

Executive Summary

A CMSi Curriculum Audit™ of the Fort Smith Public Schools

April 2022

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This Audit Report is comprised of two sections:

The **Executive Summary** provides an overview of the audit findings and recommendations in a short, graphic format.

The **Expanded Report** gives a more complete discussion of audit methodology and discusses the findings and recommendations at length. The Expanded Report also presents the extensive data analyzed and an explanation of what those data demonstrated in the context of the audit.

FSPS Curriculum Audit by the numbers

Site Visit Date:
January 24-27, 2022

145

interviews conducted with
staff, administrators, board
members, and parents



633

documents
collected for review



364

classrooms observed



3,150+

survey responses from parents,
teachers, administrators, and students



616

student work
artifacts evaluated

Introduction: The CMSi Curriculum Audit



This document constitutes the Executive Summary of a Curriculum Audit of the Fort Smith Public Schools in Fort Smith, Arkansas. A Curriculum Audit is designed to reveal the extent to which leaders and personnel of a school district have developed and implemented a coordinated, valid, and comprehensive system to manage the design, development, implementation, evaluation, and support of curriculum. Curriculum is defined as the set of learnings students are expected to master over the course of their years in the district. The system to manage this curriculum, when implemented effectively and in alignment with the district's vision for student engagement, will yield improved student learning and achievement over time if all its related processes and components are operating in coordination with one another. The effectiveness of curriculum management results as well in increased efficiency and assures district taxpayers that all fiscal support is optimized within the conditions under which the district functions.

District Background

Fort Smith Public Schools are in a period of transition. While they have experienced a relative level of success over recent years, they are poised for their next step. After a robust strategic planning process in 2017 that produced the Vision 2023 plan and a

successful \$120 million bond issue to support the implementation of the plan, the district is set to consider their next strategic plan. A new superintendent, Terry Morawski, and team of many new central office administrators are leading the district forward. District leaders plan to use the audit as the foundation for the subsequent strategic plan and for the district's activities going forward.

Fort Smith Public Schools has been a successful district and a source of pride for its community. However, while FSPS students have been successful relative to peers in the state of Arkansas and in similar school systems across the state, the district lacks systems to sustain and grow that student performance. A common refrain is that FSPS has operated as a system of schools rather than a school system, meaning that schools have largely operated without the necessary controls and direction to ensure activities are aligned behind a common vision. The school district is uniquely positioned to support future plans and activities due to its strong financial footing with revenue consistently exceeding expenditures and a successful 2017 bond issue that generated \$120 million to support district efforts. Although well positioned, the district is also experiencing a major leadership transition with a new superintendent in 2021 and many new district and campus administrators.

System Purpose for Conducting the Audit

When auditors asked district leadership why they were interested in having a Curriculum Audit™, they shared the following:

- Fort Smith Public Schools has experienced a significant turnover in its executive leadership. The audit can provide a foundation for their work in moving the district forward.
- The audit provides a mean to externally identify and also to validate the leadership's beliefs about the strengths and areas of needed growth.
- The audit will provide a foundation for the development of many systems that will support teachers in their efforts to provide quality instruction for students.

During on-site interviews, district staff and community members consistently showed interest and provided positive feedback regarding the curriculum audit. While they are proud of the current system and overall performance, they appreciated the willingness of leadership to be transparent and to seek feedback that can positively impact the district.

CMSi Audit History

The Curriculum Audit™ has established itself as a process of integrity and candor in assessing public school districts. Over the last 40 years, it has become recognized internationally as an important, viable, and valid tool for the improvement of educational institutions and for the improvement of curriculum design and delivery.

The Curriculum Audit represents a “systems” approach to educational improvement; that is, it considers the system as a whole rather than a collection of separate, discrete parts. Auditors closely examine and evaluate the interrelationships of system departments, levels, and related processes to determine their impact

on the overall quality of the organization in accomplishing its primary purpose of improving student learning.

The audit process was first developed by Dr. Fenwick W. English and implemented in 1979 in the Columbus Public School District in Columbus, Ohio. The audit is based upon generally-accepted concepts pertaining to effective instruction and curricular design and delivery, some of which have been popularly referred to as the “effective schools research.” An audit is an independent examination of four data sources: documents, interviews, online surveys, and site visits. These are gathered and triangulated to reveal the extent to which a school district is meeting its goals and objectives related to improving student learning and achievement. The process culminates in a comprehensive written report to district leaders that summarizes district strengths, audit findings, and the auditors’ recommended actions for improvement.

