



SCARSDALE
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

'Dale Dispatch: District e-Newsletter

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From Dr. Thomas Hagerman
Superintendent of Schools



Executive Function: The Connective Tissue Between Rigor and Wellness

One of the dichotomies with which we continue to grapple in Scarsdale schools is the relationship between rigor and wellness. Both are important to our mission as we prepare our students for their future lives--both academic and holistic. In an attempt to define the relationship between these aims, we have been using a double helix as a metaphorical representation of the balance we would like to achieve. In their simplest form, metaphors compare two concepts that are unrelated and create a clearer connection for the recipient. But to date, our metaphor of the double helix has been lacking. The axis, or connective tissue, that describes the interconnectedness of rigor and wellness has been missing...well, until now.

On October 2nd, Dr. Nancy Sulla, author, national speaker, and thought leader in transforming learning environments to build student engagement, empowerment, and efficacy, spent a day with Scarsdale teachers and administrators. In her presentations, she shared insights from her latest book, *Building Executive Function: The Missing Link to Student Achievement*. In this work, she frames executive function skills as a requirement for mastering six increasingly complex life skills that should be the goal of any school: conscious control, engagement, collaboration, empowerment, efficacy, and leadership.

As an introduction to this topic, Dr. Sulla explained that for too long executive function has been a term used primarily among special education professionals to discuss deficits, but largely ignored by mainstream educators. Instead, she argues that executive function "is an umbrella term for the neurologically based skills involving mental control and self-regulation" (Cooper-Kahn, Dietzel, 2008, p. 10) which are necessary for all students (and adults, for that matter).

Some of these skills include the following: focusing; concentrating; shifting focus from one event to another; changing perspective; seeing multiple sides of a situation; being open to other people's points of view; being creative; catching and correcting errors; thinking about multiple concepts simultaneously; storing and manipulating visual and verbal information; identifying same and different; remembering details; following multiple steps; anticipating; persisting in a task; organizing actions and thoughts; and considering future consequences in light of current action. Albeit incomplete, this list certainly describes a skill set with which we hope our students are equipped as both part of their journey through our schools and certainly beyond.

During her visit, Dr. Sulla explained that executive function and self-regulation skills depend on three types of brain function: *working memory*, *mental flexibility*, and *self-control*. These functions are highly interrelated, and the successful application of executive function skills requires them to operate in coordination with each other.

Each type of executive function skill draws on elements of the others. *Working memory* governs our ability to retain and manipulate distinct pieces of information over short periods of time. *Mental flexibility* helps us to sustain or shift attention in response to different demands or to apply different rules in different settings. And *self-control* enables us to set priorities and resist impulsive actions or responses.

When children have opportunities to develop executive function and self-regulation skills successfully, they experience lifelong benefits. Here are a few examples:

School Achievement: Executive function skills help children remember and follow multi-step instructions, avoid distractions, control rash responses, adjust when rules change, persist at problem-solving, and manage long-term assignments. Students develop confidence as learners, and come to view themselves as capable of success in a variety of contexts.

Positive Behaviors: Executive function also helps children to develop skills of teamwork, leadership, decision-making, goal attainment, critical thinking, adaptability, and awareness of emotions, both our own and those of others. This social-emotional maturity allows students to be successful both independently and collaboratively.

Good Health: Executive function skills are necessary in order to make more positive choices about nutrition and exercise; to resist peer pressure to take unhealthy risks; and to be more conscious of safety for self and others. Effective executive function also primes our biological systems--mind and body--to better cope with stress, an area that we have been focussed on of late, particularly with our high school students.

These intersections begin to reveal the axis, or connective tissue, that holds together rigor and wellness in an ideal balance. In isolation, these concepts seem at odds with one another: polarizing agents that force untenable choices. However, when one considers the role of executive function, we see how academic achievement and personal health and well-being can exist in a symbiotic relationship that is actually mutually-reinforcing.

As a District, we will continue to explore this nexus as we continue to reflect on Dr. Sulla's work, and its positive benefits for our students and staff, so that executive function also becomes part of our DNA.

