

Recent Wilmington Learning Collaborative Questions

1) What are the votes that school boards are being asked to take?

The first vote is for districts to authorize their superintendents to enter into negotiations with the state over the drafting of the MOUs. The second vote, once MOUs and further details have been collaboratively developed, is to approve the MOUs and WLC structure. Through the first vote, to enter negotiations, the districts are not making any commitment to sign the final MOU.

2) What components of the MOU will districts be authorizing their superintendents to negotiate?

We strongly believe that this should be a collaborative process, and do not want to prejudge the content of the MOU. However, in order to give board members and the public an accurate understanding of the task ahead, below is a list of elements, most of which have been taken from the MOUs that have been used in similar models around the country. We believe that many of these elements could and should be the subject of the MOU negotiations for the WLC:

- **Systems:** A community-based governing structure, a small team to provide hyper-focus on supporting these schools, an intermediary to house this effort, educator empowerment in shared decision-making at the building level, and operational and funding flexibility to best meet student need.
- **Wraparound Services:** Extended learning and enrichment opportunities, behavioral and physical health services, and family and community engagement.
- **Teaching and Learning:** Direct supports to school leaders and educators, an intentional effort on educator retention, pipelines into city schools and innovative recruitment efforts, curriculum and instruction support, and cross-district collaboration.

3) Is there data to show that this model is working around the country?

No model is perfect, but this approach has shown the ability to improve outcomes for children.

- **Springfield, MA:** Since the effort's launch, the only two secondary schools in the state to exit underperforming status were both in the Springfield zone. Additionally, chronic absenteeism has declined at 10 of 11 schools and suspensions declined at nine of 11.
- **Denver, CO:** In their first year, three of four schools met their three-year performance goals. The zone's schools outperformed the district average for closing achievement gaps, student growth, and achievement.
- **Waco, TX:** Waco's schools beat the state average in 8th grade math. In 2019, teacher retention improved by 11%.

4) How does the funding work?

In this year's budget, the Governor has proposed that \$7 million will go directly toward the WLC. That could fund after-school programs, pre-k seats, and/or additional staff, along with some of the administrative costs of staffing the Collaborative. Through the MOU process and any necessary budget epilogue language, we envision providing participating schools with flexibility with how to use resources to best meet the needs of their students.

5) What is the makeup of the Trustee Board?

We believe that a city board member and the superintendent for each participating district should serve on the Trustee Board. We also want to make sure we have parent representation, educator representation, community representation, and student voice, and we want to ensure board members are known in the community and know city schools. We believe it is important to create a board that is a true representation of the community it serves, while ensuring that the size of the board is not so large that timely and efficient decision-making becomes difficult. The exact details of board make-up would be determined by the collaborative MOU process, so those districts that vote to participate would have a say in this question.

6) Has the legality of a board of this nature been considered? Doesn't this usurp local authority?

No attorney involved in the development phase of this process has identified any statutory provision that would prevent the type of collaboration and coordination we hope to achieve. We envision that attorneys from the Office of the Governor, from the Office of the Attorney General, and attorneys representing the districts and the DSEA, would be heavily involved in the drafting of the MOUs. We believe that working together we can find a workable balance between the types of decisions that need to remain with the districts and the types of coordination activity the Collaborative could provide. Again, we will work with the districts to ensure that the final structure is both workable and legal. We would anticipate that the MOU negotiation process would involve finding the right balance between the coordination interests of the Collaborative and the educational interests of the district. If the final MOU does not achieve that balance, the district(s) need not sign it.

7) Which board will have final authority in the event of a difficult decision? By signing the MOU, aren't boards ceding final authority for their schools, business operations, HR, and other things to the Trustee Board?

The exact responsibilities that district boards will delegate to the Trustee Board will be determined through negotiations over the MOU process. The guiding principle will be to push decision-making, where possible, closer to the schools themselves and the Trustee Board. This is not a takeover, and the schools will remain part of their home district.

Generally, we hope that districts will delegate to the schools and Trustee Board decisions directly affecting what happens in schools and classrooms. Decisions affecting back-office functions may more appropriately remain in the hands of the district boards, but again, this is what we will be negotiating collaboratively through the MOU process.

8) Who retains liability – the home districts or the WLC?

Again, this is not a takeover, and these would still be district schools. The principal, the teachers, and all school employees would remain employees of the home district. As such, the district would still have liability exposure. With that said, the intermediary entity may also have some liability exposure and presumably would need to obtain insurance. The MOU process would include the development of a strategy and language to mitigate and clarify risk to both the home district and the Collaborative. These are important issues and need to be addressed, but we are hopeful this does not get in the way of working together to lift up our students, educators, and families, and providing them the direct supports needed for success.