Curriculum Audits have been performed in hundreds of school systems in more than 46 states, the District of Columbia, and several other countries, including Canada, Saudi Arabia, New Zealand, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Bermuda. Details about the methodology employed in the audit process and biographical information about the audit team are covered in the Appendices.



Audit Scope of Work

The audit's scope is centered on curriculum and instruction, as well as any aspect of operations within a school system that enhances or hinders curriculum design and/or delivery. The audit is an intensive and focused "snapshot" evaluation of how well a school system such as Fort Smith Public Schools has been able to set valid directions for pupil accomplishment and well-being; concentrate its resources to accomplish those directions; and improve its performance, however contextually defined or measured, over time.

The Curriculum Audit does not examine any aspect of school system operations unless it pertains to the design and delivery of curriculum. For example, auditors would not examine the cafeteria function unless students were going hungry and were, therefore, unable to learn. In some cases, ancillary findings from a Curriculum Audit are so interconnected with the capability of a school system to attain its central objectives that they become major, interactive forces that, if not addressed, will severely compromise the ability of the school system to successfully meet student needs.

The Curriculum Audit centers its focus on the main business of schools: teaching, curriculum, and learning. Auditors use five focus areas against which to compare, verify, and comment upon a district's existing curricular management practices. The focus areas reflect a management system that is ideal, but not unattainable. They describe working characteristics that any complex work organization should possess in achieving stated organizational goals while being responsive to the unique needs of its clients.

A school system that is using its financial and human resources for the greatest benefit of its students is able to establish clear objectives, examine alternatives, select and implement alternatives, measure results as they develop against established objectives, and adjust its efforts so that it achieves its objectives.

The five focus areas employed in the CMSi Curriculum Audit™ are:

- 1 District Vision and Accountability:** The school district has a clear vision and demonstrates its control of resources, programs, and personnel.
- 2 Curriculum:** The school district has established clear and valid objectives for students and clientele.
- 3 Consistency and Equity:** The school district demonstrates internal consistency and rational equity in its program development and implementation.
- 4 Feedback:** The school district uses the results from district-designed or adopted assessments to adjust, improve, or terminate ineffective practices or programs.
- 5 Productivity:** The school district has improved its productivity and efficiency, particularly in the use of resources.

The auditors report where and how district practices, policies, and processes have met or not met the criteria and expectations related to each focus area and what specific action steps are recommended for revising areas needing improvement. These findings and their corresponding recommendations are presented in detail in the expanded report.



Fort Smith Public Schools Strengths

Fort Smith Public Schools is a successful school district with the potential to reach greater excellence. The district benefits from tremendous community support and dedicated teachers and staff. The schools and community work collaboratively to provide programming and support for the district's students. That support ranges from passing a major successful bond issue to the development of the PEAK center for career programming to meeting needs of individual school buildings. While the district often outperforms peer districts, district leaders are not complacent, but rather focused on continual growth and improvement.

1 Community Support

4 Positive Achievement and Growth Measures

2 Vision 2023

5 Foundation Present for Curriculum Development

3 Motivation to Improve

6 College and Career Ready Programming

*"The district staff [members] are a strength. They are very collaborative working together, and they have a heart for kids."
(District Administrator)*

1 Community Support

The Fort Smith community takes great pride in the school system and has provided significant investment and support toward its efforts. The district has a robust Partners in Education program that supports varied needs in schools; community members are active on district committees, and many of them volunteered to be interviewed by the audit team. Several commented to the effect that if the district has a need, all they have to do is ask. The community's investment in the schools was evidenced by their approval of a \$120 million bond issue that supported numerous improvements for FSPS and its students.

2 Vision 2023

In 2017, FSPS engaged in a significant strategic planning process that has informed much of the work of the district in the years since. District documentation revealed that more than 182 people participated, devoting more than 3,487 hours to the process. Their efforts generated Belief Statements, a Mission, Objective Statements, Parameters, and seven Strategies to achieve results desired by the district. The work of Vision 2023 serves as a strong foundation for the district as it engages in planning for its next strategic plan.

3 Motivation to Improve

Although all school systems can improve, not all have a desire to do so. It would be easy for FSPS to be complacent. They are completing a successful strategic plan; the students perform well relative to the state and other similar districts; the district is on a strong financial footing, and the community is supportive and affirming. However, the district is instead soliciting feedback and looking for ways to change its practices to better meet the needs of its students. District stakeholders regularly commended the district for being open to receiving critical feedback.

