



Shrewsbury Public Schools

Strategic Priorities: 2012 – 2016 Report & Recommendations to the School Committee

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To: Shrewsbury School Committee
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Superintendent of Schools

All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the fate of empires depends on the education of youth.
~ Aristotle

Shrewsbury students need a world class education.

I use the word “need” intentionally, because if our school district is to meet its stated mission to “provide students with the skills and knowledge for the 21st century” it must provide an educational experience that prepares our youth to succeed in a world that is more complex than in any time in history and where human capital – knowledge, skill, health, and values – is more important than ever for the security and prosperity of individuals, families, communities, states, and nations.

Recently, a strategy paper from the Pentagon indicated that our country’s future success is dependent on making investment in the education and health of our youth America’s number one priority:

Without doubt, our greatest resource is America’s young people, who will shape and execute the vision needed to take this nation forward into an uncertain future.... We must embrace the reality that with opportunity comes challenge, and that retooling our competitiveness requires a commitment and investment in the future.... Inherent in our children is the innovation, drive, and imagination that have made, and will continue to make, this country great. By investing energy, talent, and dollars now in the education and training of young Americans – the scientists, statesmen, industrialists, farmers, inventors, educators, clergy, artists, service members, and parents, of tomorrow – we are truly investing in our ability to successfully compete in, and influence, the strategic environment of the future. Our first investment priority, then, is intellectual capital and a sustainable infrastructure of education, health and social services to provide for the continuing development and growth of America’s youth.

~ (Porter & Mykelby, as “Mr. Y”, *A National Strategic Narrative*, 2011)

In recent times, the media, think tanks, political advocacy groups, researchers, and theorists have produced innumerable books, articles, documentary films, television shows, and blog posts regarding the need for America to improve educational outcomes for its students. Of course, as with most issues, the realities are more complex than what is often reported at the surface. Take, for example, the conventional wisdom that the United States has lost substantial ground regarding educational outcomes when compared internationally. The U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, reacted to the results from the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) by stating, “Being average in reading and science—and below average in math—is not nearly good enough in a knowledge economy where scientific and technological literacy is so central to sustaining innovation and international competitiveness.” It is difficult to disagree with this outlook when viewing the country as a whole; however, as with many issues that are seen through a national lens, there are significant differences that make up the aggregate. When the PISA results are disaggregated by income, the U.S. ranked first in the world when comparing both the subset of U.S. schools and nations where poverty rates were less than 10% and the subset where poverty rates were 10% to 25%, which is the category where Shrewsbury would be placed (Tirozzi, National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2010). The disturbing fact is that the child poverty rate in our country is over 20% and climbing (Monea & Sawhill, Brookings Institution, 2009) and this has a very high correlation with educational outcomes.

By the measures used for national and international comparisons, one can argue that Shrewsbury already has a world class school system. For the past several years, Massachusetts public schools have been considered to be among the best in the U.S. and in the world. Nationally, Massachusetts has ranked first or tied for first in all four tests of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Grade 4 reading and mathematics and Grade 8 reading and mathematics) for the past four years (Mass.gov). In international comparisons on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) exams, Massachusetts competes as its own “country” and on its most recent administration ranked second in the world in Grade 4 science, third in Grade 4 math, first in the world in Grade 8 science, and sixth in the world in Grade 8 math. Given that Shrewsbury consistently ranks among the top districts in Massachusetts on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exams—often in the top 10%, and as high as the top 1%—and that Shrewsbury has achieved national recognition from the College Board for increasing participation with very high performance in the Advanced Placement program, one can deduce that according to such measures our students are among the highest achieving in the nation and the world.

Additionally, Shrewsbury achieves these outstanding results in an extremely cost effective manner. Recently, the Center for American Progress, a Washington D.C. think tank, ranked U.S. school districts according to a formula measuring educational “return on investment.” Shrewsbury ranked among the top 2.8% of over 9,000 districts nationally with regard to the quality of education compared with funding provided. The state’s measure of per pupil spending, which takes into account all town government expenditures on the educational budget, is

consistently among the lowest in the state.

We should all be justifiably proud of the quality of our schools' academic performance and the value generated for what has been invested. Our school district has numerous admirable characteristics that should be preserved going forward, and much of our efforts should be focused on maintaining our strengths. However, it would be unwise, and even perhaps disastrous, to rest on our laurels and focus our energies solely on maintaining the status quo. Indeed, our district's foundational goals articulate the importance of *continuous improvement*, and in order to do so not only requires the ongoing refinement of our current approach but also the courage to try innovative approaches that hold promise for improving the education of the young people we serve.

