



SCARSDALE  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## 'Dale Dispatch: District e-Newsletter

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From Dr. Thomas Hagerman

Superintendent of Schools



### Autonomy vs. Consistency: An Age-Old Question in Scarsdale

Last week the Tri-State Consortium visited the District for a consultancy on the topic of *wellness*, particularly to explore the interplay between our high academic expectations and our current wellness efforts. Later in this newsletter you will find a piece by Lynne Shain, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, which more comprehensively outlines the background and process of the Tri-State's work; however, for the purpose of this article, I want to explore one particular topic raised by them, one echoed by many others on similar types of visits: the role of autonomy vs. consistency in our daily practice.

During our collective debrief, the Tri-State's delegates posed and explored several provocative questions with District staff around this issue:

- (1) Are autonomy and alignment inconsistent with each other?
- (2) Isn't it much harder to sustain a healthy, organic, and autonomous system?
- (3) Is Scarsdale's autonomy creating stress for students through a lack of common language, experiences, and the like?
- (4) Are there times or places where autonomy does not belong?
- (5) Leading faculty with high levels of autonomy makes tracking an initiative more difficult and requires more frequent pulse-taking of students. How is that taking place? How do you know when you are successful?

While these are just a few of the many questions raised, they provide enough context and variety to understand the main issues. As I have been reflecting on potential responses, I have found myself, first, reaffirming a core, personal belief around autonomy, one which I believe many

teachers also share: student engagement is critical to learning, and teachers need to have the autonomy to use their deep understanding of their students, along with their own experience, knowledge, and expertise to meet each child's unique needs.

To be clear, though, this notion of autonomy should not be construed as a free-for-all within Scarsdale schools. There are a host of professional responsibilities which are clearly articulated and embodied. More specifically, in terms of classroom teaching and learning, this work is guided by explicit District curricula; building goals and initiatives; and grade, team, and department agreements. In academic parlance, we often refer to this as the "what." In other words, after some course of study, *what* do we expect students to know, understand, and be able to do as a result of this new learning. These are our universals.

Autonomy comes into play with "how" teachers help students to achieve mastery of these concepts and skills. The best teachers employ a myriad of techniques, strategies, exercises, methods, and modalities that meet the individual and collective needs of students in their classroom. This practice is often referred to as "backwards design," or the process of identifying the big ideas and desired results, choosing acceptable evidence of concept or skill attainment, and developing an instructional plan that ensures these outcomes. While this may sound somewhat simplistic on paper, teachers understand that this work is incredibly complex, rigorous, and iterative.

In a recent meeting with our Curriculum Coordinators, the topic of curriculum design arose, and I found myself searching for a metaphor to better illustrate my thinking on the topic. I was reminded of a Food Network cooking show called *Chopped*. If you haven't seen it, the show consists of several, timed rounds. At the onset of each round, competitors are presented with a mystery basket of ingredients. They may supplement this with other pantry and refrigerator items, but in a relatively short period of time, they must use all the ingredients in the basket to produce the most delectable appetizers, entrees, and desserts (or, as you likely have guessed by now, they get chopped from the show). Now, if your dessert basket happens to contain reindeer pate, stinging nettles, and a bag of pork rinds, even the best of chefs might be stymied.

This example is not so very different from what we expect and ask of our teachers every day. Their "baskets" may look a bit different in that they contain a host of curricular expectations across content areas that may seem very disconnected on the surface. Their work necessarily involves assembling these into both a coherent, long-term, instructional plan, and also the "bite-sized" pieces for our students' daily and weekly consumption. Beyond content, as I mentioned earlier, there are a host of grade-level and departmental agreements. For example, schedules may be established for when tests or quizzes may be given, in order to avoid overburdening students. Or, there might be a grade-level agreement to use yoga breathing in any given week as a focusing technique. All of these affect both planning and timing of instruction. But, like accomplished chefs, teachers achieve remarkable outcomes through careful use of the given ingredients, effective use of time, purposeful risk-taking and revision, and constant feedback and reflection.

