



# **State of the District Report**

**Dr. Joseph M. Sawyer**  
**Superintendent of Schools**

**March 29, 2023**



# State of the District

- 1) The state of our school district is both *strong* and *vulnerable*
- 2) Our schools face *multiple, complex challenges*
- 3) Our future success will depend on *strengthening systems* in order to *empower people*



# Technology: Trends

“Technology integration is a crucial trend that has impacted education. The increasing use of technology has revolutionized the way teachers deliver instruction, with the incorporation of virtual and online learning. Technology also helps schools communicate with parents and students, and manage administrative tasks more efficiently. The shift towards personalized learning is also evident, with schools focusing on meeting individual student needs.”



# Technology: Trends

“Technology integration is a crucial trend that has impacted education. The increasing use of technology has revolutionized the way teachers deliver instruction, with the incorporation of virtual and online learning. Technology also helps schools communicate with parents and students, and manage administrative tasks more efficiently. The shift towards personalized learning is also evident, with schools focusing on meeting individual student needs.”

***The above text was written by the ChatGPT artificial intelligence program in response to the query: “Write report on state of education for public schools superintendent.”***



# Technology: Challenges & Opportunities

Strengths include:

- Artificial intelligence as a tool for learning and assessment
- Equitable access to educational content
- Enhanced communication across cultures and continents

Challenges include:

- Artificial intelligence as a substitute for thinking, writing, problem solving
- Addiction to phones/devices (distractibility, lack of sustained focus)
- Access to disturbing content outside of school (violence, pornography)
- Social media dynamics/cyberbullying



# Technology: A Tool to Amplify Learning

- Our district is well-positioned to use technology effectively
- Technology is a tool that can enhance learning and communication, but only if the underlying approach is sound
- To improve, our schools must determine how we can best use technology to amplify strong educational practices and student learning



# Academic Health

## MCAS results show students recovering from the turmoil of pandemic learning but reveal losses in English language arts

Updated: Sep. 30, 2022, 8:19 a.m. | Published: Sep. 29, 2022, 8:05 p.m.

## Global Academic Loss Persists Nearly Three Years Into the Pandemic



By [Sarah D. Sparks](#) — January 30, 2023 ⌚ 5 min read

## Pandemic Prompts Historic Decline in Student Achievement on Nation's Report Card

As grim as the declines in math and reading are, they were also widely expected given the academic setbacks as a result of interrupted learning during the coronavirus pandemic.

By [Lauren Camera](#) | Oct. 24, 2022, at 12:01 a.m.



# Academic Health

Challenges are multifaceted:

- Complex needs of students
- Effects of the pandemic on skills development
- Need to update literacy instruction to match current research and best practices
- Loss of access to vocational/technical high school and limited career technical education options
- Enormous amount of content to be taught in limited time

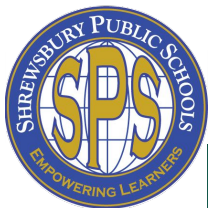




# Academic Health

Strengths and opportunities:

- Highly skilled and committed educators and support staff
- Academic skill screening tools to identify gaps
- Continued development of systems of support and intervention
- Content and skill-development tools accessible to all students through technology
- Ongoing professional development in best practices (e.g., Universal Design for Learning)
- Partnerships with businesses and higher education to advance career technical education



# Mental, Behavioral, & Emotional Health

The image shows the cover of a report titled "PROTECTING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH". The cover has a dark green background. At the top, the text "PROTECTING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH" is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below this, the subtitle "The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory" is written in a smaller, white, italicized serif font. In the bottom right corner, there is a small white box containing the year "2021". In the background, there is a faint, circular seal of the U.S. Surgeon General's Office, featuring a caduceus and the text "U.S. SURGEON GENERAL'S OFFICE" and "1798".

## PROTECTING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

*The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*

2021

## *Surgeon General Warns of Youth Mental Health Crisis*

The coronavirus pandemic intensified a rise in adolescent depression, anxiety and mental health distress that was underway before the spring of 2020.

By **Matt Richtel**

Dec. 7, 2021

The United States surgeon general on Tuesday warned that young people are facing “devastating” mental health effects as a result of the challenges experienced by their generation, including the coronavirus pandemic.