Warm regards,



First Impressions

By Edgar McIntosh, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, and Co-Director, Center for Innovation

I'll never forget my first formal interview with Scarsdale. There was a carnival at the High School that morning and the treacherous ride "The Zipper" (a personal childhood nightmare) was set up between the parking lot and the entrance. Was it a sign?

I'm glad I made it in the door. A friendly community welcomed me--leaning forward, smiling, curious about my experience and my opinions. And the questions were telling--about innovation, authentic inquiry, student wellness, global competencies, and the value of creativity and critical thinking.

The first two summer months on the job I had the pleasure of reading through Scarsdale teacher-designed curriculum and course proposals. I was delighted by the rich, detailed, and student-centered planning: lessons and sequences were both challenging and creative. I read about the integration of arts, science, social studies, math, and several new courses and curriculum including a rigorous new Advanced Topics course on Entrepreneurship, and a collaboration between a history teacher and an art teacher that explores the role and artistry of Chinese opera masks.

In August, I got a chance to see some of our students in action at the Global Learning Alliance conference in Helsinki. Our students presented with international partners from Finland and Singapore on the topic of Student Wellness. These presentations grew from months of international collaboration in which students designed and implemented research studies across land and sea. Meeting each other for the first time in person, the students presented like old friends. Tellingly, they were asking to spend time in the Finnish high school right up until their flight time.

Upon my return, I began meeting and interviewing Scarsdale's diverse and passionate educators. There were recurring themes. Here were administrators, teachers, curriculum specialists, and support staff who were dedicated to excellence and student well-being. People spoke about the value of innovation, teacher expertise, and passion; the high regard for professional learning; shared student-centered vision; and the uniqueness of the Scarsdale Schools. In committee meetings I've witnessed a collaborative spirit, professional trust, and respect for new ideas.

But my best insight into the Scarsdale schools happened when the students arrived, and I got into classrooms, laboratories, maker spaces, music rooms, gymnasiums, libraries, and the occasional lunchroom. Whether it is Kindergarteners joyfully gluing beads onto the first letter of their names, a fourth grade classroom animatedly discussing the most efficient way to solve a complicated word problem, or High School seniors debating political policy in Global Citizenship, these students are here to question, stretch, and expand their understanding of their world.

I look forward to the work ahead. The changes in our world mean that our teaching and environments must continue to adapt in order to best nurture and inspire our students. The global economy *and* ecology demand that students must not only be intelligent, but also creative, civically engaged, empathetic, and deeply critical thinkers. I am thankful for my engaged partners in this exciting endeavor -- visionary administrative leadership, an engaged Board and PTA, a generous and forward thinking Scarsdale Education Foundation, Scarsdale Teachers Institute, and talented and motivated teachers. I can think of no better place -- and with no better colleagues -- to roll up my sleeves and take on the challenges of our next chapter in education.

After literally circling Scarsdale for years--first south in New York City as a teacher and instructional coach, then east in Mamaroneck as an assistant principal, west in Ardsley as a principal, and north in Briarcliff Manor as a director of instruction and HR--I am delighted to find myself a member of this special community. It feels like I've hit the bullseye--and found a wonderful place to contribute, learn, and grow.

... and Leadership Development

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



"What do you administrators do in those meetings?" Perhaps not surprisingly, I hear this question on occasion, often upon bumping into a teacher or support staff member while exiting a lengthy meeting. While the business-of-the-day may have included a budget discussion, a capital planning update, a safety and security conversation, a review of student assessment data, and/or information related to the many state-mandated reports we are required to submit, the meeting likely also included the opportunity to discuss and reflect on our leadership practices. For example, we have devoted time at recent meetings to the study and discussion of a compelling text titled *Building Executive Function: The Missing Link to Student Achievement* by Nancy Sulla.

This year, the District administrative team--all of the principals, assistant principals, and Districtwide administrators -- are collaborating to expand our knowledge base around executive function. In fact, we were fortunate to have Dr. Sulla here in the District on October 2, when she met with administrators and department chairs, and also conducted an after-school session open to the entire District.

