

The Scarsdale Education for Tomorrow: What is it? Is it succeeding?

Program and Teacher Evaluation

Q. What is The Scarsdale Education for Tomorrow?

A. The Scarsdale Education for Tomorrow (SET) is a plan to enable students to succeed and lead in today's interdependent world. Through a distinctive education, Scarsdale seeks to foster academically superior, globally conscious graduates who KNOW, THINK and ACT effectively in their personal and professional lives.

- SET advances student knowledge with globally competitive skills and experiences, fostering a love of learning.
- SET empowers students to think critically and creatively, to learn independently, and to persevere.
- SET Inspires students to collaborate, embrace diversity, and contribute locally and globally.

SET's ultimate goal is to graduate young adults who are among the most prepared to take on the challenges of today's demanding world – and to make it better.

Q. Can you give some examples?

A. Scarsdale students become capable writers, readers and mathematicians through a strong liberal education in the sciences and humanities. These experiences also enable them to develop an appreciation for the richness of the human experience and the workings of the natural universe. Much about this education is enduring and familiar. At its center is the essential encounter between student and teacher.

At the same time, the Scarsdale Education for Tomorrow is placing growing emphasis on efforts to develop capacities like critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, global awareness and a deep interest in learning. These include a structured inquiry research program in the elementary schools, eighth grade research projects at the Middle School, the Advanced Topics program at the High School, and a district-wide curriculum focus on thinking skills.

Q. What is Inquiry Research?

A. Inquiry Research is research on a topic or question identified by the student. The research may reflect the student's personal interest or it may be about an issue the student identifies in the process of exploring academic content: "Why was the Battle of Iwo Jima important?" for example. The point of inquiry research is to help students develop skills and knowledge that will enable them to find answers to the kinds of complex, open-ended problems they will face in college and in the world beyond.

University students do this kind of work as a matter of course, and in recent years forward-looking high schools have asked their students to do so, as well. To develop inquiry research skills more fully, Scarsdale has introduced projects even earlier in school, beginning with fifth grade Capstone projects, and now extending to the earliest grades.

In conducting inquiry research, students learn how to formulate good questions; find, evaluate and use information; let new information take them in new directions and develop perseverance. Because students formulate their own questions in cooperation with teachers, they also are more engaged and motivated.

Q. How does Scarsdale assess attributes like these? What are current examples of Scarsdale’s local assessments of critical and creative thinking?

A. Scarsdale’s locally designed assessments seek to determine whether students can apply higher order skills like critiquing or arguing, often to questions or problems that have meaning in the real world. A “real world” problem might be as concrete as finding a solution to the political, economic and scientific problem of water scarcity in the Southwest. It could be as abstract as reading *Moby-Dick* and trying to define the nature of evil.

Scarsdale is expanding the use of these assessments. Examples include elementary school inquiry research and narrative writing measures, the fifth grade Capstone Project, Middle School e-portfolios and Public Service Announcements on human rights themes, and the Colorado River and ninth grade “world cities” interdisciplinary projects at the High School. These assessments measure how well our students are improving their critical, creative, communicative and global-minded capacity and skills.

Q. How do we know whether our graduates are as well-prepared as the best in the world?

A. Scarsdale has long been described as providing a world-class education – but are we? And what does that mean? Scarsdale administrators and faculty sought to find out, initiating a groundbreaking research project that now involves scholars from Columbia University and other universities around the world, along with high-performing schools from high-performing nations such as Finland and Singapore.

Educators in this Global Learning Alliance are collaborating on defining and then evaluating whether students are able to think, solve problems and otherwise perform at a “world class” level. During their discussions, participants also share best practices. All of this benefits students, as the experience and information from the project help guide staff to improve teaching and assessment. At a Board of Education meeting on October 11, 21011, Dr. Sheridan Blau, Teachers College Professor at Columbia University, told the Board: “We see what’s happening in Scarsdale as an opportunity to show to the rest of the country, and to the rest of the world, that other ways of thinking about learning, in assessing learning, are possible without reducing education to the kind of triviality that it’s reduced to in the kind of tests that are used nationally to measure progress.”

