



# WESLEY INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY

*THE PROMISE OF THE FUTURE AT WESLEY...*



**Wesley International Academy (WIA)** is an open-enrollment charter school serving students in kindergarten through eighth grade from across Atlanta Public Schools. Located in Grant Park on Memorial Drive just beyond the shadow of the capital, the school is home to more than 700 K-8 students from throughout the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) attendance area. The mission of Wesley International Academy (WIA) is to engender excellence, global perspective, life-long pursuit of learning, and community through single-gender, International Baccalaureate (IB), and Mandarin Chinese instruction.

WIA opened as Imagine Wesley Academy with the support of the Imagine Charter Management Organization in 2007, but localized its governance body with the secession from Imagine's portfolio and organization of a local, non-profit board in 2009. Now in its sixth year of operation, WIA has organized a strategic plan spanning the next three years of operation to ensure organizational alignment and programmatic excellence.

## Rationale for Strategic Planning

After six successful years of operation, the strategic planning process is timely for WIA for several reasons:

- The school is finally completely autonomous and no longer receives services, guidance, or materials from the former management company
- The localized non-profit board selected its first school leader who has completed a second year at the school (marking the first time in school's history a school leader has been retained for two consecutive years)
- The school has secured a long-term, no-rent facility that accommodates the program
- The staffing and enrollment models have finally stabilized and the organization has begun its second charter term under APS



In its two years of autonomous operation and leadership, WIA has accomplished great things.

Student performance outcomes are largely increasing, positioning the school in the top third of schools in the district. Although the student population has remained one of the most diverse in the district, the percentage of high-needs students has continued to increase, enabling the school to serve a truly diverse population that includes students who enter under-resourced and in need of excellent educational options. Although there has been staff turnover, it is a positive trend: mission-alignment across the school has engendered an increasingly high-performing, collaborative staff with higher capacity and skills than in the history of the school. Parent engagement continues to be anomalously high, and the majority of parents report increased satisfaction with programming and a strong relationship with the new leader. Student retention is at an all-time high, and there are no longer vacancies at any grade level with most boasting waiting lists.

However, like any high-performing organization, WIA has identified growth areas and gaps it seeks to address through a strategic planning process. Student outcomes are high, but still vary by subgroup and could be higher as a whole. The use of data and assessment is inconsistent, and the use of data to drive instruction is still not codified. New initiatives and best practices introduced by leadership have been adopted with some reluctance and inconsistency, reducing their impact on student incomes. Roles and responsibilities are unclear and in some places overlap, preventing evaluative systems from making a significant impact in performance.

There are also tremendous opportunities that a strategic plan should help stakeholders better leverage. The budget has balanced annually (even despite significant challenges) with no development from the board, excellent teachers in the building have not been fully leveraged as models to influence practice across the school, and the behavior and attitude of students has been largely cooperative despite few formal systems. In consideration of the strengths, gaps, and opportunities, the strategic planning process has evaluated the organization and programming to isolate key levers for the next three years that will best move the organization from where it is to where it wants to be.

## The Process

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The strategic planning process was initiated by an ad hoc committee of the board organized to oversee the process, and enlisted the support of a third-party consultant who previously supported the school through a charter renewal and programmatic review and principal selection process in the school's final year under Imagine. Over six months, the consultant led surveys and focus groups of all stakeholders and a programmatic audit, as well as reviewed performance data and held meetings with the leadership team to identify key strengths, gaps, opportunities, and risks. Through evaluation of this data (which include longitudinal examinations and comparison to a baseline programmatic audit conducted in the spring of 2012), key trends were isolated and explored. Based on this analysis, the consultant and leadership team identified three key strategic directions that would be the most critical levers for organizational change over the next three years.

Although the strategic directions are not intended to replace foundational model elements as a focus, the purpose of these three directions is to align all stakeholder groups behind common goals to create alignment of priorities and resources. Several key issues that arose throughout the process included efficiency, clarity and execution of expectations, mission alignment, adherence to policies and procedures, staff development, and clarity around roles and responsibilities. To this end, the various opportunities were organized within three strategic priorities that can be isolated as critical levers for positive change over the next three years of the organization.



## Strategic Directions

Based on the information gathered in the strategic process, the three critical levers identified are: create a culture of accountability; develop a strong, positive staff culture; and operationally define standards of excellence. These three critical levers can be used to prioritize action, organize stakeholder foci, and unite the school in a common effort to move from a highly-effective organization to an excellent one.

The need for increased accountability addresses the feedback and data that showed a break-down in follow-through amongst all stakeholder groups,

inconsistency in response to and enforcement of articulated expectations, and lack of clarity around performance management measures. Some ways this increase in accountability might be manifest include: backward mapping of school-wide goals into appropriate staff performance evaluations, consistent administration of consequences for actions that do not meet expectations, coaching for leadership and staff in difficult conversations to address challenges with transparency, restructured organizational chart to provide all staff with coaches/managers (and appropriately sized case load of direct reports for each manager), articulation of board expectations and procedures, and organization of a dashboard system to track data against goals across staff and years.

The need for a focus on building a strong, positive staff culture responds to feedback and observations of staff that reveal a need for increased trust and collaboration across staff, coupled with more positive framing and support across the organization in order to better internalize the growth mindset and mission-alignment critical to success.

Although the need for a stronger, more positive culture extends in many instances to student and parent culture as well, the organization must first strengthen staff culture to build a foundation for culture building of other stakeholders. Some ways the focus on a more positive staff culture may be manifest include ongoing high-quality team-building, frequent coaching sessions between managers and direct reports to problem-solve, integration of a positive framing approach to staff feedback, organization of staff to guide staff culture initiatives, establishment of a compensation model that yields an incremental increase for all staff, addition of capacity to address key staff pain points (such as the addition of staff to support student behavior), and focus on staff culture-building in summer orientation and professional development.

Finally, the need to operationally define standards of excellence responds to lack of agreement across all stakeholder groups on the indicators of excellence for students and adults, as well as the need to articulate a vision for alumni success from which all programming and priorities are backward-mapped. In addition to observations and data that show alumni do not demonstrate a specific set of experiences, traits, or skills that would define their preparation by WIA, staff and student success has not been articulated or defined in such a way as to align stakeholders behind common goals. Rather, students and staff, to date, aspire to varied goals and expectations inferred, implied, and sometimes even misunderstood. The operational defining of standards of excellence may include a vision statement for students and staff that articulates key priorities, organization of a dashboard that tracks data toward measurable goals, evaluation tools and processes for all students and staff that value growth toward common success indicators, resources and coaching for the board and staff that build target competencies, and processes to codify recognition of excellence from stakeholders as a means of modeling expectations.



## Action Steps

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The identification of these three strategic priorities are used to organize short- and long-term action steps for all stakeholders over the next three years. Through the organization of tools like an annual ED evaluation protocol, revised organizational chart, and the data dashboard, leadership and the board can begin to more effectively define goals and measure progress toward them, making overall programmatic impact and improvement a tangible and ongoing priority. The board strategic planning committee, in cooperation with the school site leadership team, will use an accountability matrix to outline action steps toward growth and ownership of progress toward these strategic directions over the next three years. The board and ED are advised to use the tools developed as a launchpad for ongoing focus on the strategic directions, continuing to add initiatives organized within these priorities over the course of the plan term. As part of the board's annual self-evaluation, growth in each direction should be evaluated with new or revised action items planned for the subsequent year. The organization is encouraged to revisit the priorities at the end of the plan term to evaluate the need to add, remove, or revise those directions based on the organizational improvement in each domain over the plan term.