings that had to be addressed and updating the State Board on the remarkable journey that the district had made in 24 months, Dr. Neale recommended that the State Board reclassify the Normandy Schools Collaborative as a provisionally accredited school district. The Board then took several minutes to comment on the major work that had occurred to get to this point in our journey. At one point the Board President asked for the motion, and the Board voted unanimously to reclassify Normandy as a provisionally accredited school district. It was a magic moment, one that I still frequently re-live.

We celebrated a victory watched by many across the state. As an urban school district, with all of the challenges of such, this was a significant victory. But, we do not get to live in the past. We celebrated this as a critical benchmark or milestone, and then – because the future of children matters and because this was a short-term goal on the path to creating a quality 21st century school system – we had to ask and answer the question, “What’s next?”

To recap, the Normandy School District was reclassified as unaccredited in January 2014. Approximately 900 students transferred to surrounding accredited districts as a result of the reclassification. From 2014 until December 2017, \$33 million was spent in tuition fees for Normandy Schools Collaborative students to attend other districts in the region. Additional funds were spent to support transportation for those students to one receiving district. Bel Nor Elementary closed, programs were cut, staffing was reduced and the district shifted into a survival mode.

In 2015-16, a mindset shift occurred. NSC went from being in survival mode to thrive mode. We refocused the budget to support the restoration of programming, and staffing to support that programming, while still staying as “lean” as possible at the district level. We restructured professional learning for all staff, implemented a strategic planning process that brought accountability and quality control to all departments, both academic and operational. We realigned wraparound services to support students in ways that should lead to higher academic performance for our student body. With 92 percent of the student population living at the poverty level, resources were needed, but those resources needed to be offered strategically to support student learning. We completed all of the plans associated with Proposition “T”, funds devoted to technology hardware and infrastructure, and security.

We created new partnerships and restored old partnerships. Now we have a new generation of students taking advantage of the Gateway to College program through the St. Louis Community College system. Through this program, high school seniors can graduate with a high school diploma *and* an Associate’s Degree. There are students participating in the University of Missouri-St Louis Bridge program which is designed to equip high school students to go to college and be successful while there. We have a cadre of students serving in an internship program with Fortune 100 Corporation Centene. We have students who placed nationally in entrepreneurship competitions for their invention, the “Double Backer

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Packer," a customized backpack with separate compartments for athletic gear and class work. Normandy 7th-8th Grade Center students have earned multiple national awards for their journal of poetry in collaboration with another county school.

Normandy is at the center of a study that will develop a framework for "Healthy Schools, Healthy Communities."

All the while we have focused upon improved instruction. We examined our work climate and implemented the Five Pillars — Accountability, Collaboration, Professionalism, Trust and Respect — which guide "How" we do the work. We have continued to work diligently and intentionally to ensure the Pillars guide our daily practices. The fund balances, once as low as 1.5 percent are now closer to 12 percent. These changes were critical, and none of this has been easy.

In April 2017, this community, which has historically invested in its children, passed a \$23 million no-tax-rate increase bond issue which will allow us to build a new state-of-the-art Early Learning Center to house our PreK and Kindergarten programs, as well as make key renovations to Washington and Jefferson Elementary schools.

A brighter future for our children is both the short-term and long-term response to "What's Next?". The pursuit of excellence is "What's Next?" A more intentional focus on workforce and career readiness is the answer to the question, "What's Next?"

Our great opportunity is to answer this question with each and every child in mind. To all of our Alumni, thank you for continuing to be a part of this collective action!

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