Scarsdale Public Schools

TRI-STATE VISIT 2020

Restart Plan, October 19-23, 2020

(Remote Visit)
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Tri-State Consortium

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Overview

The Scarsdale School District has planned and implemented a Restart Plan that combines in-person learning with distance learning from home. This “hybrid model,” summarized later in this report, varies across elementary, middle, and high schools. Many students, parents, teachers, and administrators have expressed strong feelings about how the hybrid model was developed and communicated, its strengths and drawbacks, and the adjustments made this fall. Feedback has been plentiful, some of it emotionally-charged. To help assess this current reality, Superintendent of Schools Thomas Hagerman asked the Tri-State Consortium, an independent alliance of high performing public school districts, to conduct a series of focus groups with students, parents, teachers, administrators, and the Board of Education. This report summarizes what they said.

Background: From Crisis to Transition

At the end of February 2020, Scarsdale had no known cases of COVID-19, but school community concerns were growing and rumors swirled. As concerns about the virus escalated, the school district used electronic newsletters and its website to update the community with information about upcoming events and guidance from various public entities about what the school was doing to mitigate the risk of infection (hand sanitizers and cleaning procedures, for example).

In the first days of March, there were still no known student cases of COVID-19 in Scarsdale, but the district curtailed student travel and cancelled the Science Olympiad, a large group regional event. When a Scarsdale teacher contracted the virus, following the advice of the Westchester County Health Commissioner, all Scarsdale schools were closed from March 9-18 out of an abundance of caution.

This extended school closure, designed to reduce the spread of infection, thrust the district into full-scale remote learning, and students, parents, teachers, and administrators scrambled to respond as best they could, given the abruptness of the shift and the available resources. Uncertainty and anxiety grew about what the future would bring—educationally and otherwise. Next, the Westchester County Executive declared a state of emergency extending school closures through March 31, 2020. When cases skyrocketed in the region, the Governor intervened, closing the all schools through April 15, then again through April 29. This was extended to May 15, and finally for the remainder of the school year. These extensions only exacerbated uncertainty, anxiety, and intensity. The Superintendent began sending messages regularly over the District’s website, many of them aimed at alleviating the stresses of uncertainty, fear, and dislocation. His communications also played an important, positive role in helping the teachers, now separated from each other, maintain a sense of connection as a faculty. His basic message was “We’re all in this together. We’ll figure it out.” During this period of time the Board of Education met at least weekly not only to perform its usual functions (such as budget adoption) but also to monitor efforts to manage the crisis. The District disseminated numerous resources for e-learning and also sought feedback about how the situation was evolving during this period of confusion, isolation, and loss.
When it became clear that schools would not open for the balance of the school year, District leaders not only continued to manage the chaos of the current crisis and support instruction, but also considered how best to reopen schools if, and when, it would be safe to do so. By mid-May the Governor had not yet issued guidance for reopening, but looking ahead, Scarsdale had already formed a Restart Committee to plan for the District’s transition to a new reality in which new health and safety restrictions would apply and further disruptions were likely.

Planning

New York eventually set forth guidance for the reopening of its schools, requiring all districts to adhere to health and safety protocols from the Center for Disease Control, the NY Department of Health, and the NY State Education Department. This guidance includes such measures as masks, social-distancing, ventilation plans, screening for symptoms, cleaning and disinfecting, and other health and hygiene practices. New York also required districts to plan for three contingencies: (1) 100% in-person learning, (2) a hybrid model combining in-person and remote instruction, and (3) 100% remote learning. Districts faced a daunting timeline for completing these complex tasks. Like other districts, Scarsdale faced the challenge of shifting from operating in a crisis mode, reacting to emergency conditions, to a set of structures and processes designed to adapt to a new reality.

Superintendent Thomas Hagerman appointed Eric Rauschenbach, Assistant Superintendent for Special Education and Student Services, to lead the District’s Restart Committee. As a first step, a 26-member steering committee developed a guiding statement of purpose:

“The Scarsdale Schools Restart efforts commit to providing an educational environment that is physically and emotionally safe; to establishing and nurturing connections within the full school community; and to fostering meaningful learning opportunities for each student regardless of the structure of schooling which takes place in the future.”

The Steering Committee also coordinated the work of ten subcommittees assigned to:

“Work through specific challenges and develop specific plans for implementing the health and safety restrictions, while also maximizing the ability to provide a school experience as close to normal as possible. Our groups will meet regularly throughout the summer to assure we are ready to open in September.”