Q. What does Scarsdale do to develop and refine its local assessments?

A. Assessment development and review are ongoing in Scarsdale. During the summer, teams of teachers, grouped by grade levels and schools, have reviewed curriculum and teaching methods and devised assessments of critical and creative thinking. As teachers use these measures in each grade and subject during the academic year, they gather information about how well the assessments work. This coming summer, teachers will focus on analyzing feedback from the current year's assessments.

Q. Why doesn't Scarsdale depend on traditional standardized tests instead of developing its own measures?

A. Standardized tests, the type currently used by New York State, typically take the form of true/false, multiple choice and other short answer questions. Sometimes they also include essays. In general, these kinds of exams check to see if students have mastered very basic skills, memorized facts or are able to show they understand particular academic content.

These kinds of tests are technically limited. The scores aren't precise indicators of students' abilities, and they don't necessarily help teachers help students to learn better. Just as important, today's standardized measures don't do a good job of evaluating many of the capacities that are essential in the 2000's: critical thinking, whether someone can solve a problem that has no clear answer or whether she can create something new, for example.

Q. What is a high-stakes test and how does it vary from other standardized tests?

A. The term "high-stakes" refers to tests that result in significant life decisions about students, teachers or schools. Some schools use the results of a single standardized test to place students in honors classes, for example. Others make promotion or graduation contingent on passing a final exam. New York State's new teacher evaluation scheme makes student test scores a significant part of performance ratings.

Research shows that high-stakes exams have a number of undesirable consequences. They cause teachers to focus on test prep at the expense of other learning. That focus, combined with the process of test administration and correction, can take inordinate time from more valuable learning. Schools also narrow their curriculums to what may be tested. The potential for error is also a serious concern when a single test is used to make life-changing judgments about students or teachers.

Q. Which high-stakes testing are Scarsdale students currently taking as part of the school day?

A. All public school students in New York State, including Scarsdale students, are required to take the State's English/Language Arts and math tests in Grades 3-8, and science tests in Grades 4 and 8. High School students are required to take Regents exams. Now that teachers are graded on the basis of their students' results, all these exams are high-stakes.

Q. How much does State test preparation and administration cost the District annually?

A. New York State's data collection and testing program is estimated to cost the District over \$800,000 in the current year. State tests take more than six (6) days of instruction each year for each student, on average. Combined with teacher time devoted to test familiarization (as distinct from time individual teachers spend prepping children for tests) and to test correction, the amount of instructional time lost to the exams is twenty-three (23) on average. This amount is projected to grow as the amount of testing increases in coming years.

Q. How if at all are such test results used by the Scarsdale School district?

A. District personnel – superintendents, principals, department chairs, teachers – review the results of state and local assessments each year, looking for response patterns that may indicate strengths and weaknesses in curriculum and/or teaching. While they sometimes can reach conclusions on the basis of a year or two of experience, more meaningful trends generally appear over longer periods of time.

Q. What resources are available to parents, students, teachers and policymakers who seek more information about the public policy discussion about the State test plan and high stakes testing?

A.

<http://timeoutfromtesting.org/nationalresolution/>

<http://www.fairtest.org/arn/caseagainst.html>

<http://dianeravitch.net/2013/02/22/massachusetts-professors-oppose-high-stakes-testing/>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2012/11/12/revolt-against-high-stakes-standardized-testing-spreads/>

<http://roundtheinkwell.com/2013/03/02/elementary-principal-speaks-to-parents-about-distorted-reforms/>

http://www.schoolleadership20.com/forum/topics/are-tough-new-ny-state-tests-too-much-too-soon?utm_source=March+6%2C+2013&utm_campaign=Mar+6+2013&utm_medium=email#.UTpDv36EYSQ.email

Q. How is Scarsdale responding to New York State's new annual performance review (APPR) requirement?

A. The District is complying with State regulations, and has a State-approved APPR plan. It is posted on the State website:

<http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/teachers-leaders/plans/docs/scarsdale-appr-plan.pdf>

Q. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the State APPR scheme?

A. The scheme requires all districts to use some procedures Scarsdale has used for many years. For example, the District continues to base evaluations on evidence of performance in several defined areas of teaching, and multiple supervisors visit teachers' classes.