4 Positive Achievement and Growth Measures

FSPS students have performed well over recent years on the *ACT Aspire* assessments. Their results outpace those of students across Arkansas as well as those in similar districts. While the trend of achievement has slightly decreased, the trend has mirrored that of the state. FSPS has also consistently earned Arkansas Value-Added Growth Scores that are above state averages.

5 Foundation Present for Curriculum Development

Teachers and administrators recognize the need to develop a strong and viable curriculum in the district. The district has invested resources in the development of a collaborative model to support curriculum development, and staff members have been engaged in identifying essential standards that will serve as a foundation for the deeper curriculum work.

6 College and Career Ready Programming

The district has partnered with University of Arkansas – Fort Smith to develop a major training facility, the Peak Innovation Center, that will deliver cutting edge technical and career programming. It will include programming in Advance Manufacturing, Health Sciences, Information Technology, and Industrial and Engineering Technology. The district has also established partnerships with University of Arkansas – Fort Smith and the Western Arkansas Technical Center to provide 74 concurrent enrollment opportunities to district students. The programs provide students with a tremendous opportunity to help transition from FSPS to college and/or the work force.



Key Focus Areas

1

District Vision and Accountability: Vision is foundational for establishing a framework for all decision making throughout the district and for ensuring that those decisions move the district in a single direction toward its established mission and goals. These goals and expectations must be clearly defined in policy to establish the parameters within which decisions across the various levels, departments, and campuses/schools are made. A functional organizational structure is also needed to assure that all personnel have defined responsibilities that do not overlap and to assure accountability at all levels. Accountability is an important part of coordinating efforts and supporting efficacy across the system.

2

Curriculum: Written curriculum, as the most critical tool to support high quality teaching and learning, is essential not only in defining high levels of student learning, but also in supporting teachers with suggestions on how to deliver differentiated, student-centered instruction that is responsive to students' needs, backgrounds, and perspectives. A strong curriculum assists teachers in meeting the needs of their students more effectively by prioritizing and defining the essential learnings targets in measurable terms and providing the formative assessment tools needed to diagnose and monitor student learning. Strong written curriculum also supports equity by clarifying for teachers what on-level learning looks like.

3

Consistency and Equity: All students in the system should have equal access to programs and services, and no students should be excluded from the regular classroom environment at rates that are not commensurate with their peers. Equity refers to students being treated in accordance with need, rather than the same as everyone else. Allocating resources and supports equitably is necessary if all students are to be equally successful academically. Under Consistency and Equity, auditors also examine the degree to which the educational program and its supporting programs, such as ELL, Special Education, or Gifted, are defined and implemented with consistency across the system.

4

Feedback: Within the context of student learning expectations and a clear vision for how students should be engaged and demonstrate their learning in the classroom, having aligned assessments that measure progress and provide feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the system is of prime importance. The audit expects school systems to have common, aligned formative assessment tools that provide teachers and building leaders with clear and specific feedback regarding student progress and learning needs. There must also be a coordinated system in place whereby data are collected, interpreted, and accessed by teachers so that they have valid information for planning instruction.

5

Productivity: When all aspects of system operations are functional and effective, productivity should be evident within existing financial constraints. Over time, as the system improves and each department and school within the district builds stronger components that work in coordination, these systems improve leaders' efforts to allocate resources more effectively and adjust programming so that ineffective initiatives are terminated or modified in accordance with data. Support systems necessary to effective operations are also clearly tied to district goals and vision, and district facilities are likewise supportive of the educational program.

What We Found

In **Focus Area 1**, auditors considered the DISTRICT VISION and ACCOUNTABILITY present in the school system. They found that while the district had established a vision through its *Vision 2023* strategic plan, crafted in 2017 and implemented since, the district has not further developed planning processes to ensure continuity from one school plan to the next or between school planning and district planning activities. Auditors found what numerous internal stakeholders characterized as a “system of schools” rather than a “school system.” While *Vision 2023* was a significant and successful initiative, auditors still found the plan, and other planning efforts, lacked most of the Curriculum Management Improvement Model (CMIM) characteristics of quality planning criteria, such as a basis in data, clear and measurable objectives, ties to budgeting, and evaluation criteria. The lack of clearly coordinated and aligned planning throughout the district has lead to a system of somewhat autonomous schools that does not necessarily further the district mission and vision (**Finding 1.3**). Furthermore, in **Focus Area 1**, auditors found the system does not have adequate control through board policy, its table of organization, and job descriptions. Those three functions help bring accountability through fulfilling legal expectations that come with board policy (**Finding 1.1**), establishing a clear hierarchy of supervision that comes with a purposely organized table of organization (**Finding 1.2**), and clearly defining responsibilities for staff via their job descriptions (**Finding 1.2**). In the absence of any of these pieces, the system has greater chance of straying from its stated vision and purpose.

