



Shrewsbury Public Schools

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Superintendent

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

Continuing the process I have followed since 2013, I am providing you with my annual perspective regarding the state of the Shrewsbury Public Schools.

The intent of this report is to provide my perspective regarding the strengths our schools possess and the challenges that we face in the context of our own strategic direction, while considering the larger perspective of public education in our state and nation. I will do so according to the four strategic priorities that the School Committee approved just over a year ago. The overarching theme: While we have much to celebrate, *we have work to do* to achieve our collective aspirations for our students.

Our work ahead will build on a very strong foundation

We have work to do, because our strategic goals are ambitious and our students' success is worthy of the significant effort it will take to achieve them. Before discussing further, it is important to pause here to note that we come to this work from a position of great strength. It is important to recognize that:

- Our students continue to demonstrate very high levels of success in traditional measures of academics, including strong performance on state and national assessments, with our district again being named to the national AP Honor Roll for increasing access to rigorous coursework while maintaining very strong outcomes. Student creations and performances in the visual and performing arts continue to earn accolades, while academic competition teams (Speech & Debate, Robotics, Math Teams, etc.) and athletic teams continue to achieve impressive results.

- Our educators, support staff, and leadership team continue to do extraordinary work every day. I am continually impressed with their commitment to students' well-being, their skillful efforts to engage students in meaningful learning, and their pride in working as a team to make their schools and district great places for teaching and learning. Scrolling through [the Twitter feed found at #ShrewsburyLearns](#), one will see superb examples of innovative educational practices, along with myriad examples of students and staff accomplishments that underscore our district's core values.
- Our School Committee provides leadership that creates the conditions for students and educators to thrive. The School Committee's participation in and support of the creation of a bold vision and thoughtful strategic priorities for our district, and its steady governance of our schools in a manner that truly empowers staff to use their professional judgment to turn the vision and priorities into reality, are key factors in the ongoing success of the Shrewsbury Public Schools. These five elected volunteer citizens work tirelessly and collaboratively to ensure our schools provide the greatest value possible for the community given the resources available, while keeping their focus on what's best for students. Their skillful generation of significant, town-wide support for funding the new Beal School building project was another example of how their leadership is critically important to our district's success.
- Our parent community provides outstanding support, for their own children specifically and for our schools generally. We could not accomplish nearly as much without the efforts of parents to ensure that students are ready and available to learn and reinforcing what is taught at school, as well as their volunteer efforts in classrooms, through PTOs, booster groups, etc. We are most fortunate to have high levels of trust and support from families.
- Our support from the town government and the community-at-large is also strong. Our relationship with the municipal government administration remains important and effective, and the recent changes in the municipal structure for supporting public buildings and grounds is already showing evidence of success. The overwhelmingly positive vote to build a new K-4 elementary school to address overcrowding and to replace an obsolete building signaled a high level of confidence in the School Department from citizens across all demographics, not just parents. The business community has also been hugely supportive, as evidenced by the many sponsorships that made the renovation and replacement of the SHS athletic stadium field a reality without using town

budget funds (chief among them being a \$750,000 sponsorship by Central One Federal Credit Union).

We should continue to celebrate the continued excellence of our schools, and utilize these strengths as we take the necessary steps to provide an even better education for our students, one that will adapt to the changing needs and demands that today's world places upon our students and us.

We have work to do

There has always been a culture of hard work in our schools, and I am proud that our efforts have resulted in the successes outlined above. In order to achieve the [vision](#) and [strategic priorities](#) that have been established, I believe that we collectively need to ensure that we are expending our efforts on the right things in the right ways. Below, I attempt to outline how we should focus our energy across our four strategic priorities.

Learning environments where everyone's success matters

We have work to do if we are to become a district where we can truly say that "all means all" when it comes to ensuring that all students are getting what they need to succeed.

We have made strides in shifting our practices to be more inclusive of students with disabilities in typical classroom settings, in order to provide more robust learning opportunities and align programming with research that demonstrates that all students are served better when instruction is differentiated effectively in a heterogeneous setting (such as in a co-teaching model). This work is challenging, as it requires high levels of collaboration between classroom teachers and special education teachers, and that specialized instruction is provided effectively to students who require it. It also requires continued attention to building a growth mindset that focuses on what students *are* capable of accomplishing if provided with the right supports, as opposed to making assumptions about what they can achieve based on deficits associated with their disabilities.

As Shrewsbury becomes more diverse each year, we must also consider how we can ensure that our practices are inclusive where it comes to our students' and families' cultural backgrounds, so that all students and families feel welcome and unconditionally accepted as members of our school communities. We will need to

build our understanding of culturally proficient practices so that our staff increase their knowledge and skill of working with students and parents whose cultures of origin differ from theirs.

We are working on how to best measure our successes related to inclusive practices, including learning more about the Department of Elementary & Secondary Education's (DESE) [new accountability tool](#), which shows gaps between different "subgroups" of students relative to various measures of achievement. If we believe that "all means all" when it comes to our students, we must invest time, energy, and resources to ensure that every single student's needs are being met in ways that promote their academic, social, and emotional growth, and to do this in the most inclusive manner possible.

Enhanced well-being of all

We have work to do if we are to become a district where we can truly say that the kids – and the educators – are alright, when it comes to addressing stress and other social, emotional, and behavioral health issues.