Two significant criticisms of the State plan are that it rates teachers numerically on the basis of student test scores and that it dramatically reduces the role of human judgment.

The first criticism arises from the fact that the preponderance of research raises serious questions about the accuracy of the ratings. Stronger teachers may be rated weaker and vice versa.

The second criticism results from the fact that all teachers must be rated unvaryingly according to a formula on a 100 point scale. Many important strengths and weaknesses – human relations and sound judgment, for instance – are minor considerations in the formula. Supervisors should be able to weight them more heavily.

These problems are two of the main reasons the District is continuing to put a much heavier emphasis on its own local evaluation processes.

Q. What is Scarsdale's teacher evaluation process?

A. Scarsdale's recruiting and hiring process may be considered the first step in its evaluation plan. The goal is to identify highly qualified candidates who will succeed as teachers. Candidates undergo a series of committee interviews and teach demonstration lessons. Reference checks are extensive.

Supervision and evaluation procedures have been developed in collaboration with Charlotte Danielson, a nationally and internationally-recognized specialist in teacher performance assessment, who is now consulting with the State of New York.

Evaluators review evidence relating to planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction and professional responsibilities. Evidence may range from written lesson plans to student work to recorded notes from classroom observations. Scarsdale also solicits parent comments on tenure candidates' performance, through a questionnaire that is sent to each family.

For non-tenured teachers, several supervisors conduct announced and unannounced classroom observations. They then meet to share observations, and to arrive at commendations and recommendations. Board of Education members are invited to observe these committee

meetings in each candidate's pre-tenure year, in order to understand the quality and the rigor of the process. They do not make judgments about the qualifications of individual candidates.

Once teachers have been appointed to tenure, they continue an in-depth program of professional development and growth through supervision, evaluation, and a variety of other approaches. Tenured teachers may pursue a project (known as "Option A") or line of inquiry every three years that will enhance their classroom performance, coupled with required observations by supervisors.

Supervision and evaluation provide teachers information and advice intended to help them qualify for a tenure appointment. In each "class" of candidates, however, some individual(s) do not meet these standards. Therefore, as the class moves forward, some individual appointments are not renewed.

When a tenured teacher's performance falls below a proficient level, supervisors develop a plan of support and, where necessary, a plan for discipline. A teacher who receives "unsatisfactory" ratings in two successive years does not receive salary increases. When performance continues to be unsatisfactory, the District takes steps to separate him or her from employment.

Q. Is teacher compensation tied to performance?

A. Scarsdale, like other districts in the Metropolitan area, pays teachers on the basis of their experience and their education.

Up through the middle 1900's, many districts set salaries at least in part on the basis of supervisors' evaluations of individual teachers. As a practical matter, however, so many intangibles affected learning (including student ability and out-of-school influences) that it often seemed impossible to draw clear conclusions about which of any two individuals merited a higher salary.

This approach led to inequities and abuses or perceived abuses. Its subjectivity created interpersonal stresses between supervisors and teachers, as well as resentment among those who saw themselves as victims of an unfair process. Individual and group morale suffered, with consequences for organizational effectiveness. As a result, the mid-1900's, saw efforts to rationalize methods of compensation. The result was the familiar salary scale based on experience and education.

Many people, including some teachers, agree in theory that it would be desirable to provide better compensation for better performance: merit pay. As the preceding background suggests, however, a problem lies in determining what's "better." For example, the federal government is now requiring that teachers and principals be evaluated in part by their children's test scores. But the metrics are uncertain and problematic.

To date, no school district in New York State has adopted pure merit pay. “Merit systems” that do exist – one in Denver is an example – are hybrids that don’t reward teachers solely on the basis of supervisors’ evaluations. Typically, merit awards are in addition to a base salary increase and are based on a combination of factors that may include student test results or the initiative that teachers show by carrying out their own professional development projects.

Historically, a practical difficulty with merit pay has been that school districts have been unable or unwilling to create pools of money large enough to reward meaningfully all who deserve recognition. Unlike business, where productivity creates more profit that can be used to reward high performers, more effective employee performance in education has no connection to the amount of money that’s available for bonuses or other merit recognition.

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