

Summary: Introduction

As you are aware, we recently completed Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy's review. Board members Sheila Balboni, David Cruise, and I undertook the effort, and we are pleased to present this summary. The review process drew on two data sources: a survey completed by the members of the Board and interviews with five members of the Senior Leadership Team.

Survey Data

The information gathered through the survey was organized into four sections: Communication and Interpersonal Skills; Leadership and Decision-Making Skills; Collaboration and Accountability; and Progress on the Strategic Plan. All sections were to be rated using a 5-point scale: Exceptional/Exceeds expectations; Above average; Satisfactory/Meets expectations; Developing/Below expectations; Poor. There was also a space for written comments in each section.

The Commissioner scored very highly across all sections, with an average (median) score of "Above average" for nearly all of the questions asked. The Commissioner scored exceptionally highly in the domains of passion and commitment to EEC's mission and vision, and attention to the evolving needs of the field and the pressing problems of today's early education and care settings. The written comments reiterated her vision, knowledge and experience, energy, and tenacity. She also scored very highly on items focused on effective communication and positive working relationships with the field, with respondents commenting on the time she has taken to engage with various stakeholders and her ability to maintain these relationships, even as the agency pivoted to emergency and long-term crisis management. Building on this point, she scored highly on items focused on ability to make sound decisions in highly complex situations, ad-hoc and crisis management and leadership, as well as her willingness to step outside her comfort zone in making decisions or suggesting innovative ideas.

The written comments highlighted the Commissioner's ability to anticipate, reprioritize, and quickly adjust to change. Multiple people commended the Commissioner for her extraordinary job during this unprecedented time responding to the needs of the organization and field while continuing the agency's ongoing work when COVID-19 hit.

Survey respondents also spoke very highly of the strategic plan, with all respondents rating both the quality of the plan and the quality of the process as "Exceptional/Exceeds expectations" or "Above average." They noted that the appropriately ambitious plan provides a clear articulation of EEC's work and purposes and sets forth a clear vision that balances immediate and long-term needs and opportunities. Respondents praised the "listening sessions" held in the field and the comprehensive nature of the plan, which reflects the Commissioner's clear understanding of the state-wide childcare environment.

The survey responses identified one area related to building a team, where lower scores indicate a timely area for focus as the Commissioner moves through her second year in her role. The development of a diverse internal team to maximize collective skills and talents will be essential to implement new internal supports and systems to successfully operationalize the agency's goals. As an evaluation sub-committee, we agreed that this would be an excellent and timely focus for the year ahead.

Interview Data

As part of the Commissioner's evaluation, the ad hoc committee interviewed five members of the Department's Senior Leadership Team. These individuals included Jocelyn Bowne, Timothy Keane, Maria Martinez, Sean Reynolds, and Sarah Toce. Interview questions were designed to gather input about the Commissioner's overall strengths and areas of growth, as well as her and the agency's progress toward identified goals.

Those who were interviewed offered overwhelmingly positive comments about the Commissioner's leadership, specifically regarding her vision, energy, passion, knowledge and expertise, decision-making skills, support of senior staff, and strong external relationships.

Interviewees described her leadership as an exciting change; she has been the right person to lead the agency at the right time, especially during this unprecedented time. She is deeply connected to the work, steadfast in the transformation she wants to enact in the agency, and committed to the mission of EEC. She is an incredible systems-thinker and able to see the interconnected nature of things in her decision-making, taking into account what actions are needed and how to execute, big picture, all the way down to work on the ground. Although decisions have largely been reactionary due to COVID, they are strategic and mapped onto the larger goals and mission of EEC. While it is easy to get lost with "fires," it has been clear that the Commissioner sees them as opportunities, without straying from the mission.

Those interviewed also mentioned her strong relationships with senior staff, and ability to foster a supportive and collaborative environment. They perceived the strategic action plan as a team effort; the sentiment is that she gets things done collaboratively, and her staff are starting to see the siloes in EEC's departments break down. She is readily available and responsive and holds people accountable in a way that is capacity-building and empowers collaborative decision-making. Interviewees also highlighted her strong relationships with external stakeholders. This was especially evident in the strategic planning process, where she started with the field through a series of regional listening sessions, to ensure that the field had a voice in the process.

The area of growth and attention for this upcoming year that came through in the interview data were synonymous with that in the Board survey data.

Given the strategic planning process was primarily driven externally, interviewees perceived the need for more intentional and active engagement with the internal EEC staff as these internal relationships are crucial during a time of rapid change. While everyone felt they were able to give input in the strategic plan, they felt that building stronger, more trusting relationships within the organization would empower staff, strengthen systemic support, capacity and engagement, facilitate collaborative decision-making, and accelerate the implementation of the strategic plan in year two. Many voiced the need for more time and people power across the agency, especially as the agency moves forward with the strategic plan—but especially on the Commissioner's team, so that the work and decision-making can be genuinely delegated and there is enhanced role clarity.

Summary: Conclusion

In summary, while recognizing areas of growth at this critical juncture as the agency starts to pick up the strands of the strategic plan, while also continuing to grapple with the COVID crisis, the Board and the members of the senior team are thrilled with the direction of the agency in light of its mission, and overwhelmingly appreciated the Commissioner's leadership—her passion, her skills, and truly visionary perspective. In many ways, the evaluation sub-committee understood the progression to be staged appropriately. That the first stage of the Commissioner's leadership involved forming trusting relationships with the field and to develop and roll out the department's work under a strategic plan. The data from this evaluation support her success in the endeavors of this first stage. Going forward, and in order to operationalize the strategic plan in this next stage, it will be necessary for the Commissioner to draw upon a different set of leadership and management skills—those related to the Department's internal organization. That is, the Commissioner will need to further develop and sustain internal operating supports, systems, and processes, and develop and manage a skilled and diverse staff.

On behalf of all involved, we want to take this opportunity and moment to express sincere gratitude to the Commissioner for all that she is doing on behalf of the agency, the field, and the Commonwealth's children and families.

Finally, while we would typically be voting on a raise, this is not possible nor appropriate given today's fiscal climate and circumstances. However, as an evaluation sub-committee, we did discuss two issues: the first is syncing up this evaluation process with the fiscal year such that any corresponding salary adjustments come at the onset of a fiscal year. Second, we discussed the importance of a review of the Commissioner's salary in the near term, and the senior staffing infrastructure, given the complex portfolio and the evolving scope of the work of the agency and what lies ahead.

Again, a great big thanks to Commissioner Sam for her tremendous leadership, especially at such a crucial time.