



Shrewsbury Public Schools

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Superintendent

January 10, 2018

To: School Committee
From: Joe Sawyer
Re: State of the District

As I have done annually for the past several years, I am providing you with my perspective regarding the state of the Shrewsbury Public Schools as we enter the calendar year 2018.

The intent of this memorandum is to provide an overarching view of our school district's current strengths and challenges, as opposed to the more technical information you have received in previous reports on standardized test achievement levels, college matriculation, enrollment and class size, etc.

My assessment of the current state of the Shrewsbury Public Schools is summarized in the following five points:

- 1) Our students continue to demonstrate success by traditional measures, and community satisfaction with the quality of our schools is high.
- 2) We have articulated a bold, shared vision for the characteristics we wish for our students to develop as a result of their education in Shrewsbury.
- 3) We have developed an ambitious set of strategic priorities and goals that will guide the direction and focus the energy of our district and our schools for the next five years.
- 4) Realizing our vision, priorities, and goals will require the resources to do the job.
- 5) Empowerment is the key.

Below I provide a brief overview of each point.

Our students continue to demonstrate success by traditional measures, and community satisfaction with the quality of our schools is high.

Results show that Shrewsbury students continue to perform at high levels on common measures of academic performance, including [state tests](#), [national tests](#), and [post-graduation options](#). There are also myriad examples of student successes in academic competitions (such as Speech & Debate, U.S. First Robotics, Science Olympiad, math competitions, etc.); visual arts; performing arts; and athletics.

As part of our strategic planning work during the past several months, the district [utilized a tool called Thoughtexchange](#), which resulted in thousands of parents, community members, staff, and students sharing their thoughts about what they appreciate about our schools, what could be improved, and what was most important to focus on over the next several years. The responses confirmed that there are high levels of satisfaction with our schools, and they outlined a broad consensus regarding how to improve and what direction to take, which I believe is now represented in the *Portrait of a Shrewsbury Graduate* and our new strategic priorities and goals.

We have articulated a bold, shared vision for the characteristics we wish for our students to develop as a result of their education in Shrewsbury.

Over the past year, a group of Shrewsbury educators and parents representing various professions and work sectors joined together to learn and debate what skills, knowledge, and dispositions Shrewsbury students should attain and develop during their years in our schools. The draft “portrait of a graduate” this working group developed was presented for public comment through the Thoughtexchange process referenced above, as well as through School Committee members bringing it to the various school PTOs for discussion. The final result is the [Portrait of a Shrewsbury Graduate](#) that was formally adopted by the School Committee in December 2017.

I believe that the *Portrait of a Shrewsbury Graduate* provides a bold, shared vision for what we aspire for our students to become as a result of their education in our schools. It is important to note that while many of our practices already align with these aspirations, realizing this vision will require our schools to adapt some things we already do in order to shift emphasis, while in other cases it will require our schools to

do different things. Such changes will take time, which is why it is important that the district also now has a road map in the form of new strategic priorities and goals.

We have developed an ambitious set of strategic priorities and goals that will guide the direction and focus the energy of our district and our schools for the next five years.

Over the course of this past summer and fall, [new strategic priorities and five-year goals](#) were developed with considerable input from stakeholders, including students, staff, parents, and community members. These priorities illustrate areas of focus for the next five years that will advance our students further towards the ideal vision illustrated by the *Portrait of a Shrewsbury Graduate*. These include priorities that focus on learning environments that 1) have adequate staffing and resources, 2) build school climates and cultures that are inclusive and responsive to the changing nature of our student population and community, 3) emphasize the well-being of all students and staff, and 4) shift emphasis to learning experiences that provide the key skills students will need to apply knowledge to solve real-world problems, to be effective citizens, and to develop independence beyond graduation.

Realizing our vision, priorities, and goals will require the resources to do the job.

Our greatest ongoing challenge as an organization is to build the resource capacity that will enable us to turn our mission, vision, priorities, and goals into reality. The year-over-year cost escalations we are experiencing through normal inflationary factors in a personnel-heavy endeavor, ongoing and new mandates, and reduced or flat financial support from the federal and state levels in terms of grants, reimbursements, and funding for education, make it very difficult even to just bring the existing program forward. The added pressure of increasing enrollment, especially at the high school level, exacerbates our financial challenges for operations. Additionally, we are in the midst of a critically important capital project to hopefully build a new Beal School, which is part of the long-term solution to providing the space needed for our growing student population, and gaining community support to add this resource is paramount.

As noted above, the *Portrait of a Shrewsbury Graduate* and the strategic goals and priorities will require the district to emphasize different and/or new approaches to several elements of our program, and this cannot happen without providing the means to implement them. As Richard Elmore has stated in his writings on school reform,

there must be a “reciprocity of accountability and capacity,” in that school organizations cannot fairly be held accountable for implementing significant changes in educational practice without having the capacity to carry out those changes.

Some key areas where our district currently lacks capacity, but that will be necessary to address in order to carry out our vision and strategy, include:

- establishment and coordination of partnerships with community resources, including businesses, higher education, service agencies, alumni, etc., in order to create more experiential learning and career awareness opportunities for students;
- development of systems that promote family engagement and culturally proficient practices within an increasingly diverse community;
- coordination of social emotional learning strategies and programming for students, along with professional development to build staff capacity to address students’ social, emotional, and health needs;
- developing and implementing a comprehensive well-being strategy and corresponding programming for staff.

Elements of each of the above areas are, and will continue to be, part of the ongoing work of existing staff. However, because of the existing high levels of efficiency and the realities of carrying out day-to-day responsibilities, I fear that without creating additional capacity the ability of the district to deliver on these aspirations will be significantly compromised.

Empowerment is the key.

“Empowering learners” is the motto inscribed on the district’s logo. Using the term “learners” instead of “students” is intentional, in order to signal that empowerment of everyone associated with our schools is important. Educators and support staff, as well as parents and community members, also must be empowered to continuously learn so that our schools evolve effectively to meet the new, complex challenges facing public education in the 21st century.

Even if adequate capacity is available, it would be folly to believe that our shared mission, vision, priorities, and goals can be accomplished through organizational directives from the School Committee and administration, as the work is too complex and diffused across too many in an organization of our size (and top-down fiats don’t work well in complex organizations, anyway). Conversely, our aspirations cannot be

realized if individuals act independently and without coordination, which results in haphazard and uneven implementation. The key is to achieve a balance where the district's mission, core values, vision, and goals are communicated effectively and serve as both compass and map regarding where the district needs to go, while providing the opportunity and motivation for members of the school community to act in concert to find the best ways to get to the desired destination. If we provide the resources, time, opportunities, and support, and then entrust our students and staff with real responsibility, I believe that they will be empowered to create the best educational experience possible. I am confident that the return on those investments of capacity and trust will be substantial in helping our school district achieve its aspirations.