



Forward Thinking: Preparing our students for success in 2022

A joint report submitted by Mrs. Margaret Belsito, Mrs. Amy Clouter and Dr. Jane O. Lizotte

Shrewsbury Public Schools

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Introduction

In Shrewsbury, strategic planning mechanisms have long been an impetus for continuous improvement. Executed well, an inclusive process allows the district to:

- anticipate challenges,
- align priorities,
- connect with the community, and
- set and meet ambitious goals.

Most importantly, the strategic cycle is an opportunity for reflection and renewal. The process begins when school communities and other stakeholders look back at the district's past performance. In partnership with Dr. Sawyer and the School Committee, representative groups share feedback and frank input. Each plan affords the district the opportunity to consider anew how best to prepare our students and staff for the future. In this way, our steps forward are linked to past successes and deeply rooted in our core values.

This three-part report proposes a shared vision for the next five years in three key areas that

further the important work our educators are doing, aspires to motivate our school communities to consider new goals, and affirms the deeply held beliefs that have helped our students and staff to become thoughtful, kind, skillful, and engaged contributors to the community.

Background Information

From 2012-2016, educators in Shrewsbury's schools centered their work around four strategic priorities in service to one goal: ensuring that at every level Shrewsbury's students received a world class education. Our commitment to remaining a high performing school system is unwavering. Yet since the completion of our last plan the world has changed, and thus our practices must shift accordingly. This document reflects our shared perspectives on where our schools should focus over the next five years in order for our students to be successful both during that time and beyond their school years. Simply stated, each of us in turn will aim to answer the question, "What are the most important things for students to know and be able to do in 2022 and beyond?"

Social and Emotional Learning

Dr. Jane O. Lizotte, Principal, Sherwood Middle School

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is defined as *the process through which people acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions*. SEL focuses on five competency areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. These competency areas are integral to social and emotional learning and are believed to be most impactful when practiced across the school day. Research shows that SEL is foundational to students' ability to become knowledgeable, responsible, caring, and contributing members of society. Character traits including honesty, self-regulation, self-confidence, hard work, empathy for contributing to the safety and benefit of others, personal health and well-being, and career and life skills, need to be directly taught, practiced, reinforced, and assessed from preschool through high school and beyond.

During the past few months, district leaders, administrators, and faculty representatives from each of the district's nine schools, participated in courses, conferences, book groups, and professional development pathways to further explore ways in which social and emotional learning is currently being taught and practiced in our schools. The goal of this initial work is to better understand the

ways in which adults build relationships with students and collaborate with one another in order to provide a well-rounded education that will enhance students' healthy growth as lifelong learners, ethical and democratic citizens, and increasingly competent, self-sufficient individuals who are optimistic about the future and prepared to succeed in an ever-changing world. Over 50 educators attended a conference in Westborough in October entitled, *Social-Emotional Learning: A Teaching, Learning, and Leadership Opportunity*. During the conference, we collaborated with one another and members of neighboring districts to learn more about how social and emotional learning is happening in our schools and districts. Members of the Shrewsbury group met following the conference to identify gaps in teacher practice and student experience, in order to make informed decisions about next steps, as we work to close those gaps.

National organizations including the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL-<https://www.casel.org/>) advance and promote integrated Pre-K to 12 academic, social, and emotional learning for all students. CASEL's mission is to make social and emotional learning an integral part of education from preschool through high school. A recent CASEL report entitled, *Ready to Lead, A National Principal Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Prepare Children and Transform Schools* (http://www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ReadyToLead_FINAL.pdf), illustrates the connections between students' academic achievement and their cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being, claiming that students equipped with SEL skills will become better students now and better adults in the future. The report explains, "In today's environment of increasingly demanding jobs and the fraying of American communities, nothing could be more important than to foster, teach, and promote the five competencies...they are the attitudes and skills that provide the glue of a functioning society, robust economy, and vibrant democracy." It is important to note that the report highlights survey data that further explains, "Principals also believe SEL can have a major benefit on students' academic achievement in coursework (97 percent) and preparing students to get to and through college (97 percent)." However, principals and leaders in the field are seeking additional evidence of the impact of SEL on academic achievement in order to strengthen the case for action. Other organizations, including Boston-based, non-profit, Transforming Education, stress the importance of teaching these skills and practices throughout the school day and during after-school clubs and activities.

