



Shrewsbury Public Schools

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Superintendent

August 22, 2018

To: School Committee
Re: Update on summer work by administration

In addition to the many operational responsibilities that the Central Office administrators and the principals have during the summer, we have spent significant time on activities designed to build our leadership capacity and to address the district's strategic priorities, with particular attention paid to the culture of our district and our schools. This memo provides a summary of this work.

Summer Institute (June 25-28)

This professional development institute, held at Shrewsbury High School in partnership with the Westborough Public Schools, included 13 courses, as well as three keynote lectures by presenters on the topics of personalized learning, universal design for learning (inclusive practice), and engaging diverse learners, all of which connected with our strategic priorities. I taught a course on communication and relationship building, and several SPS faculty taught courses as well (including some SHS department directors).

School Leadership Team Summer Leadership Conference (July 24-26)

The School Leadership Team (SLT), made up of Central Office administrators and principals, again held its annual summer leadership retreat at UMass-Amherst's conference center. The team read the book *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Effective Groups* by Daniel Coyle, and various members coordinated discussions of the book's themes and how they could apply to our work in strengthening the culture of the district and our schools. The SLT also completed its year-long participation in the DESE course on Inclusive Practice in order to build our collective understanding of best practices in effectively including students with learning and other differences, which again aligns closely with our strategic priorities. We also spent time mapping out how to best move our strategic priorities and district goals forward in the coming year, and discussed how to best communicate these priorities to the various stakeholders in the district.

District Leadership Team Workshop (August 21)

Yesterday, the full District Leadership Team (DLT), consisting of all administrators and curriculum leaders across the district, met for our annual day-long workshop at SHS. Amy Clouter and I facilitated the agenda, which included a heavy focus on building even stronger cultures in our schools and departments (using the themes from *The Culture Code* as a framework). This included a segment on how DLT members might effectively use Twitter as a communication tool to emphasize our strategic vision and goals while amplifying the excellent work our students and educators are doing. Finally, we also

spent time determining how the structure and content of DLT meetings might be adjusted to best meet the needs of the team in the coming year, so that our district's leaders have the opportunity to continuously build leadership capacity while working together to advance the district's strategic priorities and goals.

Attending to culture as an antidote to stress

During these various summer leadership meetings, the issue of stress was raised and discussed. There is consensus that a variety of factors are making work in public schools more stressful for educators, support staff, and administrators. Factors that contribute to this include a more "harried" feel due to larger volume of students, parents, and tasks and a lack of capacity to do all of what is necessary in a timely way; unease regarding school safety in the aftermath of the Parkland, Florida and other school shootings; societal dynamics with growing expectations for immediate satisfaction of wants; and ongoing heightened expectations for what schools provide to address academic, social, and emotional needs of students.

Our work this summer has been focused on determining ways to strengthen the culture of our district, our schools, and our departments. As the famous management guru, Warren Bennis, once said: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." We know that no matter how well-thought out our strategic priorities and goals are, if the culture deteriorates we will not be successful in achieving them for the benefit of our students. We were fortunate to come across an excellent resource in *The Culture Code*, in which the author posits that there are three major contributors to effective group cultures:

- 1) They **build safety**, by creating signals of connection that generate bonds of belonging and identity
 - 2) They **share vulnerability** where habits of mutual risk drive trusting cooperation
 - 3) They **establish purpose** where narratives create shared goals and values
- (Coyle, *The Culture Code*, p. xix)

Based on what we learned and discussed from the book, there is no doubt that we already utilize many of the approaches that create strong cultures, but there is also no doubt that we can improve upon them, and this requires action. As Coyle states, "Culture is a set of living relationships working toward a shared goal. It's not something you are. It's something you do." (p. xx)

I look forward to discussing our approach to strengthening our culture at our workshop.