

**BOE Meeting, January 17th, 2024**  
Superintendent's Remarks

**State of our Schools**

Our compact district, split between two municipalities but only 1.9 square miles and less than 9,000 residents, fosters a tight community feeling, a quality valued by those that responded to our strategic planning surveys. Our special identity comes from the Rye Neck school district itself. It is the district which makes us all Panthers.

We have strong and active community support from our various parent organizations, including the PTSA, the Booster Club, and the Alumni Association, and the newly formed Rye Neck School Foundation. Keeping those groups and our parent community at large informed about our schools requires consistent attention to our communication procedures. Mrs. Lanza and our new Technology Planning Advisory Committee have looked at results from our November survey regarding the replacement of our website and we know that push-out communications are preferred over passive information accessed through our homepage. Of course we still hold many in-person opportunities for parents to learn about our schools. For the purpose of communication, here are some fundamental things we have been doing in our schools.

Student service is obviously the driving principle behind schools. Our curricular and social responsibilities can be measured quantitatively and qualitatively and that is best done individually since students have differentiated abilities, needs, and motivations. From a parent's perspective these are the categories represented on a report card, or an assessment of work and social habits communicated through conversations with teachers or counselors. Marking period data from throughout a school year can gauge growth, while state test scores, Regents, and other summative assessments help educators adjust to better target individual student learning needs.

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The core of our work is **Academics**. To support that and measure success our elementary Data Teams meet every 6-8 weeks to look at student performance in ELA and Math, module assessments, i-Ready diagnostics, and other student work, tracking progress to inform our instruction. Routine Instructional Support Team, or IST meetings, focus on all areas of development from social-emotional and cognitive skills to literacy or science understanding. Grade teams, Special Services teams and Specialists meet regularly to collaboratively plan instruction in all subject areas, and team leaders meet weekly with the principals.

Daniel Warren teachers have recently been focused on the updated Eureka Math<sup>2</sup> curriculum and early classroom observations show increased math engagement, hands-on exploration, and discourse. At Bellows students are demonstrating growth in their reading comprehension skills through our reading assessments which include products like I-Ready and Fountas and Pinnell; our total number of students in need of Academic Intervention Services, or AIS, for both Math and ELA has decreased over the past two years; that's true for the Middle School as well.

Despite sharing a building and over a quarter of its staff with the high school, Rye Neck Middle School is not a junior high school. Rather, it maintains the qualities of a middle school, where there are grade level teams who know their students well. The MS also makes use of iReady scores to guide instruction associated with the 3-8 state tests and Data Teams and weekly IST meetings to gauge student progress and need. In addition to the motivation provided by the Honor Roll, the new Student of the Month program is beginning this month to promote a student-centered approach to the "whole child".

Our High School courses are credit-bearing, adding more gravity to attendance and grade point average. In addition to the running GPA tracking that takes place over the course of a year, the IST and Data Teams review numbers and individual student progress, recommending interventions, tutorial support, extended day or Regents review programs. We track participation in Regents and AP courses, scores, scholars programs, and college credit programs. The number of honor societies and the number of inductees in them are all up significantly and plans for a new science society are in the works.

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**Extracurricular** activities often allow more student choice, opportunities for self-directed engagement, and interaction with peers.

Noon Pursuits begin at DW this week, expanding to two cycles this year with 101 students signed up for this "lunch and learn" enrichment opportunity. The PTSA is currently funding 16 clubs at DW and another 10 at Bellows. Bellows has seen an increase in the number of optional academic enrichment opportunities afforded to students. For example, we currently have the largest number of students in grades 4 and 5 participating in both the competitive and in-school Math Olympiad at 85.

The Middle School runs about a dozen clubs, with annual changes based on attendance and new student ideas. Not long ago the middle school began gathering qualitative data from conversations with students through annual 8th grade exit interviews.

Rye Neck High School encourages participation in outside programs, such as the Heard in Rye Junior Board and the 21st Century Citizen Leadership Project. Students participate in 27 clubs and a menu of curricular contests. In addition to Ms. Folchetti and the staff hosting transition meetings with all students in grades 9-11 in the fall, Seniors exit interviews start this month so our 12th graders can give us parting advice.

Of course, our two largest extracurricular programs are the Performing Arts and Athletics. While there are music and art classes from K through 12, and theater class in the middle- and high school, 156 students at Bellows and 152 at the middle school participate in extracurricular music. Our high school musicians perform as an extracurricular unit but meet as classes during the school day, so they are usually smaller and reflect those students more likely to participate in NYSSMA competitions or music after high school.

Theater productions in the middle and high school typically attract a broad range of students, with almost 100 middle school and almost 200 in the high school shows. We measure success by the number of students participating in the program and with external validation from the Metros and NY Thespian Awards. Don't take my word for it-- come see Beauty and the Beast, February 29th through March 2nd!