As I have spent more time reflecting on the questions our Tri-State team posed, it has become even clearer to me that the role of autonomy is a critical piece of the work that we do in our classrooms every day. What may not have been as clear to our visitors is that, in my mind, it is predicated on a clear understanding of the interaction between the "what" and the "how." The "what" provides our students with a common underlying foundation for learning from kindergarten through high school. It ensures common curricular and process vocabulary, progressive skill development and mastery, and appropriate sequencing and spiraling of content. Clearly, this allows teachers and students to maximize learning opportunities and growth every year. The "how" is the personalization of this learning which is critical for creating meaning and enduring understandings for our students. Both ingredients are necessarily essential.

Warm regards,  
Dr. Thomas Hagerman



## Tri-State Consortium Visits Scarsdale

*By Lynne Shain, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction*

A team from the [Tri-State Consortium](#) visited our schools on April 19-20. Founded in 1992, the Tri-State Consortium has developed an alternative assessment model designed to enhance student performance in high-performing school districts.

The purpose of the visit was to conduct a consultancy based on the Essential Question below about our initiative on High Academic Expectations and Student Wellness.

We are strongly committed to Wellness. To what extent is our commitment to support and sustain a strong culture of student wellness reflected in our:

- Transfer and Application of Research-based Partnerships
  - District-Wide
    - [Scarsdale Teachers Institute](#): Courses that promote evidenced-based models linked to positive psychology and positive education
    - Mission Statement, [Scarsdale Education for Tomorrow 2.0](#)
- Whole Child
- Active Learning
  - Elementary: [Inner Resilience](#), Linda Lantieri, founder.
  - Middle School: Positive Psychology: [Positive Psychology Center](#), University of Pennsylvania
  - High School: [Challenge Success](#), Stanford University
- K-12 Approach
- Strategies to help students manage academic expectations
- Efforts to Inform parents, community, and the Board of Education

The District-wide Leadership Team reaffirmed that any iteration of a Scarsdale Education for Tomorrow 2.0 would prominently feature wellness and education of the whole child. Among others, these elements complement our continuing dedication to offering a classic education that is taught in a progressive fashion.

Scarsdale students, parents, and faculty recognize that a high and intensive level of academics is associated with a Scarsdale education. For some students, this intensity is motivating and fosters superior work and performance. For others, a Scarsdale education causes unhealthy stress levels, based on a research study conducted by Challenge Success, Stanford University, in November, 2015 with Scarsdale students.

In preparation for the consultancy, we created a [Self Study](#), documenting our progress to date, and a [Schedule](#) for the [Visiting Team](#).

Through presentations and school visits, we shared with the Visiting Team the significant and impressive work that we have done so far on this initiative, and then had the opportunity to hear their insights, suggestions, and recommendations.

Within a month, we'll be receiving a written report, containing commendations and recommendations, which will be discussed with our Board of Education and posted on our website. This report will also be shared with [Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools](#) (the organization that accredits Scarsdale's schools), and will serve as our application for our accreditation to be renewed.

The collaboration of our staff on this initiative has been truly remarkable in and of itself, but made even more so through the power of Google Docs, as exemplified by our [Self Study](#)....take a look!

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## After Tenure: Career-Long Teacher Professional Growth

*By Drew Patrick, Assistant Superintendent  
for Human Services and Leadership Development*



At the next Board of Education meeting, the Superintendent will be recommending a total of 26 educators for tenure. This is an important and exciting milestone for each individual, and indicates that these educators have successfully demonstrated that they possess a high level of knowledge, skill and understanding in the areas of content, pedagogy, and relationships. As with any milestone, there is a "before" and an "after." I have been asked, "what happens with teachers after tenure?" on a number of occasions since arriving in Scarsdale, causing me to think it worth using this space to paint a picture of the ongoing professional supports in place to help all of our teachers grow, learn, and make continuous improvement throughout their careers. In truth, I have discovered that the supports are many, simply because the expectations for performance remain high. Below is an overview of how we nurture continuous professional improvement over time, and a preview of work to come.

### **Teacher Leadership**

A critically important structure that is perhaps under-recognized in the Scarsdale Schools is the teacher leadership model. Examples of teacher leaders include Department Chairs, Elementary Curriculum Coordinators, Computer Teachers, and Teachers-in-Charge (a position that will be migrated to the title of elementary assistant principal starting July 1). These individuals provide the first line of support to teachers in all aspects of their craft, and are tasked with the responsibility of supporting the educators in their department or area of concentration, day-in and day-out, across the entire arc of a teacher's career. This model, well-founded in the research base on professional growth, is a proven vehicle for supporting the development of faculty members at every stage of their professional journey. Many teacher leaders are also part of the formal supervision and evaluation processes, and conduct performance appraisals annually, putting them in close touch with the needs and aspirations of their colleagues.

