



# Shrewsbury Public Schools

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Superintendent

January 6, 2017

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

As we begin a new calendar year, I am pleased to report to you regarding the state of our school district. I will also provide remarks in person at your January 11 meeting, at which time I will be pleased to hear any feedback and answer any questions you may have.

The intent of this report is to provide a holistic view of our school district's current situation from my perspective, rather than the statistical information you have received in previous reports regarding topics such as educational testing results, 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 are engaged in learning within respectful school cultures; they are acquiring skills, knowledge, and habits of mind they will need for future success; and they are demonstrating high levels of success in academics and co-curricular activities.
- 2) The complexity and pace of society are affecting students, families, and educators in ways that present significant challenges within the school environment, and that require both resources and skill to address.
- 3) Our educators are motivated, student-centered, and focused on their craft; and they have more opportunity for and autonomy over their professional development.
- 4) Our school facilities are strong overall; however, enrollment pressures and program needs require additional space in the early grades and are stressing capacity at the middle and high school levels.

- 5) The public education landscape is evolving rapidly and remains subject to demands for academic performance, mandates for compliance, and pressures to address societal issues; however, the realities of the cost structure and funding mechanisms for our public schools will make the upcoming budget cycle extremely challenging.

Below I provide a brief overview of each point to illustrate my assessment, and I will provide additional information when I present the report on January 11th.

### **Our students are engaged and successful...**

Results show that Shrewsbury students are doing very well on virtually every common measure of academic performance, from [state tests](#), to [national tests](#), to [post-graduation options](#). Students also excelled in co-curricular activities over the past year, as evidenced by a state championship in high school speech and debate; the regional award for best overall production for the high school musical; a prestigious state drama award for the SHS fall play; the chairman's award for high school robotics; and multiple league championships in athletics, including state finalist teams in gymnastics and football.

One of our district's strategic goals for the five-year plan just being completed is that "90% of students, parents, and educators will agree that student learning experiences are engaging and that students participate in appropriately challenging coursework that meets their needs." On a survey in June, the results were that 88% agreed or strongly agreed that learning experiences are engaging, while 86% agreed or strongly agreed that coursework is appropriately challenging, just below the goal threshold but representing a very high degree of satisfaction regarding the quality of what our schools provide.

When visiting classrooms, I am seeing more examples of students engaged in activities or projects that are purposefully connecting the learning to real-world applications that are building proficiency at the so-called "21st century skills" of communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. I am also observing very purposeful cultivation of a ["growth mindset"](#) among students, which actualizes our district's core value of "fostering the belief that effective effort is the most important element of success."

The use of digital tools for learning, from interactive whiteboards at the early childhood and elementary years to our personal digital device program in grades 5-12, plus the introduction of a 1:2 in-school student to iPad program in grade 4, provides educators and students with opportunities to find and display information from myriad sources; present evidence of learning and create in a variety of written, audio, visual, and video modalities; organize course materials and resources through an online learning platform; and communicate and collaborate within the school community as well as across the nation and globe. As use of digital devices and materials matures, I am seeing educators and students become more adept at utilizing these tools to create learning experiences that would not be possible without them. With the ubiquity of digital devices in 21st century life, it will continue to be critical to provide lessons in digital citizenship and to help students learn how to utilize these

tools appropriately and to avoid being distracted by them, which is a skill all higher education students and adults need to acquire.

**The complexity and pace of society are affecting students, families, and educators...**

Life has become more complex, and the features and expectations inherent in society in this place and time, along with the acceleration of the pace of life and the increase in the volume and speed of information, are all having an impact on our schools.

These phenomena manifest themselves in our school environments in a variety of ways, both positively and negatively. Greater access to information can enhance learning, but it can also be overwhelming. Parental support for children's success is strong, but can also create high levels of stress for students due to overscheduling of activities and misapplication of expectations. The ubiquity of smartphones and the constant connection to social media, texting, and email make it easier to connect with family, friends, and community, but can lead to unreasonable expectations for instant response; sleep loss; constant worry due to "fear of missing out;" and unrealistic perceptions of others' success and happiness vs. one's own, as public online personae are carefully "curated." As a result, stress is a very real factor affecting students, families, and our staff. Therefore, it is not surprising that the concepts of "[social thinking](#)" and "[mindfulness](#)" and their application to the educational environment are gaining significant traction within our schools.

Mental and behavioral health issues present a significant and growing challenge to our schools. While a small percentage of students have significant problems in this area, addressing their needs is extremely time and resource intensive. Students who present with these symptoms are also at risk for substance abuse problems, another area where our schools are dealing with changing societal issues and norms due to the opiate crisis and the legalization of marijuana. Further, we know that the risk of violence in schools, while very small, is connected to mental and behavioral health issues among students and/or members of the community. The time and resources we are devoting to school safety and security is an unfortunate reality, but beyond this we know that ensuring that our students are connected to adults in the school community and having systems in place to identify students who are having difficulties is the best proactive work we can do to mitigate safety risks.

Our town is becoming more diverse in terms of nationality, ethnicity, and culture, which greatly enriches our community, but also creates challenges regarding educating students and communicating with families with limited or no English. Diversity has also continued to increase regarding children who have different physical and neurological abilities, due to more children surviving from birth due to modern medicine and the greater prevalence of conditions such as autism. Our schools rightly must provide appropriate educational services to all of our students, and the ways these moral and legal mandates must be implemented create great complexity in the educational system and the need for significant resources.

**Our educators are motivated, student-centered, and focused on their craft...**

I continue to be impressed with the passion, commitment, and skill our teachers, paraprofessionals, secretaries, technicians, and administrators bring to their work. We are fortunate to have highly qualified and competent people doing the critically important work of educating our town's young citizens.