To that end, over the past several months the district administration has been working to fulfill your charge to recommend a set of strategic priorities for the next five years. It was made clear that this was not a request for a traditional strategic plan, of the kind that often becomes too unwieldy and cumbersome due to a surfeit of details and a kitchen sink mentality that includes too many priorities and therefore does not truly identify what is most important. Rather, this would be a set of three to five priorities where the school district would focus its attention and resources in order to help the district meet the collective purpose articulated by our mission and core values. Based on the work of Rachel Curtis and Elizabeth City, we determined that a strong strategic priority must be:

- 1) Broad enough to apply across the entire district, PreK-12
- 2) High leverage, so that if executed well it will ultimately have a significant impact on student learning
- 3) Motivating, so that it promotes innovation and problem solving that move the district closer to fulfilling its aspirations
- 4) Aligned with the other strategic priorities so that together they are coherent and mutually reinforcing

Process

Given the importance of this task, we determined that it would be crucial to not only look to the current best thinking in the fields of education and organizational management, but also to ask our stakeholders what they believed were the most important things the district should be addressing. The following process was used to gather feedback from our stakeholders:

- An online survey was conducted (paper versions were also available). Approximately 440 individuals responded to the survey, including staff members, parents, high school students, community members, business people, and public officials. The survey was analyzed by the administration for trends.

- A public forum was conducted on October 19 at Oak Middle School. While turnout was light, the two focus group conversations, which included parents, high school students, and administrators, were helpful.
- I met separately with the following groups to listen to their perspectives regarding priorities:
 - Shrewsbury High School Student Council
 - Oak Middle School Student Voice
 - Sherwood Middle School Student Voice
 - PTO presidents
 - Faculty Advisory Council
 - Coordinating Council (representation from each school's administration, parents, and teachers on the various school councils)
- The School Committee hosted two panel discussions: one with admissions officers from various local colleges, and one with local business leaders. These discussions centered on what kind of preparation students would need for success in post-secondary education and in the workplace.
- The various combinations of our leadership structure met multiple times to discuss strategic priorities, beginning in August. This included multiple meetings of the District Leadership Team (all administrators); the School Leadership Team (principals and Central Office administrators); and the Central Office Leadership Team.

Findings

While, as with any public process regarding education, there is a range of opinions regarding what the public schools in our community should be prioritizing, the feedback from the process outlined above coalesced around several themes:

- There is substantial appreciation for the successes of our schools, and having high performing educators is seen as a key component of that success. Our schools are seen as providing value to our students and to the community in general, and some commented on the potential for our students to further enhance the quality of life in our town through various types of community service while enhancing their education through what they learn through such experiences.
- Given economic challenges, there are concerns regarding the ability to maintain the current level of resources and to ensure that students have reasonable class sizes and access to a sufficient range of academic programming and instructional tools, especially technology.
- With regard to technology, the fact that our district has not been able to keep up with the demands for updated hardware has made accessing many new learning tools extremely difficult to impossible in many cases. The field of education is rapidly adapting to the availability of more interactive technologies,

including access to web based learning tools such as tutorials, videos, and online resources that require high bandwidth and updated computers; the use of interactive white boards, projectors, and document cameras in classrooms to aid instruction; new “apps” for education through devices such as the iPad; online coursework (such as Virtual High School), etc. Ensuring student and staff access to learning opportunities that require updated technology was a recurrent topic.

- Many cited the need for all students to be able to have engaging and challenging learning experiences that prepare them for success in their current schooling and beyond high school. This included students who struggle with learning, students who are working above grade level expectations, and students in the proverbial middle. While current levels of success on the MCAS tests and other traditional measures are appreciated, many commented on the need to provide students with skills that are not necessarily measured through standardized tests, such as the ability to communicate effectively with different audiences, think critically and solve complex problems, be innovative and creative, function as a collaborative team member, etc.

- The health and wellbeing of students was often cited as being of great importance, especially with regard to the social and emotional climates of our schools. While there is not evidence that bullying or other antisocial behaviors are seen as major issues in our schools, there is an understanding that it does exist and that today’s young people face not only the traditional challenges regarding the pressures to engage in inappropriate and unhealthy behaviors (e.g., substance abuse), there are also new challenges with respect to so-called “cyberbullying” using online communications and social networking. Further, there are internal concerns relative to an increase in the number of students who have significant emotional or mental health issues. While the numbers of such students are relatively small compared to the whole population, the amount of time and resources required to address students with these issues is significant. Not only do we want to be as proactive as possible to minimize the impact of such issues on the individual students, but also to minimize the impact on our educational program and on our fiscal resources. The need for our students to be physically healthy was also cited, given the concerns in our society relative to increased childhood obesity and the desire to ensure sufficient physical activity for young people.