What was the goal of this engagement? Why do we want to expand our knowledge base around executive functioning? Like other concepts that serve as throughlines in our work (i.e., sustainability), executive function is one that draws many threads together. For example, our ability to foster design thinking in students or to create the conditions for active learning requires combinations of executive function in the areas of cognitive flexibility, reasoning, and problem-solving for both teachers (planning the curriculum) and students (engaging in it). Thus, if we can deepen our collective understanding of this concept, we should be able to increase our ability to impact student learning in these ways. The challenge of nurturing an entire school system that envisions an education such as the Scarsdale Education for Tomorrow (SET) 2.0 requires this kind of work, and leaders who can lead it.

The portrait painted above speaks to a broader focus on the work of leadership development in the Scarsdale Schools. Of course, the term *leader* is not necessarily a synonym of *administrator*. Those of us in formal leadership positions know well the importance of encouraging -- indeed, expecting -- leadership to emerge from all levels of the organization. Formal or informal, we rely on leadership throughout our ranks in order to better understand what we are doing well in service of the SET 2.0 mission, what we can do better, and what we need to anticipate for the future as we strive to prepare each and every student in our schools for that future. That's why, even as we begin an administrative study of executive function, the Scarsdale Teachers Institute is responding to feedback from Dr. Sulla's visit, and generating a course for teachers devoted to the topic.

This is a familiar pattern in Scarsdale, work spreading organically through iterations of study, inquiry,

practice, and reflection, catalyzed by moments of inspiration, understanding, and wonder. Conversations about important concepts are anchored by leaders at every grade level, in every department, and in every building. Leadership is shared over time, ebbing and flowing between networks of educators depending on the learning at hand. In this way our schools behave as living systems, as [Margaret Wheatley suggests](#). She points out that, like ecosystems, leadership self-organizes and changes. Our shared interests -- guided by the mission and purpose of educating students -- coalesce and reveal the work that is meaningful and relevant to the collective "us." We engage, make attempts, iterate, and revise, all in the service of providing the kind of education to our students that will help them find their own voices as independent thinkers and leaders.



October Already!

By Eric Rauschenbach, Director of Special Education and Student Services

As I write, I contemplate the speed at which the middle of October has come upon us. Every year, September is a busy time where students and teachers form new relationships and discover what a new grade and class have in store for them. The year has gotten off to a smooth start and the excitement of work ahead has kicked in!

On the elementary level, our kindergarten Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) program has had a second section for the third year in a row and all grades (with the exception of third and fifth grades) now have two sections each of ICT. We are excited to see the expansion of this program and the benefits it brings students across the District. This year we will be continuing with our professional development in co-teaching with regular consulting for all teachers included in the program. Additionally, the Learning Resource Centers (LRCs) are working on various aspects of executive functioning, and on progress monitoring for their students.

Finally, I am thrilled to welcome our new District Behaviorist, Shana Ginipro! Shana has worked for the District in a consulting role for a number of years and now joins us as a faculty member. Shana will be helping us expand our capacity to work with students experiencing behavioral challenges, and our capacity to provide crucial support for our students on the Autism Spectrum.

Both our sixth and ninth graders have made excellent transitions to their new buildings and are starting to feel comfortable (and making it to class on time because they know where they're going). Both the Middle and High Schools are focusing on well-being and helping students balance their workloads. The District has spent a lot of time discussing what factors must be present to help students experience well-being, and Special Education is no exception. The LRC and SSP (Scarsdale Support Program) are major factors in helping students who have academic challenges learn and practice the skills that facilitate well-being, such as time management, self-advocacy, and metacognition. Our teachers have been focusing on these topics in their professional development and practice.

Each year brings a unique blend of students with particular needs, resulting in both challenges and opportunities, as we work with our families and students to develop new and innovative ways to help students learn. Our teachers are ready to meet the challenge!

Facilities Improvements

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



It was a very busy summer for facility renovations, additions, and improvements, all completed in time for returning students.