Transforming Education (<https://www.transformingeducation.org/>) partners with school systems, educational organizations, and policymakers, to provide support and guidance on issues related to Mindsets, Essential Skills, and Habits (MESH) research, assessment, and practice. Transforming Education asserts that assessing students' MESH competencies provides educators with valuable information that helps them understand students' strengths and identify the areas in which students need additional support. Like CASEL, Transforming Education promotes the belief that social and emotional learning is an important dimension of schooling and student learning.

Factors include the cultivation of important traits such as the ability to set and reach goals, the capacity to maintain positive relationships and the foresight to make responsive decisions are integral to the acquisition of skills and knowledge related to academic achievement. Transforming Education reports, “Rigorous longitudinal research has demonstrated that specific competencies—such as self-management, social competence, and growth mindset—have significant impacts on students’ academic performance, career success, and lifelong well-being.” Other organizations including the Rennie Center (<http://www.renniecenter.org/>), and The Aspen Institute (<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/>), concur with these findings and are committed to sharing research, resources, and opportunities with others.

In order to provide an inclusive environment for all students, schools need to identify ways to cultivate strong and trusting connections between students and members of the adult community, and ensure that these connections are sustained over time. When students (and adults) feel connected to others, they feel a sense of belonging and responsibility to the community of which they are a part. Research shows that students experience this sense of belonging when they build trusting relationships with others. Providing the curriculum, professional development, time, support and other resources needed for adults in the school community (educators, parents, and community members) is critical. Working in collaboration with the broader community to promote healthy student development is imperative, as community engagement is essential to bringing about meaningful change and is key to efforts that ensure equity for all students. In order for students to become knowledgeable, responsible, and caring citizens, they need opportunities to develop the social and emotional skills proven to allow them to thrive academically and prepare for challenges beyond school – all of which requires knowledge, understanding, and practice.

Link to Cultivating Connections on Shrewsbury Media Connection:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1fjWjgPcdBQOT-WLM9yDzw9G-TPLX1w68>

From the Rennie Center-Social and Emotional Learning: Opportunities for Massachusetts, Lessons for the Nation. (The full report can be found at renniecenter.org/research)

SEL-focused districts and states identify *four major challenges and lessons learned*:

1. Prioritizing SEL
 - Leaders must actively prioritize SEL.
 - Everyone must contribute to the SEL effort.
 - SEL must be tailored to the local context.
2. Operationalizing SEL

- Securing funds is challenging without mandated funding sources.
- Human capital must be allocated to ensure that SEL is “owned” explicitly and that specific people focus on its implementation.
- Administrators and teachers must build capacity to be able to implement SEL with fidelity and ensure sustainability.

3. Integrating SEL into existing work

- SEL isn’t on the plate; it is the plate.
- SEL shouldn’t be an added burden or short-term policy.
- SEL can be part of the larger solution to many challenges.
- SEL works best when it is aligned with other strategies in the district.

4. Monitoring SEL progress in order to evaluate and improve practice.

- Adding assessments can create burden.
- Some level of accountability is necessary for success.

Additional Recommended Resources:

- The future of education in 5 charts. SEL is part of it. (World Economic Forum) [More](#)
- Video: How school leaders can attend to the emotional side of change. (KQED) [More](#)

21st Century Learning: *NEW* Rs for Schools

Amy Clouter, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment

Rigor

There is clear consensus among educators and researchers alike that in order to be ready for college and career, our graduates should have a solid grounding in new competencies. Commonly called “the 4Cs”, the new emphasis on critical thinking, collaboration, communication and creativity is driving education reform across the country. Here in Massachusetts, changes in state assessment practices call for a reexamination of how we group children as well as how we measure student growth. Forward thinking school systems are aligning their curriculum units to state standards and embracing performance-based assessment. Simply stated, today’s students will be asked to recall what they know and tasked with showing how they can apply their skills to solve problems. The Massachusetts guide to the 2016 frameworks is clear: “Rigor in teaching and learning is achieved by relating conceptual understanding of core ideas (content), practices (skills), and application of those to the natural and designed world. Such rigor is how students will be

able to apply or transfer their school learning to civic, college, and career contexts. State standards are explicitly designed to relate these three aspects in learning outcomes; curriculum and instruction should do so as well." (2016 *Massachusetts Science and Technology/Engineering Curriculum Framework*, p.4) Our district can better prepare our graduates for rigor by shifting instruction. Today's teacher must pique student interest with relevant learning issues, enable increased access to content knowledge, and couple classroom assignments with learning tasks that ask students to evaluate information, wrestle with relevant, "real world" situations and work together to solve complex problems. (Wise and McTighe, 2017) Some of these problems will be found outside the classroom and perhaps even outside the school community.