Recommendations

The leadership team considered the findings above in the context of our ongoing work to determine how best educational and organizational practices should be implemented in our school district. The strategic priorities recommended below have gone through several iterations, and we believe that they fit the criteria listed earlier regarding application across all grades, being high leverage, being motivating, and being aligned with one another.

It is important to stress that these strategic priorities, and the five year goals that accompany them, are not hierarchical (i.e., no one is considered more important than another, but that they are to be seen as complementary). Further, it is

important to recognize that the purpose of these priorities and goals is to establish the *what* and the *why* for the next five years, but not the *how*. In other words, this is an attempt to articulate a vision for what our schools should collectively aspire to provide to our students, not a blueprint for how to get there—that will be the work to be done over the next five years to reach these aspirations. As with any worthy goals, these present ambitious challenges that will require hard work, adequate resources, and new, innovative approaches to meet them, but at the same time are not so difficult to achieve that they seem out of reach. They are, in no particular order:

Increase Value to the Community

- Continue our school district’s reputation for excellence.
- Provide the personnel, resources, and infrastructure needed to ensure the quality of education necessary for our students to meet the challenges of the 21st century.
- Serve community needs through volunteerism.

Five Year Goals

- A) Continue to achieve results that consistently place Shrewsbury among top performing school districts.
- B) Prepare students to be successful with the next generation of assessments that will measure 21st century skills.
- C) Raise \$2.5 million in new, supplemental funding through a capital campaign, competitive grants, and/or sponsorships.
- D) Provide 50,000 hours of student community service.

Engage & Challenge All Students

- Ensure that all students participate in rigorous learning experiences that require the application of knowledge and skills, with an emphasis on writing across all content areas.
- Empower students to meet future college, military, and workplace demands in a globally connected environment by building proficiency at the 21st century skills of communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity.

Five Year Goals

- A) All students will participate in learning projects that require real world problem solving with clear benchmarks for proficiency.
- B) Full implementation of the *Shrewsbury Writing Project* to ensure students achieve high levels of proficiency in written communication across all content areas.
- C) All educators will participate in collaborative professional development in teaching 21st century skills and successfully apply this in the classroom.
- D) 90% of students, parents, and educators will agree that student learning experiences are engaging and that students participate in appropriately challenging coursework that meets their needs.

Enhance Learning through Technology

- Provide staff and students access to the technology needed to strengthen teaching and learning in ways that are not possible with traditional tools in order to help students master 21st century skills.
- Utilize technology to provide better access to information and interactive media, a wide range of assessment and feedback tools, and the ability to make learning connections locally, nationally, and globally.
- Educate students to use technology productively and responsibly.

Five Year Goals

- A) All Preschool – Grade 4 core classrooms will employ interactive technology daily to improve learning.
- B) All students in Grades 5-12 will utilize individual digital devices daily to improve learning.
- C) All educators will participate in collaborative professional development in the use of educational technology and successfully apply this in the classroom.

Promote Health & Wellbeing

- Reinforce respectful, positive school cultures in order to empower members to act with kindness, empathy, and compassion.
- Communicate and model the importance of proper nutrition, exercise, and healthy living habits.
- Ensure a systematic response to students who are struggling with social, emotional, and/or mental health issues.

Five Year Goals

- A) 90% of students, parents, and educators will agree that their schools' social and emotional cultures are healthy.
- B) 75% of students will participate in at least sixty minutes of physical activity each day (both during and outside of school).
- C) Develop a comprehensive approach to support students experiencing significant social, emotional, and/or mental health issues.

Rationale

Unquestionably, there are many more worthy priorities or goals that our district could set for the coming five years. The recommendations above reflect what we believe are the most crucial topics to address that will, if accomplished, have a multiplier effect that improves student success across many facets of their educational experience.

We believe that focusing efforts on *increasing value to the community* captures the importance of why a strong public education system is so crucial to the quality of

life and economic viability of our community and beyond. Providing the resources for the world class education our students need to prosper in the 21st century will require a commitment from everyone in the community, and we believe it is wise to seek financial assistance outside of the traditional sources of funding in order to maximize our investment in our students. We also believe that by increasing the amount of community service our students provide we will not only generate increased value from the deeds themselves, but also provide meaningful, real world learning experiences that are engaging to our students.