# Mental, Behavioral, & Emotional Health

Challenges are multifaceted:

- Experiences with trauma
- Lack of connection, exacerbated by isolation during the pandemic
- Social pressures and feelings of inadequacy amplified by social media
- Stress related to academic pressures, perfectionism, perceptions of what post-high school “success” looks like



# Mental, Behavioral, & Emotional Health

Challenges are multifaceted (continued):

- Vulnerability to bullying and cyberbullying
- Addiction to phones/devices
- Access to disturbing content (violence, pornography)
- Evolving societal norms about cannabis use, shift of nicotine addiction from cigarettes to vaping, family alcohol and drug abuse issues
- Anxiety and worry about societal issues: school shootings; injustices based on race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, and socioeconomic status; climate change; economic insecurity; war



# Mental, Behavioral, & Emotional Health

The antidotes our schools must provide:

- Conveying a sense of belonging as part of the school community, based on unconditional acceptance
- Fostering human connection
  - With trusted adults
  - With students who share common interests – and those who don't
- Cultivating a sense of purpose and enabling meaningful contributions for the benefit of others
- Developing social and emotional competencies



# Diversity, Belonging, Inclusion, Equity

## Honoring the diversity of our community

**LYNSEY HEFFERNAN**  
*School Committee Chair*

Over the last many years, the diversity of Shrewsbury has blossomed. We learned in our Elementary Redistricting process in 2021 that in the course of two decades Grades K-4 enrollment changed from over 90% white students to less than 50%. With that diversity in our community there have been incredible benefits and, at times, challenges to adapt quickly enough to cre-

Inclusion, to me, means we ensure that each and every student, staff and educator in our building feels supported, welcomed and invited to bring their full self to school each day. These feelings should apply to everyone, celebrating any religion, or no religion. I do not wish to have the School Committee be in the role of picking and choosing which religion deserves a holiday and which does not. I want everyone, no matter their faith, to feel supported as they exercise their right, under law, to honor participation in religious events

# J SHREWSBURY SCHOOL Journal



## Peers mentoring peers: setting the “Foundation” for student success!

**DR. ERICA PRATT**  
*Director of Health, PE,  
Family Consumer Science*  
**PAMELA LEBLANC**  
*Director of Visual Arts*

For several years now, the Family Consumer Science, Music, Physical Education (PE) and Visual Arts departments at Shrewsbury High School (SHS) have been providing multiple learning opportunities for students to

skills in various exhibits, performances and movement experiences. Every effort is made in these courses to promote cross-curricular connections with several subject areas.

When asked about their experiences in these courses, students shared the following:  
*Great opportunity to be able to take a leadership role and kind of act like*



## Craving connection

**DR. JOSEPH M. SAWYER**  
*Superintendent of Schools*

One of my goals this year is to make an assessment of how our students are doing in the aftermath of the pandemic. As part of that work, recently I spent time in all of our elementary schools, both middle schools, and the high school in order to have conversations with groups of students. I met with over 200 students from grades 3 through 12 in various leadership groups, clubs, activities, and programs in order to ensure that I was able to speak with a cross-section of our very diverse student population.



# Diversity, Belonging, Inclusion, & Equity

## *Support Educational Excellence and Well-Being*

School cultures that

- *celebrate diversity,*
- *foster belonging,*
- *include everyone, and*
- *provide equitable access to high-quality teaching and programming*

enable a school community to **achieve educational excellence** and **enhance the well-being** of its members.



# Diversity, Belonging, Inclusion, & Equity

## *Support Educational Excellence and Well-Being*

School systems that

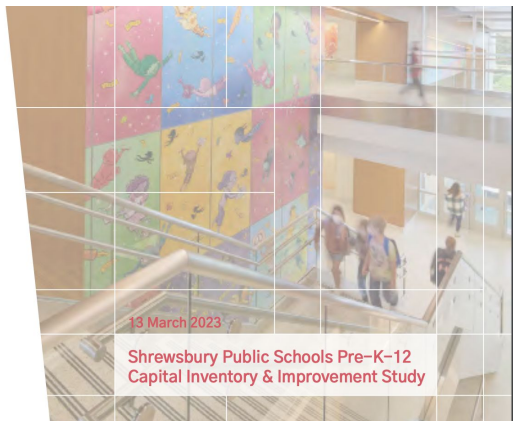
- *welcome and include all families,*
- *demonstrate respect for everyone,*
- *diversify their staff to reflect the diversity of the students and the community, and*
- *provide equitable access to supports for mental, physical, social, and emotional health*

enable a school community to **achieve educational excellence** and **enhance the well-being** of its members.