“We are a district of schools trying to become a school district.” (District Administrator)

Auditors considered the current quality of the CURRICULUM and the planning for CURRICULUM management in **Focus Area 2**. The district has begun efforts at planning for and establishing curriculum; however, the district does not have a clearly articulated plan for curriculum management. The CMIM defines 15 characteristics of quality curriculum management planning. Auditors found that just one of those characteristics was partially present, leaving the district without a clear systematic process to design, deliver, and evaluate student learning (**Finding 2.1**). The lack of planning for curriculum has manifested itself in courses that do not have any curriculum guides (**Finding 2.2**), low quality guides for those that do (**Finding 2.3**), resources that do not align well with state standards or do not provide feasible time for implementation (**Finding 2.4**), and student activities that do not consistently align with standards and are not particularly engaging or cognitively challenging (**Finding 2.5**).

“The campus improvement plans have been an exercise in compliance.” (District Administrator)

Focus Area 3 includes a review of the internal CONSISTENCY and EQUITY in the district. It looks at how well the system functions collectively to deliver high quality learning experiences for all its students and staff. Auditors began the analysis by considering indicators of equity in the system. They reviewed student data by school, economic status, and race/ethnicity to see if any were predictive of performance. The auditors found evidence of inequity in a strong trend that showed as the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in a school increases, the overall school performance decreases. They also found large gaps in achievement related to race/ethnicity. Auditors determined that the district is not allocating additional resources to

the neediest schools to help “level the playing field,” in fact, the needier schools and students are more likely to have inexperienced teachers (**Finding 3.1**). Auditors also found that while the district provides a significant amount of professional development for staff, there is no clear plan or coordination with district goals (**Finding 3.2**), and activities are not having a significant impact on improving the quality of instruction in classrooms. Auditors visited 364 classrooms and found that instruction was generally not cognitively demanding and often teacher-centered. They also reviewed district practices for monitoring classroom instruction and found that there is not a consistent and meaningful approach to reviewing what is happening in classrooms to ensure instruction is consistent with district expectations and goals (**Finding 3.3**). Finally, auditors reviewed programming for English Learner students. English Learners make up 22% of the student population and require specialized programming to help them acquire language skills while also making progress in content areas. Auditors found that much of the planning and programming offered addressed issues of state and federal compliance, but planning was not sufficient to adequately support the needs of EL students (**Finding 3.4**).

Focus Area 4 focuses on how the district designs its assessment system to provide FEEDBACK and how feedback is used to influence programming and instruction. The auditors found that the district does not have a clear, formal assessment plan, and little direction is provided in guiding documents and policy for how to utilize assessment. Furthermore, they found limited evidence of assessment data being used to inform practices at the classroom or higher levels of the system (**Finding 4.1**). Auditors found that the district has a limited set of assessments available for teachers, and only 71% of core courses have a specific assessment to measure student learning (**Finding 4.2**). Lastly, auditors reviewed the FSPS student performance on state assessments. They found that while overall the

district students perform well relative to the state and to schools with similar demographics, the district has gaps in achievement between Economically Disadvantaged, English Learners, and Special Education students and their non-identified peers (**Finding 4.3**).

“We have all the campuses operating independently, and the lack of continuity leads to inequity since everyone is doing something different.” (Staff Member)

In **Focus Area 5**, auditors analyzed the PRODUCTIVITY of the district by reviewing its financial decision-making practices and its practices for implementing interventions to support various student needs. The auditors found that the district was in a strong financial position, which has mitigated its need to strategically evaluate programming from a cost benefit analysis lens. Such a practice is essential to ensure that financial and human resources are used in the most efficient way possible to address all the varying needs in the school system (**Finding 5.1**). Auditors also examined the practices related to the selection, implementation, and evaluation of academic interventions. Interventions are programs that often involve large costs in financial investment as well as educator time. As such, they must be carefully selected and closely monitored for effectiveness. Auditors found that no such selection and/or monitoring process exists. The district has invested in many different programs that may or may not have been aligned with needs of the district’s students, and without any meaningful review of the impact the interventions had on student learning (**Finding 5.2**).