In order to effectively carry out this work, they established the following structures:
The subcommittees included parents, faculty, staff, school building administrators, central office staff, and Board of Education members. The school-based PTAs elected representatives to participate.

The District reported on its work in progress and sought additional input through virtual public forums, surveys, and other means. Prior to its public release, however, the District’s emerging plan met with some public opposition, fueled by parents’ desire to ensure as much in-person learning as possible for all students, K-12. That opposition led to further revision, some of it at odds with the Committee’s prior work. A revised plan was finalized in August and can be found here. In presenting it to the public a district administrator presciently observed that “no one will be happy; it will not be business as usual; change will be constant.”

**Implementation**

Scarsdale launched its hybrid model in September, opening the schools for the first time since March. Students began school in phases, making connections with teachers in person and virtually in a phased-in basis. Parents reported that their children were delighted to be back in school, and students themselves expressed great pleasure at seeing their friends again and renewing their connection with teachers. Students, parents, and teachers all recalled the eagerness, enthusiasm, and excitement they brought to the new school year.

The District’s new health and safety measures stood front and center. All stakeholders followed protocols for screening and testing, including a mobile application for daily self-assessment. The District communicated frequently about conditions across the schools, including any known exposure, and guidance about how to get tested. The Scarsdale Schools Covid-19 Family-District Compact outlined expectations regarding exposure, self-quarantining, and risk mitigation. Parents uncomfortable with any in-person learning were given the opportunity to select fully remote instruction. About ten percent of District families made that choice.
Not surprisingly, as soon as the District put the hybrid model in place, calls for adjustments followed. Some were logistical in nature, such as the decision to upgrade cleaning and ventilation plans. Others were situational, as when it became necessary to quarantine certain students. The District announced other changes, such as the addition of a Wednesday Enrichment Block (WEB) and live streaming classes for absent students.

Feedback Process

To analyze, organize, and make sense of the steady flow of feedback from all quarters, the Superintendent decided to convene independent focus groups of students, teachers, parents, administrators, and Board of Education members. He invited the Tri-State Consortium to conduct these sessions. The Consortium, a professional alliance of fifty public school districts in Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York, advances student performance through continuous improvement processes. It provides a range of services to member districts, including training, study groups, consultation on special issues, and a formal peer review process. Scarsdale has been an active member in the Consortium since it’s founding in 1992; two recent peer reviews focused on response to intervention and health and wellness.

From October 19-23 the Tri-State Consortium conducted 39 separate Zoom sessions with close to 400 participants, representing students, teachers, parents, administrators, and Board of Education members. The groups represented all schools, general and special education students and parents, and both the hybrid and virtual-only approaches. District leaders asked the Consortium to focus on two aspects of the Restart Plan, communication and the plan’s effectiveness, using the interview questions shown in Appendix A.

Four educators from the Consortium carried out this work: Martin Brooks, Director; Kathleen Reilly, Director of Training; Lauren Allan, Senior Associate; and David Quattrone, team member and report writer. Working in pairs or trios, they facilitated 45-minute Zoom sessions, with a maximum of ten Scarsdale participants per session. (A few parents amplified their comments with follow-up emails.) To support this review, many Scarsdale people went the extra mile, including the Superintendent Thomas Hagerman, Assistant Superintendent Edgar MacIntosh, and Rachel Mosely, Director of Information Technology. Dalya Khan, PTC President, orchestrated parent participation, and Honore Adams managed the intricacies of Zoom logistics. There were undoubtedly many others who supported this work also, too many to name here. Most of all, the Consortium team extends its thanks and appreciation to the students, parents, teachers, administrators, and Board of Education members who collectively volunteered their time to share their insights. We have done our best to honor their voices.
Executive Summary

Here are the main points that emerged from the focus groups. The sections that follow provide more context and specific detail.

1. Stakeholders value and support the District's health and safety precautions and perceive that, for the most part, they are working well during school hours.

2. Students, parents, teachers, and administrators express support, empathy, and appreciation for each other as they adapt to the uncertainties, pressures, and extra work that has come to pass.

3. Everyone believes that in-person instruction is going well. Indeed, many told us that the smaller class size has led to stronger student-teacher relationships and higher quality instruction. They want more of it. Some argue for expanding time available within the hybrid model; others want to return to full-time instruction.