# Financial & Operational Health



## BUDGET & FINANCE

### Inflation Is Putting the Squeeze on Schools. How Are They Coping?



By [Mark Lieberman](#) — July 22, 2022 ⌚ 3 min read

### Shrewsbury voters approve \$9.5 million override aimed at solving structural deficit



**Kim Ring**  
Telegram & Gazette

Published 6:30 a.m. ET May 5, 2021 | Updated 3:00 p.m. ET May 5, 2021

[View Comments](#)



SHREWSBURY — With nearly 30% of the town's registered voters casting ballots, residents approved a \$9.5 million override of tax-limiting Proposition 2½ Tuesday.

The measure passed, 4,323-2,769, according to unofficial results provided by the town clerk's office late Tuesday night.

## RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

### Schools Are Still Understaffed. Here's How Hard-Pressed Principals Are Responding

Filling hard-to-staff vacancies takes time away from other tasks for principals juggling a multitude of responsibilities.

Denisa R. Superville, October 13, 2022 • 9 min read



# Financial & Operational Health

Challenges are multifaceted:

- Uncertain and volatile economic environment with high inflation
- Difficult employment market, ongoing staffing shortages
- Overcrowding and lack of space for programming at SHS
- Aging infrastructure at other schools, particularly Coolidge
- Future preschool space needs
- Half of schools lack climate control



# Financial & Operational Health

Strengths and opportunities:

- Financial stability thanks to funding from the 2021 operational override and agreement between the School Committee and Select Board
- Excellent finance and operations staff; strong partnership with other Town Departments
- Federal pandemic grant funding that assisted with extraordinary costs and are supporting learning recovery
- Advancing initiatives through philanthropic giving and partnerships
- PreK-12 Space Study provides a blueprint for infrastructure needs; statement of interest being submitted to MA School Building Authority for a potential future expansion of SHS



# The Path Ahead

Empowering our people by strengthening our systems.



# The Path Ahead

*Empowering our people by strengthening our systems.*

“A bad system will beat a good person every time.”

– W. Edwards Deming



# The Path Ahead

*Empowering our people by strengthening our systems.*

- Safety and security
- Multi-tiered system of support for students
  - Student academic health
  - Student mental, behavioral, social, and emotional health
- Instructional practices informed by research and data
- Professional development and training for staff
- Staff wellness program to address workplace stress



# The Path Ahead

*Empowering our people by strengthening our systems.*

- Personnel hiring and retention with an intentional focus on diversifying staff
- Support for students and families who face barriers to access due to language, socioeconomic factors, transportation, etc.
- Systematic approach to fostering belonging and inclusion



# What Do the Students Want?

Met with over 200 students, grades 3-12 and noted these themes:

Students:

- Appreciate clarity, patience, and sticking with them and providing extra time or help when they don't "get it" at first
- Notice when adults genuinely care about them, accept them for who they are, and make them feel that they belong
- Value when adults respectfully listen to their concerns and then provide advice





# What Do the Students Want?

## Students:

- Believe that our schools generally have a respectful climate and culture...but,
- Are concerned that there are still too many instances of unkind behavior of students toward other students (teasing, bullying)
- See some of this behavior coming from ignorance or misguided attempts at humor, but see some as intentionally targeted at individuals or groups with the intent to be hurtful. This behavior sometimes includes slurs based on identity (race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.)
- Notice when there are efforts to address these behaviors, but want to see more explicit expectations and messages that disrespectful or hurtful language or behavior will not be tolerated, and for it to become less frequent



# What Do the Students Want?

“Just one word: *connection.*”



# What Do the Students Want?

“Just one word: *connection*.”

Systems that empower people to build and nurture human connections

- among students
- with trusted adults
- with families



# State of the District

- 1) The state of our school district is both *strong* and *vulnerable*
- 2) Our schools face *multiple, complex challenges*
- 3) Our future success will depend on *strengthening systems* in order to *empower people*