There is a strong sense of community pride and investment in the school district. (District Administrator)

There is stronger, younger leadership, more visionary, and forward thinking. (Teacher)

We have done some amazing work with Vision 2023. (District Administrator)

When I ask why we do certain things, no one has a good answer. (District Administrator)

The district does a pretty good job of equalizing materials, supplies, and grants, but it is difficult to equalize poverty. (Staff Member)

We need a strong district-wide instructional framework. (Campus Administrator)

We have great inconsistency in the measures we use to identify success. (District Administrator)

Too many initiatives. Teachers can't keep up with all these programs. You can't get data from one to even see if it's working before there's a new one. (Campus Administrator)



Key Recommendations

The auditors' recommendations collectively focus on developing planning practices that will bring greater continuity to the Fort Smith Public Schools system. The recommendations begin by addressing the district's strategic planning as well as the campus improvement planning practices and how they can be better coordinated to more efficiently address the vision of the overall organization. Subsequent recommendations address the planning for curriculum, assessment, professional learning, and budgeting that will bring greater cohesion among schools, and provide a stronger foundation to develop and deliver high quality instruction. Accompanying the planning recommendations are recommendations to enhance board policy, organizational structure, and job descriptions that will help better define and bring greater accountability for action around the needed improvements in the organization.

1

Develop the district and campus planning processes to bring greater continuity to the school system.

2

Develop board policy and job descriptions to bring clarity to responsibilities and expectations within the organization.

3

Develop a curriculum management plan and an aligned curriculum that supports more rigorous and engaging instruction.

4

Develop the use of assessment to impact decision making at all levels of the organization.

5

Develop a professional development plan that promotes high quality instructional design and delivery.

6

Develop budgeting procedures that regularly utilize cost-benefit analysis to better support funding of the district's priorities.

Recommendation 1 focuses on the long-term “strategic” and short-term “improvement” planning of the district and how those functions can be modified to move toward the desired “school system” and away from the current “system of schools.” The recommendation articulates policy changes that will support continuity between the long-term and short-term plans, and provides an outline for supporting district and campus administrators in the development of purposeful plans that inform the work of the district and schools. Plans are to be monitored for effectiveness and formally evaluated at various benchmarks so that plans can evolve and inform subsequent plans. The recommendation also articulates a process for carefully planning interventions, which are often called for in the “short-term” campus plans, to ensure that those are closely aligned to the overall district and campus mission, and so that they have the greatest likelihood of using human and financial capital most efficiently and productively.

Recommendations 2 and 3 provide an outline for bringing greater accountability to the system by enhancing board policy with expectations for the development of curriculum management functions, along with a more efficient and productive organizational structure, and updating and modifying job descriptions to

ensure that key responsibilities for curriculum management are present.

Recommendation 4 provides the core foundation for developing a robust curriculum management plan that facilitates the development and implementation of a quality curriculum in FSPS. The recommendation begins with the development of a curriculum management plan to direct the design, delivery, monitoring, evaluation, and revision of the curriculum. Once the curriculum management plan is established, the recommendation guides the design and development of the curriculum through establishment of a model guide based upon the Curriculum Management Improvement Model characteristics, the development of personnel to be effective curriculum writers, and practices for ensuring that resources and activities are aligned to the curriculum and meet the diverse needs of students. The recommendation ends with guidance for implementing the curriculum. It includes training teachers on the use of the curriculum, identifying research-based developmentally appropriate strategies for instruction, developing approaches that support differentiation to meet varied needs, and practices for monitoring what is happening in classrooms to ensure that instructional practices are consistent with the mission and vision of the organization.



Recommendation 5 guides the development of a comprehensive plan for assessment and the meaningful use of assessment data. The recommendation calls for policy that addresses the use of assessment in formative and summative ways and use of data to inform decision making at all levels of the organization. The recommendation outlines the development of an assessment and program evaluation plan and components therein, as well as directions for campus administrators and staff to develop curriculum aligned formative and summative assessments to provide ongoing data on student performance. Finally, the recommendation provides guidance for job descriptions and assignments to ensure that meaningful data use is embedded in the expectations of the district.

Recommendation 6 provides an outline for developing a professional development plan that is aligned with district priorities and will promote effective instructional delivery. The

recommendation directs efforts to establish a professional development plan based upon the CMIM Professional Development Criteria, and emphasizes the development of a long-term plan for professional development that supports the district's long-term priorities.

Recommendation 7 addresses financial practices in the district. While the district is on a solid financial footing, the recommendation supports movement toward greater use of cost-benefit analyses for the various financial and human capital outlays. It supports the identification of the cost of overall programs so that a determination can be made as to relative value of that program over other proposed or existing programs. With such an approach, the district can adjust funding to get the greatest "bang for the buck," and be able to support new and existing initiatives and programs in a more efficient and meaningful way.





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