4. Parents have less confidence in what happens when students are not in school. They express concerns about the organization and quality of asynchronous learning experiences and seek additional resources to help students learn at home.

5. Special education and virtual-only parents feel marginalized with respect to the District's planning, communication, and technology efforts.

6. Parents believe District level communication is overwhelming in volume and length. They want to get the information they need in a more succinct form.

7. Many parents distrust District communications because they do not explain WHY and HOW district leaders make particular decisions. They wonder what the long-term plan is.

8. While the majority of parents with whom we met advocate for more in-school instruction, the preponderance of teachers is concerned about bringing students back into school for longer periods of time both for health and safety and educational reasons.

9. Teachers perceive that District communications have been top-down in nature, reflecting a lack of a decision-making process that includes and values the voice of teachers and building administrators. They perceive that decisions are made in a reactive manner, often in response to parent pressure.

10. The Wednesday schedule has produced widely different perspectives. Many parents feel the day is a waste of potentially valuable time, and students find the ever-changing schedule confusing. Teachers, on the other hand, want and need the time for planning and preparation.

11. The recent plan for “cross-cohort streaming” seems problematic on several levels: the decision lacked meaningful teacher participation, communication about the plan was unclear, and the technology infrastructure is not in place to deliver a high-quality experience. Moreover, the approach undercuts the advantages of small cohort size and adds to a student workload that is already daunting.

12. Although current conditions are an improvement over the prolonged closure last spring, stresses on social and emotional health persist for all stakeholders. Some of the sources of stress include the students’ need for more social interaction, parents’ worries about
their children falling behind, and teachers feeling the pressure of totally overhauling their curriculum and instruction without adequate time and training.

**Communication**

Scarsdale teachers excel at their profession, and students and parents hold them in high regard. One parent put it this way: “Teachers are doing an incredible job teaching in innovative ways and giving a great example for the kids during these hard times.” The strength of these relationships has endured during the disruptions of pandemic. The Tri-State team heard many accolades and expressions of admiration and gratitude for the extra effort made by the K-12 faculty.

Communication from the classroom teachers remains generally strong and responsive; almost all parents report developing positive relationships with their child’s teachers. However, the frequency and quality of communication vary widely from teacher to teacher, and parents want more consistency. Some norms and standards in this area might prove helpful.

Parents would also appreciate a clear picture of how the curriculum has been altered (what is being emphasized and what has been removed). They want to understand the rationale behind such changes. Over the summer, teachers made curriculum adjustments for reduced class time, and the District and each individual school shared pertinent information. However, parents believe the information is not always clear or easily accessible. The parents fear that reduced instructional time will lead to gaps in their children’s learning. There is a lack of clarity about issues of breadth and depth in the adjusted curriculum.

Parents report that communication from the District office needs improvement. They appreciate the effort to keep them informed – many told us they felt over-informed - but find it difficult to manage the complexity and sheer volume of messages. One parent said, “Eliminate the theory and jargon. Tell us what we need to know.” Another suggested, “Gear the style and language to a mom with a full-time job and three kids.”

Furthermore, many parents believe that District communications focus on operational procedures without a bigger picture that explains WHY and HOW District leaders make particular decisions. The ongoing fixes to the hybrid model, made in a spirit of continuous improvement, have created an impression that the District has no overall plan for the future and is putting band aids on a severe wound. In particular, parents crave more information about the District's thinking regarding expanding time for students in school, including factors that might trigger a fuller return. They also wonder why Scarsdale is not learning from other districts that have more direct instructional time. Some parents even prepared a comparison chart in this regard. (Inaccuracies in such a project are inevitable, and Superintendents in the region are reportedly preparing a more updated and comprehensive version.) These parents are asking, “If nearby schools are operating fully, why can’t we?” They perceive that the District has not provided a clear, full answer to this question. Some parents made it clear that the only action that will stanch their frustration and anger is a full (or fuller) return to in-person learning,
but other parents told us they simply yearn to understand why this can’t happen, and the “why” hasn’t yet been shared with them.