In Shrewsbury, the adoption of the *Math in Focus* curriculum resulted in extensive work with new state standards and mathematical practices district wide. Its inductive approach to problem solving helps students develop models as representation of understanding (Ban Har, 2014) At the same time, many teachers across the district learned about and applied elements of project based learning (PBL) in their classrooms. As part of our strategic priorities members of Shrewsbury's Innovation Team created a blog and resource bank of PBL units and work products, and there are several "bright spots" where students and teachers are grappling with these elements. A continued emphasis on the 4 C's and on PBL is recommended so that we can outline a more consistent approach.

Given the significance of the shift in practice, meaningful implementation of new units will take time. What resources will be needed to successfully integrate 4Cs teaching and project based learning? Ms. Banios' report from last spring suggests that we should focus first on building capacity. She states, "The district is building strong supports for teachers as they explore creating deeper learning experiences for their students. This program relies heavily on teacher leadership." In order to increase rigor and access meaningful project based learning opportunities, educators need model units of study, collaboration time and continued coaching to support their efforts. Yet in our district there are few teacher leaders to do the work of aligning and integrating existing curriculum. Given the importance of peer models to adopting "best practices", I respectfully suggest we grow our teacher leader ranks and adjust our curriculum review process to facilitate a more efficient means of acclimating students and staff alike to the higher expectations our graduates will face in the future, and not just in Math and Science.

A new structure for curriculum review will help educators to adjust their practice to reflect new considerations about what future students should know and be able to do. It's just as important that we reexamine how students learn, and how we can sustain student investment in learning in and out of school. (Spencer, 2017) One way to motivate children to serve is to foster community connections. For example, students that frequent the library may someday access hubs there to

transform community service to service learning. No matter the approach we must carefully consider the strengths and needs of individual students, balancing learning supports with inclusive practices. To do this well it's important that we reexamine the way we monitor student progress.

In the last five years our teacher teams have implemented the use of common assessments to gauge progress towards proficiency in several key content areas. At the same time, educators tell us that too often we are collecting information as an exercise in itself. Another task teacher leaders might tackle is analyzing district data practices and making recommendations for improvements in the way teams use information to inform practice. Similarly, we need to reexamine our homework policies to ensure that the work students are assigned is aligned to curriculum goals, meaningful to students and conducive to developing healthy study habits.

Relationships

For the past five years the district has purposefully used the phrase 'empowering learners' to speak to the hope we hold for students and staff alike. To that end, in the last strategic plan the district adopted a new model of professional development that was deliberately structured to infuse professional development offerings with the qualities of learning we aspire to provide students, namely inquiry, autonomy, choice, reflection and revision. The response from educators across levels has been overwhelmingly positive, in part because staff have been able to network with other educators to support change efforts beyond their home schools. Further, as part of the evaluation process our professional staff use technology as a tool for self-assessment, reflection and growth. Given the needs of tomorrow's graduates, we should consider a similar model for our students.

Students in Shrewsbury are well positioned to pivot from learning about what the iPads can offer to using their devices to monitor growth and to communicate learning outcomes with an audience. Further, web-based platforms can help teachers to create student 'pathways' that offer our children choice. Providing students with the means to personalize learning will expand their opportunities while teaching them to make responsible choices. Finally given the success of our investment in technology, leveraging the use of devices to offer blended learning experiences and/or enrichment opportunities is a logical next step. (Tucker, 2017) In fact, some teacher teams within Shrewsbury have already begun using software tools to connect students across classrooms and to facilitate student access to higher level courses. Outside the district, several high schools have begun to offer integrated units of study and/or extra credentials to students that can demonstrate competencies in more than one content area. The Seal of Biliteracy in Foreign Language is one example to consider. Similarly, in our district there is interest in offering Global Studies coursework. In this way, the successful completion of one goal (increased student

achievement within a given content areas) may well fuel consideration of another, namely the integration of course content.

