

Checking off the to-do list

Scranton School District makes progress on recovery plan tasks



CANDIS FINAN
Chief recovery officer

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SCRANTON — Scranton School District administrators meet each week to discuss progress made on the comprehensive recovery plan.

And, each week, officials say the district moves toward finding financial solvency and improving academics.

In two months, the district strengthened professional

development, saved money by making bus routes more efficient and ended the practice of making employees and vendors sign confidentiality agreements. The progress comes as the district operates with new leadership — and a new vision.

“I can’t speak highly enough of where we moved from to where we are today,” Chief Recovery Officer Candis Finan, Ed.D., said. “There is an invest-

ment in making this right. There is an investment in changing what has to be changed. It’s really exciting.”

The five-year plan includes about 200 tasks, most of which must be completed in the next year. The state, which accepted the plan shortly after the board’s approval in August, placed the district in financial recovery in January and appointed Finan as chief

recovery officer in February.

If the district finishes the tasks — which include the possibility of closing schools and raising taxes — and completes other goals annually, it should become financially stable.

The plan called for district staff and Finan to complete 32 tasks by the end of September. As of Tuesday, the district had

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Scranton School District recovery: **Progress report**

Four of the five tasks listed here have been completed. The fifth is in progress.

- Implement transportation software and make routes more efficient
- Improve professional development
- End nondisclosure/confidentiality agreements
- Review curriculum and plan for updates
- Form a building reconfiguration advisory committee

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SCHOOL: 'Pleased with progress'

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completed 24 of those tasks and made significant progress on the remaining eight.

"We are really pleased with the progress the entire Scranton School District has made so far," said acting Assistant Superintendent Melissa McTiernan, appointed to lead the district after former Superintendent Alexis Kirijan, Ed.D., abruptly resigned in August. "The chief recovery officer developed a solid plan that the board and all employees can get behind and get the district back on track."

Transportation

The district budgeted \$3.7 million this year for transporting students to and from school. With the district spending significantly more than the state reimbursement rate on busing, and legal questions persisting about an agreement with bus provider DeNaples Transportation, busing is a frequent source of criticism. The state's ongoing corruption investigation of the district includes transportation records.

Over the summer, the district started using Transfinder transportation software to help make routes more efficient and, in turn, save the district money.

Officials found that one 72-passenger bus transported only four students a day last year. The district spends about \$300 a day per bus used — which would be about \$54,000 for that one bus last year. Finan said the district should find "huge savings" by making routes more efficient, and thus, needing fewer buses.

As the district determines the most efficient routes, it will have a solid plan as the board bids its contract with Red Top Transportation for special education buses and vans in 2020 and with DeNa-

ples Transportation for buses in 2022.

More efficient runs, with more children on the buses, also will result in a higher transportation reimbursement rate from the state, Finan said.

"We're much more efficient now," she said. "It's a major improvement."

Professional development

A process to provide education to teachers was never planned "more than one day at a time," McTiernan said. Looking at teachers' strengths and weaknesses, administration developed a plan to provide monthly professional development which will include a "consistent message to teachers" — a first for the district.

"We want the focus on education," said Paul Dougherty, acting director of secondary education/technology director. "We're empowering our educators."

With a great need for special education training, the district will work with a training company that will provide services for \$1,500 — a great reduction in costs — because of the district's financial situation.

With as many as 30 students in classes in upper grade levels, teachers often struggle to meet diverse needs.

"We need to make sure we're doing better at meeting the needs of all of our students," McTiernan said.

The district also changed when Educational Research and Dissemination — ER&D — classes, which are overseen by the union, are offered. Classes were scheduled during the school day, which caused the district to have to pay for substitute teachers. Those courses now are held after school, Finan said.

Other areas

The plan calls for the district

to fill several vacant leadership positions, including for information technology and facilities. At Finan's direction, the board moved several employees to acting positions without pay increases.

"It's hard to hire when you're in recovery and people don't know whether they'll have a paycheck the next day," Finan said. "We're really lucky to have people to step up to the plate and get things done."

Finan calls the administrators "Team Scranton."

Before the district makes any final decisions on school closures, a **building reconfiguration advisory committee** will study the issue. Finan is still finalizing the committee, which will meet for the first time during an all-day session Oct. 17 at the Administration Building. The plan calls for the district to close McNichols Plaza and Whittier Elementary's annex in 2020-21 and Adams and Summer elementary schools the following year.

Finan continues to **meet with preschool providers** to discuss possible changes. The recovery plan calls for the district to find outside funding for its preschool program for 3- and 4-year-olds — a program not required by the state but one that advocates say provides great benefits to some of the city's most vulnerable children. If outside funding from grants or through Head Start is secured, \$2.2 million in federal Title I funds could be used for math and reading intervention programs.

The plan calls for the district to **seek PILOT agreements from nonprofits** — voluntary payments made in lieu of taxes. In 2018, the district received a total of \$65,613 in PILOTs. About 35% of the total assessed value in Scranton is tax-exempt. Finan said leaders of several nonprofits have approached her to discuss PILOT agreements; she will meet with them soon.

School directors soon will **use Chromebooks** during meetings and all documents will be available through the online BoardDocs system — eliminating the thousands of pieces of paper the school district uses to make copies for the board each month. BoardDocs also will lead to greater transparency with improved public access.

Teachers, in their third year of **working under an expired contract**, have not received raises. The district continues to look for health care savings, which could help provide salary increases, Finan said.

Scranton school directors said they are pleased with the progress made.

"The leadership is doing an outstanding job," board President Barbara Dixon said. "We have a strong plan, and they're working on that plan. They're doing everything they possibly can to meet all the targets. ... We all believe in the Scranton School District."

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