9) Would it be a conflict of interest for a member of the collective bargaining unit (i.e. a current educator) to have a voting seat on the board that will make substantive decisions about their collective bargaining unit?

A critical element of this plan is that it aims to empower educators and to that end, we believe that educator voice should be represented in some way on the board in addition to the school-based Educator Leader Team. We of course do not intend to violate either the letter or the spirit of any statute. If a legal review determines that a current educator is not permitted to serve on the board, an alternative could be reserving a board seat for a former educator – someone with experience in these city schools.

10) The public education funding system and structure in Delaware is regularly criticized by the public as being “top-heavy” with excessive administrators. Wouldn’t creating this structure further that perception?

The goal of this model is to do the opposite, by pushing more decision-making down to the school level. We encourage anyone who has not yet viewed it to watch the virtual visit we held with similar models across the country. This question was the first one asked, and it comes up in multiple ways throughout. Link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDoiRGYMVU0&t=238s>

11) Is there evidence to support the claim that at-risk students transfer between schools and therefore would benefit from a consistent curriculum?

We have heard clearly that there is a need for more support for students who transfer mid-year. Based on this feedback, we think a consistent, culturally relevant curriculum for city schools could be beneficial. It could also provide a valuable tool for cross-district collaboration. We believe that educators and school leaders should play a key role in selecting and developing that curriculum. The WLC would provide a structure focused only on the needs of these children and schools. It would make schools true community hubs, provide additional resources, and design a system that fosters collaboration across district lines.

12) What about students who live in the city, but attend school elsewhere? By focusing on change only in the city, how are we supporting children who attend school outside of the city?

For the past several decades, community leaders and elected officials have considered various approaches to addressing the unmet needs of our city children. None of these efforts have truly succeeded. In developing the vision for the WLC, we were mindful of the need to focus our efforts on a targeted approach that we believe we can accomplish. This is not a redistricting effort. We believe that conversation is important, but better left to the Redding Consortium.

We decided to focus the WLC solely on supporting and improving the schools physically located in the city for this reason: we must start somewhere. This plan does not address every problem. But by focusing on schools located in the city, it takes a strong step forward. Recent state efforts like Opportunity Funding, K-3 basic special education funding, and HB 100 (mental health funding) are all new sources of funding that will benefit students who live in the city but attend school outside the city. And we believe that the needs of these children should be top of mind in future redistricting conversations.

13) Where does the high school question fit here?

We have heard near universal agreement that the high school configuration for students living in the city needs to be addressed. We agree, though we want to be careful not to try to tackle too much too quickly. We believe having a short-term plan and a long-term plan will be most effective, and that the high school question should be something we look at addressing. We commit to working with districts and the Redding Consortium on that.

14) Why are we trying to get this done at a time when schools are so busy dealing with the pandemic?

We heard concerns from educators that our original timeline was too compressed, particularly amidst everything educators have dealt with over the past two years. We understand those concerns and have adjusted our timeline. While we still believe it's critical that we start this work now, we are proposing to make the 2022-23 school year a planning year, with additional supports for these schools, but minimal impacts for educators during that first year.

15) What if only one or two districts decide to participate?

As we have said from the start, this is a coalition of the willing. We will work with willing partners to invest in their educators, students, and families, and collaboratively build a system that delivers high quality wraparound services and academic supports. If only one or two districts participate, we would plan to move forward with those districts. With that said, we are hopeful that all districts will participate because we think addressing this from a city-wide perspective is important.

16) What engagement has been done around this plan?

We held Zoom meetings with educators from each district's city schools. We held four public engagement forums that we also recorded. We held a town hall with the DelawarePTA. We held a virtual town hall live-streamed in Spanish. We've knocked on doors in the city on four separate outings to speak with families and students. We presented to the Redding Consortium, City Council members, the Mayor, legislators, the Coalition of 100 Black Women, the Pan-Hellenic Council, the Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League and Wilmington Center for Education Equity and Policy, the Wilmington Early Care and Education Council, union leaders, the NAACP, each district's school board (at least twice per district), non-profit leaders, and community leaders. We've met individually with interested advocates and educators. We held a virtual visit with educators, school leaders, and community members, to see how this model is working across the country. We set up the de.gov/wlc website and have reviewed every recommendation submitted via the site.

17) Where can one learn more?

Additional information can be found at de.gov/wlc. You can also view several of the public engagement sessions on that website.