Parents have suggested thinking creatively about ways to use school libraries, cafeterias, gymnasiums and auditoriums as spaces to increase student contact time in school. Parents may get a lot of information, but they are less sure how best to give feedback, feeling communication is a one-way street. Many feel that they are not being heard, and that when they contact the District there is no acknowledgement of their concerns and suggestions. The Board of Education and Superintendent have devoted countless hours listening to public concerns, but we were told that it is difficult for parents to know what happens to their suggestions.

The communication pattern described above has started to erode trust and led to a call for greater “transparency” in decision-making. As one parent pointed out, “Vague or incomplete communication leads to anxiety, then speculation, and finally to anger.” A tension exists between letting the hybrid model play out over some period of time and making “fixes” to aspects of it that are sources of unhappiness for different constituents. Our sense from the people we met is that the ongoing adjustments to the model have been helpful, and if the District articulated a more forward-looking vision, it would be more likely to rebuild trust and gain public support.

The faculty focus groups revealed a similar pattern. Teachers credit the Superintendent and central administration with making an important and successful effort to communicate during the shutdown period last spring, holding the faculty together at a time of great stress and isolation. However, the Restart Plan has led to a period of constant adjustment and a flurry of directives without much (or any) prior consultation. “They need to talk to us in the trenches,” one teacher said. Top down decision-making, while recognized by teachers as necessary during periods of crisis, is a big shift in culture for the teachers. “It never used to be that way,” said another. Although teachers at all levels of the system appreciated the listening tours or forums conducted by the Superintendent’s Cabinet, they also expressed dismay at “decisions that were never discussed.” For many, the “Scarsdale Way” involves a process of discussion, investigation, synthesizing prior to a decision, all of which takes time and is at odds with the rapid-fire adjustments made to the District’s hybrid model. The timing of communication is seen by teachers as another problem: teachers perceive that parents often get information before the teachers do (sometimes from social media).

The concerns about and reactions to the initial rollout of the Restart Plan were compounded when the District announced that “cross-cohort streaming” would begin. The rollout of this announcement was and remains uneven. One teacher said he learned about the plan from the union, and a parent said she learned about it from her son who heard it from a teacher. District expectations about this “livestreaming” were confusing: we were told that it was billed as a pilot but felt like a mandate. Moreover, it was not clear how this decision came about. “Even the principals weren’t involved,” said a teacher. Taken together, these and other events have made teachers and building administrators wonder about the extent to which their thinking is valued and the role they play in the decision-making loop. The vast majority of teachers have
come to believe that the District is in a reactive position, that parents have lost trust in the District, and that “a small group of parents stomp their feet and get their way.”

A corollary to this situation is that messages from the District office often collide with information from the individual buildings, especially regarding matters of curriculum and instruction. While information about health and safety precautions is consistent, each school is its own island when it comes to how best to deliver instruction, handle the technology issues, take attendance, and decide on length and importance of homework. Teachers value regular communication from their principals, especially at the Middle and High Schools, but directives from the central office may clash with how things play out “on the ground.” Some teachers are wondering whether their principals are leading their schools or implementing District directives.

In our discussion with the Board of Education it was suggested that it might be helpful to have the Restart Committee focus on ways to improve communication. We also heard from parents that the district might consider identifying a few critical issues as the framework for regular updates. From the parent perspective the major unresolved issues include:

- the criteria for and timing of a fuller return to school
- the status of cross-cohort streaming
- the specific curriculum adjustments that have been (or will be) made
- the status of standard student assessments.

To reiterate, parents told us that their concerns about communication have generated questions about the extent to which the district has been transparent and the extent to which they can trust the district to keep them fully informed of all options. Furthermore, parents voiced experiencing frustration because they don’t know why decisions are made, and teachers and administrators would like greater voice as valued professionals. Focus group participants describe a need for central office leaders to connect with them more. They seek dialogue and want to be part of developing a shared vision.

Finally, it should also be noted that in some areas parents and teachers have divergent perspectives (on a fuller return to school for students, on the use of time on Wednesdays, or on the value of cross-cohort streaming). Yet there are few opportunities for teachers and parents to find common ground through some form of structured dialogue.

### Effectiveness of the Hybrid Model

This past summer, after considering alternate approaches and incorporating late-breaking community feedback, the Steering Committee arrived at the hybrid models summarized below.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>• AM/PM cohort model (half class cohorts)</td>
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The District launched these models in September, followed feedback and made subsequent changes. Across the board, stakeholders find value in the small cohort approach made necessary by social-distancing. Students at the middle and high schools identified advantages to the hybrid models: small class sizes permit them to get to know their teachers well. Teachers concur, adding that the smaller groups allow them to explore content in greater depth. One elementary teacher told us with delight “This is the first time I’ve ever had this much uninterrupted time with my students!”