It's easy to want to assess athletics by wins and losses, but we temper that with the fundamental goals of school athletic programs, such as commitment, time management, teamwork, and dealing with adversity. We measure athletics by enrollment and have a high percentage of student-athletes, currently over 60% and offer many teams for a district of our size. Yet, despite the broad focus, we are a very competitive district with most teams qualifying for postseason play, numerous All-league/section/state honorees, ConEd winners, and other seasonal superlative awards.

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It is universally recognized that there is a pervasive increase in student anxiety and related **Mental health** symptoms. Currently our students' mental health and wellness is subjectively measured through supervision by all levels of staff through direct student conversations, behavior monitoring, parent teacher conversations, IST discussions, counseling, mandated social emotional services, and student response to RULER and DBT-Steps A curriculum. Objective measures also come after students are referred for mandated services assessments. The district Social Emotional Steering Committee is working with consultants from Effective School Solutions, ESS, to refine and implement a district wide screening tool and codify a district structure for our ISTs. ESS, which has begun providing parent workshops for Rye Neck parents, has allowed for the retention in-district of multiple fragile learners and at-risk students so far this school year.

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**Staff development** is an often overlooked element of our teachers' work, yet it's critical since our teaching staff is the cornerstone of effective student service. Many of our teachers and support staff are currently in programs earning new degrees and certifications, as well as taking outside coursework to add to their skill repertoire. Rye Neck facilitates the approval of teacher credits and provision of professional development, or PD, as part of the school day and over the summer. At the district and building level, and through our Professional Development Committee, staff time is always a key challenge because the contact time between students and staff is precious. Yet, we use regular Wednesday afternoon meetings, Superintendent's Conference Days, release time during the school day, guest developers, off site workshops, and paid summer hours to provide continued opportunities to enhance teacher efficacy.

Examples of such efforts from our schools include: PD to implement the updated Eureka Math<sup>2</sup> curriculum at DW with more on the way this spring, support for the expansion of the co-teach model in K-2; springtime PD at Bellows will focus on changes to the NYS Science exam and classroom instruction, while the school is also engaging in a book study of Stephen Covey's "The 7 Habits of Happy Kids". On this campus MS English teachers are sharing best practices for Cornell Note Taking in February to improve study skills and HS world language teachers attend consortium meetings on their state tests.

Around the district, staff will expand on our August work by participating in DEI PD around "The Power of Words" and ways to elevate student voice; Steve Goldberg from the Holocaust and Human Rights Center will be addressing district teachers next Wednesday; our English as a New Language consultant has been working her way through our schools focusing on strategies that promote language acquisition and content learning for our ENL students; and ESS has been providing a Trauma Attuned coaching model for teachers to augment our abilities to recognize and address students in crisis.

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Since our district architect presented the Building Condition Survey in September, we have been completing and planning improvements for our **Buildings and Grounds**. Most recently our Facilities Planning Advisory Team has examined the BCS, building by building, in order to make recommendations to the board. Much of the early items to be recommended are basic, necessary infrastructure improvements, but we also discussed topics such as field renovation, air conditioning, and security.

School safety interests will also be on our minds entering the second half of the year. Since this year began we have completed improvements to the DW fire alarm system, added new speakers and strobes to the Bellows annex, deployed our brand new high-capability walkie talkies, made progress through the state glacial approval system

for our new high school/middle school parking lot, installed card-swipe automatic locking hardware on elementary classroom doors, and we learned that our long-awaited new security doors for the elementary schools may be installed next week.

Procedural and training improvements include ID use by middle and high school students, new reunion cards in the event of an off-campus evacuation, training for our emergency response teams with Altaris, our security advisors, increased participation in lockdown drills by our local police, and the expansion to both the group of staff able to use our lockdown app and those certified to administer Narcan.

Since tech security is also important, we have initiated 2-factor authentication for clerical and administrative staff, new data privacy training for staff to commence in the second semester, the Board has initiated penetration testing for our network, and our Technology Planning Advisory Committee will explore an improved camera system.

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Our Rye Neck **Strategic Plan** is proceeding well. The original Goal Group made up of teachers, administrators, trustees, students and parents has now passed the work to three staff groups, one for each of the district goals they created. Those goals address our aspirations for professional development and how students approach problem solving, interpersonal and community connections. Those Action Plan Teams will turn their respective goals into steps that will guide us in how to make each a reality. I will have the finalized goals in my February 5th Superintendent's message, and we will keep the community updates through our website, messaging, and future board meetings.

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Finally, it's **Budget** season! There is a full calendar on our website that details each stage of the 2024-25 school year budget development. We will be using all of our communication tools to make sure everyone knows key dates in advance and we hope you will participate in this important activity that allows us to enact the student service I just described. We are very proud of our Rye Neck identity and a combination of firm roots and a progressive mindset will give us even more to be proud of.

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Segue to Seal of Civic Readiness