### **Connecting with Networks and Experts**

While professional development can take many forms, three important structures supporting this work are professional development (PD) grant opportunities, the Center for Innovation (CFI),

and job-embedded curriculum and instructional support efforts.

PD grants are awarded to teachers through a rigorous application and committee review process. Individual teachers use these grants to attend professional conferences and workshops, or to engage in research. The CFI sponsors speakers, organizes site visits to schools and universities that are leaders in innovation, and funds collaborative teacher projects that forward innovative practice. The District also appropriates funds to pay for consultant work in our schools throughout the year to support teachers with implementation of programs like the Teachers College Reading & Writing project and Singapore Math. Together, these structures help teachers to expand their professional learning networks, pedagogical repertoires, and knowledge and skills related to content.

### **Scarsdale Teachers Institute (STI)**

Perhaps the longest-standing effort toward ongoing teacher development, the STI provides a robust array of courses that are aimed squarely at promoting a culture of reflection and collaboration. Taking place after school, on weekends, and over the summer, STI courses are designed to support District goals and initiatives, and to create opportunities for serious engagement among educators around important topics related to teaching and learning. The suite of course offerings is by no means random. Rather, courses are thoughtfully proposed, then reviewed and approved by an accreditation committee before being approved by the Board of Education.

Each of the structures outlined above serves tenured teachers throughout their careers. Hundreds of teachers participate in ongoing learning experiences via STI courses, professional development and/or Center for Innovation grant-funded experiences, and job-embedded learning. Further, our annual professional performance review system supports the continuous growth and improvement of tenured teachers. All teachers are observed multiple times annually, and receive a summary, year-end appraisal. In cases where specific needs are identified, our support mechanisms are there to assist -- teachers are steered by administrators and teacher leaders toward coursework, workshops, and/or collaborative program improvement projects that support areas for growth.

Most recently, a new aspect of our annual performance review process has been a structure that involves classroom visitation exchanges. Administrators and teacher leaders from one school or level have been visiting another school, spending time in nearly every classroom in the building. Feedback to teachers and the building as a whole takes place around an agreed-upon set of "look fors," such as evidence of student engagement. While this is just in a pilot stage, there has been great enthusiasm for this work, and teachers have expressed an interest in participating in this type of experience to learn what others are doing that is successful.

Finally, the District leadership has been engaged in concerted work around the feedback process -- what feedback we give to teachers, and how we deliver that feedback. During the 2017-18 school year, leaders will be engaged in our own professional development work with *Research for Better Teaching*. The overarching goal of this work is to build a robust common language around best practices in pedagogy, and deepen our repertoire so we can be more effective in the work of supporting teacher growth across the entire District.

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"The Talk"...

*By Eric Rauschenbach, Director of Special Education and Student Services*



As parents, having "the talk" with your kids conjures very specific visions of uncomfortable conversations with your own parents, and quite possibly trepidation about how to convey very complex subjects such as puberty, love, and sex to those smaller versions of yourself. However, in today's world, it feels increasingly like having the talk has turned into having the talk and the other talk and the other talk and...

As I wrote the parental advisory on *13 Reasons Why* earlier this month, I couldn't help but reflect on the number of times I have received and given the advice about talking to kids honestly about very difficult topics. Whether it was sex, bullying, disabilities, sexual abuse, divorce, drugs, online safety, school shooters, gay and transgender rights, or the latest sticky topic that my son picked up at lunch, the advice was always the same: be open, honest, age-appropriate, and most importantly, make sure they know you are happy to answer any questions they have at any time without needing to feel embarrassed or judged.

Most of us grew up in a world that allowed our parents to shelter us to a certain extent. We needed to sneak into R-rated movies after buying a ticket to the latest PG movie (don't tell my mother); TV's were pretty tough to hide; the stories we heard from our older siblings or cousins didn't come with pictures or streaming video; and they had some ability to keep us from hanging out with "that kid." The cell phone and social/streaming media have changed all the rules, and rendered virtually non-existent a parent's ability to shield a child from certain topics. If that weren't bad enough, the prevailing culture has just about programmed us to document every aspect of our lives in the cloud -- and our kids don't have reliable filters. When my eight-year-old son asked for a YouTube channel because some of his friends had them, I almost fell off my chair!