Secondary students also value the flexibility and variety made possible by the alternate day approach. The asynchronous time at home lets them work at their own pace. Wednesdays are helpful in that they can “catch up” on work. Teachers have “stepped up their game.” Some parents also appreciate this flexibility in that it makes it easier to schedule medical appointments, arrange other activities for their children, or just have more time outside in the fresh air.

Many parents express a desire to increase and/or maximize in-person time through a variety of adjustments such as the Wednesday format, shortening the time gap between morning and afternoon sessions, focusing on the core subjects rather than specials, or designing a more creative use of space. At the same time, parents have less confidence about what happens when students are not in school. They express concerns about the organization and quality of asynchronous learning experiences and seek additional resources to help students learn at home. Unlike the parents, teachers place a high value on Wednesday planning time, even though this time has been eroded by professional development and other requirements. There is not yet a process in place for teachers and parents to analyze these issues and find common ground.

Special subjects, all taught remotely, get a mixed review. The teachers themselves feel unappreciated and undervalued; they reported that they were not included in a number of central office communications and are valued more for their assistance during arrival and dismissal than for their content expertise. The structure makes it difficult if not impossible to
teach their content. Although many of them have reinvented their curriculum (elementary art boxes, for example), students find it difficult to engage, and some parents feel that, given the circumstances, the focus should be on the core curriculum instead. There are also timing issues as when some elementary students who attend school in the morning have their specials nearly three hours after returning home. In addition, special area teachers are assigned students who do not attend the schools to which they normally are assigned. They don’t know the students well. There is no attendance policy regarding specials, and some students are cutting class (PE and music are required by NYS law).

The three models work differently for students at different grade levels. Some parents and teachers wondered if there need to be four models (K-2, 3-5, 6-8 and 9-12) because K-2 students’ needs are different from 3-5 needs. Kindergartners are the least able to work independently and require the most support. K-2 parents believe returning the youngest students to full-time instruction should be a high priority. Similarly, students entering grades 6 and 9 would have benefited from additional support as they entered a new school -- transition and orientation programs to help them get to know their teachers and school procedures.

Those participating in special education programs and the virtual-only approach identified additional needs that have not yet been addressed. Parents of special education students, while mostly understanding, are frustrated that IEP or 504 accommodations are difficult or impossible to achieve. Special education is problematic on multiple levels: lack of in-school time to focus on academic needs; inability to attend to screens for long periods of time (and inability to understand and follow through on directions); special services, such as OT, being delivered remotely; unclear schedules and varying services for ICT and LRC students. Special education parents at the secondary level were especially sensitive to grading and testing questions. They, too, felt that teachers and schools should modify their testing and grading practices to reflect the new conditions of instruction.

Virtual-only parents experience more isolation from their home school, especially when the classroom teacher comes from another school altogether. In these circumstances, communication from the home school is erratic. Virtual-only parents feel like an afterthought – they perceive that tweaks to the models are made after listening to parents of hybrid students but not them (and they, too, are dealing with complex emotional issues). It is unclear to them how (or if) the virtual-only model figures into future planning (will it continue to be an option?). These parents made some suggestions that might work for all students: having teachers post assignments by a certain time each day and having a way to contact teachers when technology issues arise (a phone # or a text). Virtual-only parents also said they would appreciate a directory of virtual-only families so they can connect their children to each other.

Not surprisingly, technical problems are a daily event. Students use multiple software applications, some easier to use than others. Some found Schoology particularly difficult to navigate. There is also a transition from Schoology to Google Classroom that is confusing for some students. Teachers have widely varying training and skill in technology, with some able to harness the full power of Zoom (e.g., breakout rooms) and others limited to a more basic experience. When reliability issues surface, the District provides support and quick response
where possible, but given the real-time nature of Zoom classes, immediate support is necessary. We heard multiple stories of students being knocked off line in the middle of lessons, students not being able to contact teachers to report this, and students dealing with sound distortion issues. The technology also forces teachers to position themselves in one place and stay there for the entire lesson. Students say that they are not able to see their fellow students, nor can they see what is on the board or hear the students physically in the classroom.

