

# Akron Beacon Journal

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## NEWS

# Board approves Akron Public Schools plan aimed at improving performance, attendance



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Akron Public Schools has unveiled a strategic plan for at least the next five years, with the mission of ensuring all students are "college, career and life-ready by providing innovative educational experiences."

The Board of Education voted 6-0 Monday evening to approve the "Blueprint for Excellence," which Superintendent Michael Robinson said has been a priority since he joined the school district in August.

The plan can be seen at the district's website [akronschools.com](https://akronschools.com) under "Strategic Plan" on the top menu bar.

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The plan proposes expanding pre-kindergarten education to full-time, along with a reduction in the overall budget by 4% in 2025. It also calls for technological improvements including an automated timekeeping system to track employee attendance, and an emphasis on increasing student attendance, among other initiatives.

Many aspects of the plan, including full-time pre-K and other expenditures, would require additional approvals by the board.

Before the vote, Robinson outlined the plan's mission and vision statements at a morning presentation attended by several dozen community members.

"Our motto is empowering minds, enriching futures," he said. "... The blueprint reflects our commitment to ensuring all APS scholars are college, career and life ready by providing

innovative educational experiences. Our vision is that all APS scholars will graduate as architects of their future prepared to thrive in an ever changing world."

"Our mission and vision statements were created to reflect our commitment to a high quality education and provide clear guidance for the district's future."

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Robinson released the proposal following the school board's meeting Monday. At the earlier presentation he said the plan is meant to guide a "community effort," adding the news media plays an important role.

"I believe we can keep the public informed. We believe that that includes good stories, stories of the progress we're making, and the goals we're reaching, growth, progress," Robinson said. "These things matter to our community. It's about more than test scores, and data. I would also like to ask that our reporters not use this blueprint as a weapon against the school district. This is a tool to show our progress. But it is also to show where we fall short."

Robinson said the district has worked on the plan for the past three months, engaging teachers and other school staff, students, parents and community members in many meetings to discuss various aspects.

The district plans further meetings to address each of the plan's four "cornerstones" and determine specific key performance indicators to measure progress.

Robinson called the plan a "fluid document" and said it will change over time.

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## **Creating a 'culture of safety and belonging'**

The plan's first cornerstone, developing a culture of safety and belonging, seeks to increase the percentage of students, families and staff members experiencing a "positive and affirming culture," as well as increasing the number of students with a 90% or greater attendance rate, among other objectives.

The plan calls for a district-wide attendance awareness campaign and targeted interventions to increase attendance. The district also would focus on students who do not report to school or are chronically absent.

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Currently, according to the district, around 53% of students have an attendance rate of 90% or better. The district aims to increase that to 55% next year.

Also according to district figures, only 53% of students experience a positive and affirming culture, as opposed to 73% of staff.

The plan aims to increase the percentage of students who feel positive about being at school through various means, such as increasing student participation in extracurriculars, developing orientation programs for new students and creating forums for students and families to express their opinions, ideas and concerns.

It also calls for customer service training, expectations and accountability measures for staff.

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## Improving academic achievement

The second cornerstone, focusing on academic achievement, puts extra emphasis on beginning learners.

The expansion of pre-kindergarten instruction to full-time is meant to give students a good start, Robinson said.

"We're shooting for lofty goals, and hopes that we can make 10% gains each year to ensure that our scholars leave second grade ... reading at or above grade level," he said.

The plan projects the number of students entering kindergarten on track as measured by the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment will increase from 14% this year to 24%. The number of students reading at grade level at the end of second grade is projected to increase from 43% to 51%.

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Several staff development initiatives, along with new teaching strategies, are also proposed.

The plan projects similar increases in assessment scores for other grades, as well as an increase in the graduation rate, from 85% this year to 87% next year.

## Seeking operational excellence

Operational excellence is the third cornerstone; the district seeks to "optimize operational systems, structures, employee development and processes to advance district performance."

While the district budget is a separate endeavor, the district aims to reduce its overall budget by 4% for fiscal year 2025 through various improvements in efficiency.

At the same time, the plan calls for installation of a districtwide automated timekeeping system to ensure the accuracy of payroll and attendance.

School officials also would monitor the distribution of funds and resources, including use of various district physical assets, to ensure equity across the district.

The plan proposes restructuring the human resources department to deal with talent and organizational development and recruitment, as well as expanding the communications department, "to facilitate effective internal and external communication and engagement with our partners, the community and stakeholders, coupled with a strategic marketing efforts to enhance recruitment for scholars and employees."

The plan also calls for increasing the number of minority businesses in its vendor database, and increasing the amount of business it does with minority enterprises or companies that partner with minority businesses.

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## Partnerships and engagement

The final cornerstone is fostering partnership, family and community engagement seeks to improve communications between the school district and its stakeholders. The plan also aims to increase enrollment and decrease the number of dropouts.

Multiple strategies to accomplish those aims include implementing a new system of digital communication, an online help portal and dedicated social media effort to keep the community informed.

Elementary College and Career Academies, which are not described in the plan, would be established if the board approves.

The district also aims to establish cluster-based family advisory councils and faith-based community ambassador councils, neither of which are defined.

To boost attendance, the district would implement a "fully-funded communications and marketing plan to retain, recruit, and reclaim families to Akron and Akron Public Schools."

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Robinson said the fate of the city depends on how well the school district fares.

"Change is indeed a challenge, we know that," he told the morning crowd. "It takes commitment. It takes flexibility. It takes support. It takes understanding. But change can be big. It can in our case now allow for positive change, to allow an entire community to be engaged in this process, and in the success of our schools.

"If we do not serve our scholars, families and community, well, young people will leave Akron and maybe even Ohio. They won't come back to what we call a desert city."

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