There is no doubt that the success of the 1:1 technology device initiative has helped grow student skills. It's also evident that youth are highly motivated to share via social media. Often the connections that result from this kind of exchange can be disruptive. How can we use technology to encourage face-to-face connections in our local community? Already some of our students have used their iPads to do good; they've created videos to encourage charitable giving and platforms to facilitate community service. (Click [this link](#) to watch a recent SHS example). As connectivity grows, our students access learning opportunities on a global scale. Learning to interpret primary sources and to evaluate conflicting information in a diverse environment is increasingly important. Interestingly, evidence also shows that future graduates will also need to know how to disconnect.

The ability students have to monitor progress using management systems like Schoology and the ease with which today's students navigate their devices has resulted in a new sense of agency. It's important that teachers capitalize on the use of the tool to extend learning beyond the confines of the classroom. It's also true that some students struggle to manage relationships, to limit their time online and/or to "unplug" altogether. As we promote the use of technology tools we should also be mindful of the impact of screen time and stress on student health.

Reflection, Revision, Resilience

Much has been written about the many ways technology tools distract us, and it's important that we teach our students how to sustain their focus on learning in the face of competing entertainment options. At the same time, anyone wearing a Fitbit or using their phone to monitor healthy habits can speak to the potential these same tools have to motivate us, especially the reluctant. In a similar way, game-based learning tools help motivate struggling students to practice while enabling individuals to see the results of their efforts.

While we are still exploring the potential of technology to elevate instruction and access audiences on a global scale, we should explore the use of the tool to foster reflection. Research suggests that regular reflection helps students to integrate new learning, to remember concepts better and to prepare for new challenges. (Di Stefano, Pisano & Bradley, 2014) In other words, the use of tools to capture progress over time can help students to develop a growth mindset and encourage students with similar challenges to work together.

Just as importantly, students must learn to revise their work, much like apprentices learn a craft. In the book Leaders of Their Own Learning Ron Berger, Leah Rugen and Libby Woodfin outline several approaches teachers can take to encourage children to produce high quality work. Models, critique and descriptive feedback can and should drive revision over time. Reflecting and revising with help from peers can also provide even our youngest students the opportunity to see growth over time and to take pride in perseverance. The clip *Austin's Butterfly* is a powerful example of this approach in action: <https://vimeo.com/38247060>

Understanding how to seek and make use of exemplars, how to respond to feedback and even how to see failure as feedback are all aspects of what educators term "assuming a growth mindset". What feedback mechanisms would be most successful for students? How we might utilize the technology at our disposal to better facilitate meaningful and timely feedback? How can we prepare student to give each other helpful feedback? These are important questions to contemplate with staff as we look ahead to new strategic priorities.

Inclusive Schools

Margaret Belsito, Director of Special Education & Pupil Personnel Services

When students with varied learning and support needs learn together, they experience better academic, social, emotional, behavioral outcomes, relationships, high school graduation rates and post-secondary success. We have learned, over the past 30 years of educational research, that the philosophy and practice of inclusive schools has varied, not only in Shrewsbury, but across Massachusetts. Shrewsbury Public Schools is now entering an exciting time to begin to orchestrate a new era of education that will enhance the outcomes for all students.

Inclusive School data indicates for both students with and without disabilities:

- Positive impact on student achievement and self-esteem (Cramer, Nevin, Slazar & Landa, 2004)
- Improved test scores on standardized assessments (Hehir, 2012)
- Decreased referrals for behavioral problems (Schwab Learning, 2003)
- Increased teacher satisfaction and reduction in feelings of job isolation (Schwab Learning, 2003)

- Better outcomes after high school in the areas of employment and independent living (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, 2006)

As stated in the DESE [Educator Effectiveness-Guidebook for Inclusive Practices](#), Massachusetts has a longstanding commitment to providing a high-quality public education to every child, regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, cultural background, sexual orientation, exposure to trauma, or disability status. There are persistent gaps in the quality of educational opportunities available to students in Massachusetts [including Shrewsbury Public Schools], however, and these gaps are a call to action. As the needs of our students become ever more diverse, the importance of fostering inclusive learning environments continues to grow.