Engaging and challenging all students is paramount for our young people to maximize their learning. We are preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, in organizations that are "flatter" than ever and require members to collaboratively solve problems by working across human networks that are often global in nature. Therefore, it is crucial that our students "learn how to learn" through experiences that teach them to apply knowledge and skill creatively to novel situations that, like most complex problems, don't have a single "right answer." We believe that emphasizing communicating through writing across different content areas is important because one cannot be a good writer without being a good thinker, and having strong writing skills will be a key component for students to have an adequate range of options for post-secondary education and employment. To that end, we believe continuing to develop and fully implementing the work we have begun with the *Shrewsbury Writing Project* is extremely important. We must maintain high expectations for learning content and skills while devising new ways for students to apply them that prepare them for a 21st century world that is hyper-connected and changing rapidly.

The use of technology is what is largely responsible for the pace of change in our world, and it is tempting to believe that merely providing updated tools will help transform schools the way other sectors have been. However, it is important that we do not fall into the trap of using technology for technology's sake, which is why we have titled this priority *enhancing learning through technology*. The educational landscape is changing rapidly, with more and more opportunities for learning through online resources, through interactivity in classrooms, through new applications on devices, and through means of communication that are simply not possible in a traditional classroom setting. New technologies help educators engage students in ways that are personalized and provide instant feedback, by giving access to all of the world's catalogued knowledge at one's fingertips, and while providing structures for collaboration and publishing that have the potential to empower students like never before. We believe that we must explore the potential of utilizing interactive technology in the early grades and providing access to learning through individual devices in the upper grades to find out how these tools can enhance the ways in which we engage and challenge students and to find the best ways to help our students use technology productively and responsibly.

Of course, great teaching and the best technology will not have the impact we desire if our young people are not healthy, which is why *promoting health and wellbeing* is a priority. This refers to all kinds of health, including physical, social,

and emotional. It is well established that frequent exercise and good nutrition enhances educational outcomes, and it is incumbent upon our schools to provide our students and their families with knowledge about the importance of establishing healthy lifestyles early on. We are fortunate to be a recipient of the Carol M. White Physical Education Program federal grant for almost \$1.4 million over the next three years which will help us meet a goal of significantly increasing the amount of physical activity for our students. We must also attend to the social and emotional needs of our students by continuing our work to ensure positive school cultures where issues such as bullying are minimized and positive behaviors are promoted. Additionally, it behooves us to create a comprehensive approach to be as proactive as possible in helping the small number of students who present with significant social, behavioral, and/or mental health issues given the impact such challenges have on the individual and the school environment.

Finally, in order to implement these strategic priorities well, we must ensure that our educators are provided with high quality professional development to learn more about these topics, with adequate time to work together on determining how to best introduce these ideas into the classroom, and strong professional and collaborative cultures where educators have the room to innovate and influence one another in how to best achieve our goals. Given the professionalism and motivation our educators routinely demonstrate, I am confident that if we provide them with the tools and the time, they will rise to the occasion and help our students meet the challenges we are setting forth.

Conclusion

I believe we are at an important inflection point in American education, and that in order for us to meet our obligations to provide Shrewsbury's young people with an education that will truly prepare them for success over the next several decades, we should adopt the strategic priorities outlined above. Making them a reality will be a challenge for our district and our community, but being successful will provide us with the satisfaction of taking an already excellent school district and making it exceptional. To do so will not only provide our community's children with the tools necessary to live a good life, but it will enhance the quality of living in our town and continue to provide exceptional value to all who reside here. The stakes are indeed high. As Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum write in their recent book, *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back*, education is the key to individual and national prosperity:

Because of the merger of globalization and the IT revolution, raising math, science, reading, and creativity levels in American schools is the key determinant of economic growth, and economic growth is the key to national power and influence and well as individual wellbeing. In today's hyper-connected world, the rewards for countries and individuals that can raise their educational achievement levels will be bigger than ever, while the penalties for countries and individuals that don't will be harsher than ever. There will be no personal security without it. There will be no national security without

it. That is why it is no accident that President Obama has declared that “the country that out-educates us today will out-compete us tomorrow.”

In Shrewsbury, let’s make sure our children get the world class education they need to prosper in the future. It’s in everyone’s best interest.

Note: For clarity, some minor edits were made to this document after original submission to the School Committee.