Over the past year, educators in Shrewsbury have had increased opportunities to learn about best practices and consider ways to innovate within their classrooms. The work of the [Innovation in Learning Study Group](#) is one example, and through my visits I am seeing more instances of project-based learning throughout our schools. There is a clear focus on student learning when teachers are collaborating with their grade level or departmental teams, and I am struck by the level of professionalism and dedication to student success that I routinely see among our staff.

The district has provided teachers with a voice in their schools (through faculty advisory councils and surveys, for example) and also has leveraged teacher leadership to move key projects forward, including improving our mentoring and induction program for new teachers; enhancing the elementary school handbook; building online learning experiences and utilizing our online learning management system; and facilitating the work associated with the district's project-based learning goal.

After a number of years of professional development that was mostly prescribed due to various mandates, this year's professional development program for teachers has provided a significant amount of choice and flexibility. Teachers were able to choose one of ten professional development "pathways," and are using their time on professional development days and early release days to learn about their chosen topic and to choose ways to apply it to their own practice, typically in collaboration with other educators who chose the same topic. This approach, which utilizes digital learning tools through the Schoology online learning management system, has been well received by teachers and is already resulting in some interesting classroom and school applications.

**Our school facilities are strong -- however...**

The schools that have been built or fully renovated since 1997 (Floral Street School, Shrewsbury High School, Oak Middle School, Parker Road Preschool, and Sherwood Middle School) are in excellent physical condition. 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 both received full

renovations of their HVAC systems over the summer. Coolidge School has most recently had lighting improvements and is generally in good shape, but will require some significant work in the future 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. As you know, 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 selected Beal for one of its projects considered for state funding, and we have completed the first phase of the MSBA process, the so-called "eligibility period." This past December, Town Meeting approved \$1.2 million to move forward with the feasibility study phase of this project, which will take place over the next 12 to 18 months, which will determine various solutions that will provide a school with 750 to 790 student seats at the early childhood/elementary level. This is very good news for our town, as financial participation on the part of the Commonwealth is critical to meet our infrastructure needs.

It should also 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 three 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.

Regarding our space needs at the middle and high school levels, we are fully utilizing spaces at Sherwood, Oak, and SHS. This year's expected increase in ninth grade enrollment was larger than projected and has further stressed the high school's capacity, which is almost at 100% room utilization each academic period. As no expansion is planned for this population peak that will happen over the next few years (and then abate somewhat), it will be important to consider ways to minimize the impact of having over 1,800 to 1,900 students in the building. At Sherwood and Oak, not all teachers have their own classroom spaces, requiring some classes (such as foreign language at Sherwood) to be delivered in the students'

homerooms with an itinerant teacher moving from room to room throughout the day. The need for specialized special education space will increase pressure on Oak next school year.

**The public education landscape is evolving rapidly and remains subject to demands for academic performance, mandates for compliance, and pressures to address societal issues; however...**

This is an extraordinary time in education due to the unprecedented explosion of information; the ability to share knowledge and best practices across the state, nation and world; and the ability to utilize new technological tools to enhance instruction. However, the work of educating students in the public sector has become so complex and demanding that it has become increasingly difficult to meet the expectations placed upon schools by society. At the same time, funding mechanisms are not keeping up with the realities of what it costs to provide all that is expected of public schools. Here in Massachusetts, [a special commission determined that the state funding formula is woefully out of date](#), and is underfunding the cost of a so-called “adequate” public education by more than \$400 million per year. Within this context, the state’s education funding formula identifies Shrewsbury as a community whose relative financial status only merits minimal increases in state aid, as the state’s policy moves our town towards shouldering a larger share of the cost of educating students; yet, our local governmental revenue is constrained, creating a structural problem for the funding of our schools.

As referenced above, we have seen an increase in students with medical and developmental disabilities that require intensive programming, and as demographics change the amount of services our district provides for English language learners has also increased. These mandates provide important resources for students with these needs, but they also create significant costs. Other recent mandates, such as the change in educator evaluation that makes it more frequent and intensive, also require significant personnel resources. Educating children is a personnel-intensive endeavor, regardless of how it is done, and this creates inflationary pressures that cannot be offset by efficiencies in ways less labor intensive organizations might be able to. This creates significant pressure on the school district’s budget.

We also continue to be challenged by state policies regarding charter schools, school choice, and virtual schools, which create choices for families that, when exercised, divert critical funding away from the district, which makes it important for our district to be able to retain as many students as possible. I am grateful that Question 2, which would have expanded charter schools in Massachusetts, was defeated by the voters.

As mentioned above, societal pressures, including mental and behavioral health needs of students and the opioid epidemic, create greater demand for services such as counseling or preventive education, as well as real costs such as tuitions at the Recovery High School in Worcester for a very small number of students with addiction issues.

As I've stated previously, unlike organizations in other sectors, our school district's high levels of success do not result in a better fiscal scenario, as performance and revenue are not related. The operational override of a few years ago provided the resources for our schools to emerge from a crisis situation and address critical needs for class size and curriculum resources, but cost pressures and the mechanisms of school funding, much of which is beyond the district's control, will amplify the fiscal challenges before us in the coming budget cycle.

### **Conclusion**

Our community has many reasons to be very proud of our public schools. There is much evidence of success. Given our students' performance and our relative standing in Massachusetts, which continues to [lead the nation](#) and [rank among world leaders](#) in education, we continue to provide a world-class education to our town's young people. However, there are a variety of challenges, both societal and fiscal, that will require thoughtful planning and effective action in the coming months and years in order to continue to provide our children with what they need and our community with the value it expects.