



Shrewsbury Public Schools

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Superintendent

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

On this last day of 2015, I am sharing my reflections regarding the current state of our school district. I will also share my thinking in person at your January 6 meeting, at which time I will be pleased to hear any feedback and answer any questions you may have.

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

1. Our students are thriving in schools that provide excellent educational experiences within respectful and purposeful cultures.
2. Our educators are succeeding in advancing our strategic priorities through collaboration and innovation.
3. Our school facilities are strong overall; however, there is inadequate space in the early grades and some buildings are in need of significant investments in infrastructure.
4. Our district, like all public school districts, is subject to demands for performance, mandates for compliance, and pressures for addressing societal issues -- but must operate within a fiscal environment where many costs are unavoidable, yet financial resources are both structurally limited and unrelated to performance.

I will provide a brief, big picture overview of each point below to illustrate my assessment, and I will provide examples when I present the report on January 6th.

Our students are thriving...

The data clearly show that Shrewsbury students are excelling on virtually every common measure of academic performance, from [state tests](#), to [national tests](#), to [post-graduation options](#). However, it is also important to illustrate students' experiences, which not only create those academic results, but that also support students' overall growth and development. Any visitor to our schools will encounter the following:

- An atmosphere of respect, where students and staff interact positively
- Classrooms where expert instruction is occurring and where students are engaged in learning both content and skills; in the middle and high school grades, this includes the innovative use of individual digital technology
- Examples of students engaged in a wide variety of academic pursuits, including the so-called "core subjects," as well as foreign language, music, drama, visual arts, physical education, health, food science, child development, computer programming, engineering, etc.
- Specialized programs for students who need additional or different kinds of support, including special education, English language learning, counseling services, nursing care, reading tutoring, etc.
- Students excelling in various co-curricular activities, including speech and debate, academic competitions, robotics, athletics, musicals and plays, special interest clubs, etc.

- Evidence of student leadership and of various projects through which students are giving thousands of volunteer hours to serve their community

Our educators are succeeding...

Exceptional educators and support staff are the most important factor in school quality, and Shrewsbury has a longstanding, well-deserved reputation for having high quality people performing the difficult work of educating students to high standards. Our administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, secretaries, and technicians routinely go above and beyond to provide our students with what they need to succeed.

I am struck by the level of professional collaboration I see in the field, where educators are working together to examine assessment data, set ambitious learning goals for students, plan and share instructional practices, and support one another in improving their craft. Teamwork is the norm among educators in Shrewsbury, and this approach is paying off for students by ensuring the spread and implementation of best practices through true collegiality.

I am also continuously impressed with the innovation I witness in our educators' practice, especially when utilizing the significant new technologies at their disposal. The opportunities for teachers to get assessment data in real time, personalize learning for individuals and groups, and provide students with multiple access points and pathways to understanding and competence have never been greater. Our educators who have this access are doing remarkable work in leveraging technology to enhance student learning, but they and others are also utilizing approaches that do not use technology but do represent new approaches to teaching and learning, such as the work being done with the new mathematics program and the Shrewsbury Writing Project. Innovative practices do set our district apart from the norm, and translate into better learning experiences for Shrewsbury's students.

Our school facilities are strong -- however...

When it comes to the schools which have been built or fully renovated since 1997 (Floral Street School, Shrewsbury High School, Oak Middle School, Parker Road Preschool, and Sherwood Middle School), students in Shrewsbury enjoy some of the finest school facilities in the state. Of the other schools that predate this era, both the Paton School and Spring Street School have received attention in recent years through projects such as new windows and/or roof, updated flooring, etc. and are generally in very good shape in those areas; however, their heating infrastructure will require replacement soon, and these are major projects. Coolidge School has most recently had lighting improvements and is generally in good shape, but will require some significant work before too long given the age and condition of the building. All three of these schools utilize a number of modular classrooms, added to absorb rapid growth in the late '90's, which will eventually require attention in ways that permanent structures do not. Of course, the Beal Early Childhood Center, built in 1922, represents the most extreme need when it comes to infrastructure, as the building is coming to the end of its useful life. Fortunately, the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) has informed me by phone that the MSBA staff is recommending that Beal be entered into the "eligibility period" that begins the process of a potential building project -- we will know more specifics after the MSBA Board meeting on January 27.

Regarding our space needs, we are fully utilizing spaces at Sherwood, Oak, and SHS, with some room sharing necessary but with programming needs met. Next year's expected bump in ninth grade enrollment will further stress the high school's capacity, but the facility will handle the growth. It should be noted that the district has not had adequate space for its early childhood and elementary programs for many years, as evidenced by the following:

- the continued need to rent an additional building on Wesleyan Terrace (behind the Maple Ave. Post Office) to provide two classrooms (used for kindergarten in past years and for preschool in recent years)
- the continued use of Beal classrooms as overflow for Floral Street elementary students (currently four classrooms being used for Floral Street first grades); this reduces the availability of classrooms for full day kindergarten, which is highly desirable both educationally and for

parents, and which is the reality in about 90% of public kindergarten classrooms in Massachusetts.

- the increase in the need for specialized spaces for intensive special needs programming, English language learner instruction, and other mandated services; in some cases this has resulted in lack of spaces for art or music instruction, which then must be delivered “on a cart” by visiting the regular classroom.
- the lack of separate gymnasium and cafeteria spaces at Paton School, where one multipurpose space limits the ability to schedule physical education classes and alternative uses of the cafeteria for special programs, etc.

Demands, mandates, pressures, and fiscal constraints

In my opinion, there has never been a more exciting time for education, given the growth of the knowledge base of effective practices, the technological tools available to enhance instruction, and the ubiquitous availability of information. I also believe that there has never been more complexity involved in the endeavor of public education. Our schools are held accountable for educating all students at high levels, and our students have never been more diverse in terms of educational needs. The number of students with very significant medical and developmental disabilities continues to require more -- and more intensive -- programming, which we try to provide within community schools wherever possible.

State mandates for how students with disabilities and with English learning needs are educated create significant programming needs, while other mandates such as those regarding how educators are evaluated require significant resources to address.

State policies regarding charter schools, school choice, and virtual schools create choices for families that divert critical funding when exercised, which makes it important for our district to be able to retain as many students as possible. Societal pressures, such as the increased mental health needs of students and issues such as the opioid epidemic, create greater needs in our schools for services such as counseling or preventive education, as well as real costs such as tuitions at the newly opened Recovery High School for a very small number of students with addiction issues.

At the same time, the state’s education funding formula continues to identify Shrewsbury as a community whose relative financial status results in minimal increases in state aid, while local governmental revenue is constrained. Unlike organizations in other sectors, our district’s high levels of success do not translate into more fiscal resources to apply to cost pressures -- these are decoupled.

The recent operational override provided the resources for our schools to emerge from a crisis situation and address critical needs for class size and curriculum resources, but the economics of state and local government combined with cost pressures, many beyond the district’s control, will make the next budget cycle a challenging one.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the state of our school district is very strong. It is justified to say that, in many ways, we are providing a world class education to Shrewsbury’s young people. Our students are thriving in a variety of areas; our staff excel at their work through collaboration and innovation; and our facilities are strong, with some obvious needs. However, the complexities and pressures that are endemic to public education, and to the government sector, will continue to provide challenges that our district must address. Continued focus on our mission, core values, and strategic priorities will help us navigate these challenges in the near future and for the long run.