No one knows how the hybrid plan will affect learning. Although teacher committees worked over the summer to make revisions, some parents expressed concern about the vagueness of such revisions and weren’t sure how to get more information. Some worried that their children would not be prepared for State assessments or the next grade. Not all students and teachers share these concerns, especially with respect to skill acquisition (vs. content coverage). They seemed to understand that students across the nation are dealing with the same issues and that they will make up for whatever “content” they lose over time. Moreover, some teachers told us that the loss of instructional time is offset to a large degree by the smallness of their classes, enabling them to cover most if not all of the curriculum despite the reduction of in-school time. Yet parents would like a revised curriculum (or course syllabus) so they can know what is being taught (and what is being left out). Some teachers, too, want more clarity about the depth vs. breadth issue. They want more guidance about whether they should include the same number of (shortened) units of study or cut some out. Perceptions vary by grade level and content area.

The District has endorsed a “pilot project” for “cross-cohort streaming,” in which students at home watch their teachers teach their fellow students in person. This has created several new issues for students, parents and teachers:

- The rationale for this has not been spelled out, and teachers experience it as a top-down mandate.
- The communication announcing the change was uneven, without time for orientation or preparation prior to implementation.
- The technological infrastructure (cameras, microphones, training) to make this work optimally is not in place.
- Most students experience cross-cohort streaming as a new, crushing burden. It erodes much of the asynchronous time they were using to complete assignments given in school and work at their own pace at home. Zoom fatigue is real.

Many stakeholders experience heightened anxiety about the loss of opportunities to socialize, the accompanying isolation, and the uncertainty about the future. The focus group sessions made clear that the numerous social and mental health issues affect not only students, but their parents and teachers as well. Teachers are worried about not being adequately prepared (with technology or curriculum) for another potential closure and return to fully-remote learning should that be required in the coming months. Parents and students expressed the desire to have the District create more smaller group, interactive, project-based work that would bring students together (remotely). Some middle school parents wonder why the advisory program has been put on hold when social emotional support is needed.
Over the past few years, Scarsdale has been at the forefront of identifying and addressing issues of academic stress. The District was the first in the region to introduce the Challenge Success survey that highlighted the impact of workload, sleep deprivation, and engagement (among other topics). The current situation only heightens such stress.

For example, students expressed concerns about testing: there is less time spent in school and therefore less time spent on lessons, but they are still expected to pass the same tests as in previous years - they view this as unfair. They also lament the loss of office hours for teachers, and therefore access to them for extra help and to answer questions.

Here are some other matters that surfaced in the various focus groups:

• Students and parents find Schoology difficult to navigate; Google Classroom is much easier to use.
• Students reported that some teachers do not adhere to an 8:00 p.m. guideline for posting homework, making it challenging to complete assignments by the next morning.
• Office hours for teachers sometimes conflict with schedule shifts or special services.
• The MS/HS Virtual-Only Parents feel that communication during the summer was spotty at best, but since has improved. They perceive that they are treated by the district as an afterthought and that the hybrid model parents have an outsized voice with the Board and leaders.

Conclusion

Our charge was to listen carefully to the feedback we received from the stakeholder groups we met and reflect their views in this report. We have tried to do that faithfully. In closing we want to emphasize some reasons for optimism going forward.

• The Superintendent and the central office have demonstrated their deep commitment to the health and safety of all students and to providing them with a meaningful educational experience. They have devoted their full energies to continuously improving the hybrid model. Ditto for the Scarsdale Board of Education.
• The students have shown attentiveness and resilience with respect to the new safety protocols and dislocations of the hybrid model.
• The teachers have found inventive ways to adapt to the new conditions, and they have capitalized on the educational advantages of small cohorts.
• The parent community remains attentive and engaged, and parents’ feedback has led to valuable improvements in the model.

There is no reason to doubt that District leaders can integrate these assets as they develop a shared vision of how to move forward. An obvious challenge is to find the right balance between constantly adjusting the hybrid plan in real time (constant change) and sticking with the model in place until the course of the pandemic becomes clearer and longer term plans emerge.
Quite understandably, many parents want students in school full-time, and a specific plan for a full return to school would reduce uncertainty and build trust with those parents. Yet it is not clear that the parent community speaks with one, unified voice or that the path forward is linear in nature, with specific metrics that might trigger new paradigms. The focus group feedback suggests that a robust, shared vision of the future is messier, requiring a process that honors the voice of teachers and administrators and also provides the parent community with current information about why and how decisions are made. Although clarity about the future may be elusive, it is reasonable to expect that the District will make and communicate decisions in such a way that District personnel feel included and that parents feel appropriately informed.