Furthermore, a [Review of Special Education for the Commonwealth of MA by Dr. Thomas Hehir and Associates \(9/2014\)](#) found the following overarching data points for consideration:

- Finding #1: There were substantial differences in the identification, placement, and performance of low-income and non-low-income students with disabilities.
- Finding #2: Students with disabilities who had full inclusion placements appeared to outperform similar students who were not included to the same extent in general education classrooms with their non-disabled peers.
- Finding #3: Inclusive options for students with disabilities in traditional public schools were limited after the elementary school level.
- Finding #4: There were meaningful differences from district to district in special education identification, placement, and performance.

In education, the word “inclusion” carries varying definitions which can lead to some confusion for students, families, and staff. To begin to analyze “inclusion” in Shrewsbury, a selection of teachers and students were asked these questions: *What do you enjoy most about your classroom? How do you have high expectations while developing inclusive practices?* The students made statements about social interactions, small groups in the general education classroom and having many teachers. Staff spoke about collaboration, communication, planning time, and most importantly, having children stay in the classroom versus being pulled out and missing content area instruction.

It is critically important to highlight that inclusive philosophy in education must go beyond the needs of students with disabilities, in order to have a system of accessible instruction embedded with social, emotional and behavioral supports. We know, too often, inclusion is associated with

special education and the federal mandate for students with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent appropriate. Interestingly, the federal legislation regarding education for students with disabilities does not include the terms 'inclusion' or 'inclusive education', but the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act, serves as the basis for understanding and practice.

Further stated in the [Educator Effectiveness Guidebook for Inclusive Practices](#), inclusion is not necessarily a placement or a setting – it involves the implementation of systems and processes that allow all students to be educated within an educational community, the impact of which is significant. In Massachusetts, students with learning or communication disabilities who are educated, full time, in general education settings are nearly five times more likely to graduate high school in four years or fewer than are similar students in substantially separate placements.

Keeping in mind, all leaders should bear as much responsibility for student progress and success as the educators and related service providers. Inclusion is not the job of any one educator or classroom. The successful creation of inclusive schools begins at district and school levels and is made a priority for fidelity of appropriate implementation. The district's mission, vision and core values should be at the heart of this work.

Shrewsbury's efforts to establish inclusive schools are ongoing. As an example, this year, we have a team of educators at each PreK-4 building working on establishing co-teaching practices. In these classrooms, co-teaching is a partnering of at least two teachers, with different areas of expertise and experience, to provide a more comprehensive, effective instruction to all students. In this model, teachers maximize social, emotional and academic achievement for all by utilizing a myriad of instructional tools and strategies. These teams have been participating in professional development opportunities to strengthen educational practices to deliver differentiated and specialized instruction within the general education setting. In addition, our high school has developed a Transitions Program to allow students who, due to a variety of reasons, have not been able to access their education. This program allows students to re-enter the high school with the support of an adjustment counselor and education coordinator to begin to access demands and remain in their community school. These examples of our inclusive educational practices highlight how Shrewsbury is maximizing social, emotional and academic student achievement. Although this type of work is seen across the district in varying ways, in order to build and grow our work, we need to consider the following:

- Professional development with further exploring consistent co-taught practices
- Consider potential benefits of hiring educators who hold a subject/level license and a special education license

- Coaching and professional development around specific instructional tools in working with Students With Disabilities and English Language Learners
- Providing differentiation, scaffolding, support, and interventions across all grade levels with access and consideration for all learners
- Using data to monitor progress and make sure time is allotted for collaboration and communication with stakeholders
- Responsiveness to cultural differences by examining things like curriculum; achievement gaps; discipline data; family engagement; and hiring of staff

In an inclusive school system, education means that all students are full and accepted members of their school, with access to all levels of instruction, and to the community. As Senior Associate Commissioner for Accountability, Partnerships and Technical Assistance for DESE, Dr. Russell Johnston, recently stated, *as a core value, all students, and especially our most vulnerable students----inclusive of low-income students, ELL students, students of color, and student with and without disabilities----will have access to high-quality educational opportunities and will experience high academic expectations to ensure greater equity in outcomes.*

An inclusive school values and celebrates differences and similarities of ALL.

Last Words

Shrewsbury is justifiably proud of our students and staff; their achievements are numerous. Moreover, our school communities are supportive of our efforts and eager to connect learning in our schools with the development of healthy habits at home. We are fortunate that in this time of rapid change so many stakeholders across the district have helped us to shape the recommendations in this report by sharing feedback, raising concerns and surfacing priorities. Thank you.

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