The feedback from our students and staff has been consistent: stress is a significant factor that is affecting their quality of life, collectively and individually. This aligns with what is happening on a national and global level, as communities, states, and nations try to address various issues related to social, emotional, and behavioral health of young people, especially where it comes to the specific topics of depression and suicide, substance abuse and addiction (including new challenges related to the legalization of marijuana and an epidemic of vaping, in addition to the opioid crisis), and the societal phenomena of smartphones and screen time changing the social dynamic. [Health survey data](#) indicate that Shrewsbury's young people are not immune from these issues, and that these concerns are more significant in many cases when the data are [disaggregated by subgroup](#), with LGBTQ students in particular demonstrating higher levels of risk. To address these issues, we will need to focus time, attention, and resources on developing a comprehensive approach to social and emotional learning to be integrated into practices across the board, while also taking steps to address the specific concerns listed above through curriculum adjustments and expanded counseling and clinical supports for students with significant needs.

Regarding educators, the national conversation has shifted regarding the circumstances and expectations for public school educators as the No Child Left Behind era ends. Over the past decade-plus, U.S. educators have experienced a plethora of initiatives (no matter how well intended or desired); a student population

with increasingly complex needs; pressure for results in the form of higher test scores (whether real or perceived); an environment where communications technology can create a sense of constant urgency; all within a work structure that was designed for a bygone era. It is not surprising that this has resulted in higher levels of stress for educators. Layered on top of this is a perceived lack of respect society has afforded educators within our nation, with a sense that teachers were being blamed for shortcomings, along with the low compensation that many educators experienced in parts of the country where investment in public education was reduced severely during the recession and has not kept up with inflation (hence the walkouts and strikes we have seen in recent months in various states). We are fortunate that Massachusetts continued to invest heavily in public education and is in a much stronger place than most states where it comes to compensating educators and providing supports for students, and that Shrewsbury educators' feedback indicates that they appreciate the professionalism of their working environment. However, the issue of stress in the system is still very real. It will be very important to continue to develop positive, purposeful school cultures so that there are supportive environments for our staff, while also seeking and implementing specific ways in which to address stress and support our educators' well-being.

Connected learning for a complex world

We have work to do if we are to become a district where we can truly say that all of our students are participating in project-based and other authentic, connected learning experiences that are sufficiently developing the skills they will need to be successful citizens.

Our district's vision for its students, found in the [Portrait of a Shrewsbury Graduate](#), emphasizes many skills and dispositions beyond academic learning. There are many innovative ways in which our students are learning the 21st century skills of communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking, and it becomes more clear each year why building these competencies is crucial for our students' future success. What we see in society and the media today makes it apparent that our students must become savvy consumers of news and information who can also see the moral and ethical dimensions of issues, so that they become informed, empathetic citizens who serve the community and seek the common good.

Over the past several years we have developed many opportunities for students to learn academic skills and content in ways that also develop their "real-world" skills, including many that leverage new technologies, but we still have far to travel to ensure

that we are systematically providing these opportunities to all learners at all levels so that we can realize our Portrait of a Shrewsbury Graduate vision in a systematic way. To be sure, we need to empower our educators and students to find innovative ways to achieve these things, but within a clear framework that directs our energies towards these common goals.

Space and resources to support effective learning

We have work to do if we are to become a district where we can truly say that we have the space and resources necessary to achieve what the community expects of us.

We are fortunate in our district, as we have substantial resources, both capital and human, to do the important work of educating our students. These resources continue to be modest when viewed in the context of other school districts across the state, and the value that our community receives regarding the return on its investment is superb. We have made excellent progress in some areas, particularly with the strong community support to build a new Beal School, but it is clear to me that a greater investment in our schools' capacity to do the work we have been charged with accomplishing will be necessary to reach our goals.

The budget recommendation for the coming fiscal year that I will be making in early February will reference not only what it will take to maintain the status quo in our schools, but also what strategic investments will be necessary to advance the work in all four of our strategic priorities. As I indicated in my State of the District report a year ago, there must be a "reciprocity of accountability and capacity" (per Richard Elmore), in that a school district must have the capacity to implement the improvements that the community expects of it. Normal inflationary factors in what is a personnel-heavy sector, combined with ongoing and new mandates, and reduced or flat financial support from the federal and state levels, make it a challenge to maintain the status quo. It is my hope that the energy on Beacon Hill regarding providing appropriate levels of state funding, combined with continued strong stewardship of local resources, will help us make necessary investments over the next few years to address our priorities, which we aim to accomplish while still coping with increases in enrollment, particularly at the high school.

Last year, I identified areas where our district currently lacks capacity, but that will be necessary to address in order to carry out our vision and strategy; in most cases we were not able to gain this capacity during the current budget year. It is my hope that we can provide additional resources for the following:

- addressing ongoing increases in enrollment, particularly at the secondary level;
- continued implementation of inclusive practices such as co-teaching and support for in-district special education programming that provides more access for more students within our own district schools;
- additional clinical and/or counseling resources to address evolving student mental, emotional, and behavioral health needs;
- 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;
- 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; and
- support for ongoing day-to-day operations of district functions related to student registration, business operations, state reporting, etc.

As I stated a year ago, I fear that without creating additional capacity, the ability of the district to deliver on these aspirations will be significantly compromised. No matter how worthy or compelling, our goals will remain unrealized if the capacity to achieve them is lacking.

Conclusion

The hashtag used to share what's happening in our schools on Twitter is #ShrewsburyLearns. I like the present verb tense of this term, because it signals that our district is currently and continuously engaged in getting better at the core reason that schools exist: learning. Our students and educators have and will continue to learn much and learn well, but as this report suggests, we have work to do so that we may reach the ambitious goals we have set for improving the lives of the children in our care.