So, what's the answer? There isn't just ONE.

However, there are a few basic approaches that can help give our kids the tools they need:

**Listen and talk.** Open, honest, and age-appropriate conversation about everything is the most effective way to encourage your kids to trust you, and entrust you with their questions. Most of us know that this is easier said than done with teenagers, many of whom would rather get a root canal than get "deep" with their parents. However, contrary to all physical and auditory markers, they do actually listen to what you say -- even if they won't admit it.

That being said, I offer a word of caution about advice: if you are constantly talking more than your kids are in conversations, they will be less inclined to listen to you. Kids need to feel they are heard, and that their feelings and reactions are legitimate and will be acknowledged (even if they seem ridiculous). That's not to say you must approve of their reactions, but they need to know you understand why they felt or reacted the way they did. Lead them into a topic by posing questions, rather than by lecturing. And don't be afraid to set an expectation for when the next time something similar happens, and explain why. Each child is different and requires different conversations. If you are stumped, use your resources! Talk to the school psychologist, your own parents, trusted friends, or a family counselor, and discuss how to talk with your kids about tough subjects.

Your conversations will not always be fruitful, but not communicating is much worse.

**Set and model behavioral expectations.** This is not about the type of expectations that

involve curfews and chores (you need those too), but the type of behavioral expectations that align with the most important characteristics you want to develop in your child. For example, students who both see and are expected to show kindness often do. Explicitly state the things that are important values, such as respect for others and self, empathy, or the connection between effort and outcome. Expectations and values will differ some from family to family, but explaining their importance, defining them, and expanding those definitions as your children grow, are central to helping ground them in that wide world out there, where you have little control over what they are exposed to. This may seem like a simple approach, but if these values are consistently applied by you to the situations that your kids experience, it will become part of their outlook on the world.

And finally...**Live and laugh.** There is a time to talk about the many complicated and sometimes dark topics our kids come in contact with, but many more times when we should focus on the positives in our families, communities, and nation. Our children learn what is important to focus on by watching us. If we are consumed by the negative they will be as well. Find and celebrate the positive as much as possible. Each of our children has behaviors or things that we would like to change, but those characteristics should not be the focus of our relationships. Positive self-esteem and self-worth cannot come from focusing on the negative, and although as parents we need to enforce consequences, our children determine what we think of them through the sum total of our communication with them. We need to be mindful of the balance.

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## Proposed Budget 2017-18

*By Stuart Matthey,  
Assistant Superintendent for Business and Facilities*



On April 3rd the Board of Education approved the 2017-18 proposed budget in the amount of \$153.690 million, to go forth to District voters on May 16th. The Board's approval marked the end of the budget development process which began early last summer.

Although budget development is practically a year-round process, formal presentations to the Board of Education began in late December with a historical look at past budgets, 2017 year-end projections, and budget planning factors. Following that, here is the timeline of other budget presentations held and actions taken:

- **January 9th and 23rd** - Discussion of Staffing Recommendations
- **February 13th** - Budget Plan Overview, and focus on Debt Service, Transportation, and Employee Benefits Budgets
- **March 6th** - Budget Plan Update, and focus on Instructional, Facilities, Athletics, Special Education, and Technology Budgets
- **March 13th** - Budget Plan Update and Full Budget Review including Revenues and Tax Projections
- **March 27th** - Special Meeting - Budget Forum
- **April 3rd** - Board of Education adopted 2017-18 Budget
- **May 16th** - Budget Vote

The 2017-18 proposed budget was developed based on the goals and objectives as set forth in the District's Transition Plan, which have been discussed at Board of Education meetings since the beginning of the school year.

Instructional highlights of the proposed budget include additional staffing to support the District's STEAM initiative, Primary Reading, Regular Education, and Special Education programs, and World Language. Operationally, the proposed budget funds several facility improvements including support for the previously approved 2014 Bond Project, and for critical technology infrastructure. Overall, the proposed 2017-18 budget represents a 2.15 percent increase over the current year, with an associated tax levy increase of 0.96 percent, below the 1.55 percent tax levy cap calculated for Scarsdale.

Please don't forget to vote on May 16th in the Middle School Gymnasium from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.



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