We again commend the students, teachers, building and district leaders, and parents for their thoughtful, candid remarks, and we leave with the conviction that even in the face of daunting challenges, the energy and purpose of all stakeholders will help the district thrive.
Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

What information, specifically, are we hoping this report gives us?

Our focus is on improving (1) communication and (2) curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Faculty Q’s:

- In the area of Communication...
  The district wants its communication with you to be timely, consistent and effective. Please help us understand your current experience with the information you receive.
    - Given that a considerable amount of complex information needs to be conveyed on a regular basis during these challenging times, what communication practices have been effective? What can the district do better?
    - Overall, has the district been responsive to your requests for information?

- In the area of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment...
  The Hybrid model requires a balance of instruction in school, monitoring work at home, and assessment of learning. Can you share with us an example of a particular success you’ve had so far.
  
  The Virtual model requires a balance of instruction provided remotely, monitoring student progress and assessing student learning, all without having direct contact with the student.
    - **For Hybrid Teachers:** What parts of the hybrid model are working well for you as a teacher? What are the biggest challenges? What parts of the model are working well for your students? What are the biggest challenges?
    - **For Virtual/Remote Only Teachers:** What parts of the virtual/remote model are working well for you as a teacher? What are the biggest challenges? What parts of the model are working well for your students? What are the biggest challenges?

We know that neither approach is ideal but both are necessary under the present conditions. We want to ask you three questions about the model you’re using: (1) To what extent are students engaged in the work they are assigned; (2) To what extent are the social-emotional needs of your students being addressed; and (3) Are there any changes to the model you’re using that would make you feel more effective?

Is there anything else you would like us to know?
Parents/Guardians Q’s:

• In the area of Communication...

Throughout the pandemic, the district has endeavored to provide timely, consistent, and effective communication to parents. Please describe your experience with website postings, newsletters, emails, meetings, and other announcements you’ve received.

  o Given that a considerable amount of complex information needs to be conveyed on a regular basis during these challenging times, what communication practices have been effective? What can the district do better?

• In the area of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment...

To accommodate both the Hybrid model and the Virtual model, teachers have adapted their instructional practices and the curricula they teach to fit both approaches.

  o For Parents of Hybrid Students: What parts of the hybrid model are working well for your children? What are the biggest challenges for your children? To what extent is your child engaged in the work he/she is assigned? To what extent are your child’s social-emotional needs being addressed?

  o For Parents of Virtual/Remote Students: What parts of the Virtual-Only model are working well for your children? What are the biggest challenges for your children? To what extent is your child engaged in the work he/she is assigned? To what extent is your child’s social-emotional needs being addressed?

Is there anything else you would like us to know?

Students (Elementary) Q’s:

We’re interested in knowing two things about how school is going for you - are you clear about what is expected of you, and how are you doing?

• In the area of Communication...

  o Do you know what you’re supposed to be doing in school (for Hybrid students)? Do you know what you are supposed to be doing at home (for Hybrid students and Virtual students)? What do you do when you’re not sure?

• In the area of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment...

  o What about the Hybrid (or Virtual-only) way of learning works the best or you? What is the most challenging part? What ideas do you have for improving your education this year?
Two more questions: How do you know how well you’re doing? Are you feeling safe and happy?

Is there anything else you would like us to know?

Students (Secondary) Q’s:

We’re interested in knowing two things about how school is going for you - are you clear about what is expected of you, and how are you doing?

• In the area of Communication...
  o For Hybrid Students: Do you know the expectations in school? Do you know what the expectations are when you are at home? What have been the most successful ways of learning the expectations? What do you do when you are unclear?
  o For Remote-Only Students: Do you know the expectations for learning at home? What have been the most successful ways of learning the expectations? What do you do when you’re unclear?

• In the area of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment...
  o What about the hybrid (or virtual-only) way of learning works the best or you? What is the most challenging part?
  o What suggestions do you have for improving your education this year?
  o Two more questions: How do you know how well you’re doing? Do you feel safe and happy?

Is there anything else you would like us to know?