Two major additions funded by the 2014 bond were completed: at Edgewood, an expanded and completely redesigned library, with flexible spaces and furnishings enabling a variety of activities; and at Heathcote, a new multipurpose room (so students no longer need to eat lunch in the gym), a back atrium for students awaiting dismissal pickups; and a corridor with private meeting rooms to accommodate student services.

Several plant improvement projects funded by the budget were also completed over the summer, including the renovation of rooms at the Middle School to accommodate the CHOICE program, and a new paved play area at Fox Meadow.

Just recently, work began on replacement of the synthetic track and field at the High School's Butler Field. We anticipate that the field portion of the project will be completed in time for full use in the spring while the track is projected to be ready for partial use (asphalt only) at that time with full completion occurring in the first weeks of summer.

Next up are projects funded by the 2018 bond. Plans for elementary school security vestibules and the Greenacres renovation/addition are being prepared for submission to the State Education Department (SED) this fall, with construction targeted for the summer of 2019 pending SED approval. Other work projected to commence in the summer of 2019 includes, most notably, a complete roof replacement at Heathcote and the replacement of boilers at the High School.



High School Parent-Teacher Conference Scheduling Gets A New Look

By Rachel Moseley, Director of Information Technology

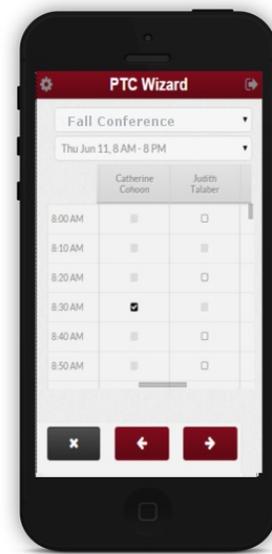
In 2013, the District started using PTC Wizard, an online conference scheduling system, with the objective of making the process more efficient for teachers and administrative staff, and with the intention of offering parents a uniform experience across all grade levels.

Last year we piloted a new version of PTC Wizard at the elementary schools and the Middle School. As of this fall, the High School is now also using the new version.

To watch a two-minute video of how this new system works for parents, you may access an explanatory video on YouTube [here](#).

The vendor has implemented some enhancements and bug fixes based on feedback received from our elementary and Middle School parents and teachers.

We would welcome feedback as well from our High School parents who have just started to schedule their conferences. Feedback may be emailed to ParentPortal@scarsdaleschools.org.



What is "Digital Citizenship" in 2018?

Jerry Crisci, Director of Instructional Technology and Innovation, and Co-Director of the Center for Innovation



As technology continues to impact our lives in new ways, Scarsdale is committed to helping staff and students understand the evolving ideas of digital citizenship.

Just a few years ago, this understanding would have focused on using digital tools and resources in the classroom. More recently, questions have emerged about the appropriate use of technology beyond instruction.

One way that Scarsdale is addressing these questions is by offering workshops to all staff about the appropriate use of technology, concentrating on four domains:

- A review of the [Scarsdale Responsible Use Policy](#) (RUP), which was developed last year and approved by the Board. This revised policy, formerly known as the Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) governs all use of technology by staff and students.
- A review of the [Scarsdale Social Media Policy](#), which was developed with community input and approved by the Board last spring. This policy clarifies the appropriate use of social media as well as staff/student online communication protocols.
- Understanding and affirming the District's commitment to student data privacy when using online services. The sharing of student data is governed by the District's Parent's Bill of Rights, which covers how student data is shared with vendors.
- An overview of technology and website accessibility issues, emphasizing the need for everyone to make an effort to insure that online information can be accessed by all members of the community, regardless of an individual's disability.

Many of these policies, including the RUP and Social Media Policy, are also reviewed with students. For example, all elementary students are provided with instruction about the appropriate use of technology during the first three weeks of school. Middle School and High School students also have opportunities to discuss issues related to technology and social media. These student experiences, combined with our staff workshops, allow everyone in our school community to understand the

important concepts that contribute to the development of productive digital citizens.



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