

Greetings,

We're almost two weeks into January and as much as we may have all proclaimed that 2025 would be a fantastic year, we're kinda off to a shaky start. Between the terrible events in New Orleans, the Cybertruck explosion at the Trump Hotel in Las Vegas, the devastating fires in California, and continual news reports of *stuff* going on in our area and City, it's already been a lot in these short ten days.

Notwithstanding the things are simply out of our control, the past week in South Country really was a great one. First, I finally got out to see our varsity basketball team in action and it was great to see the Clippers triumphant over a really competitive team in Smithtown West. Basketball games are intense! I also had the privilege of attending the majority of our civics presentations at Bellport High School today, which continues to be one of my favorite experiences. What I love most about the presentations is that our students pick topics that are bigger than themselves and advocate for the wellbeing of their peers and community. Whether it's additional food pantries, addressing dangerous driving, improving safety on Martha Avenue, or preventing teenage drug abuse - the students pick topics that really speak to the physical and emotional well being of our community. The collaborative nature of the work is awesome and the fact that students at all ability levels participate is just the icing in the cake. Big shout out to the teachers and staff that participate. It really is awesome.

More than that, yesterday we participated in a community strategic planning meeting that engaged multiple stakeholders; administrators, teachers, staff, trustees, parents, and community members in a manner that really was inspiring and reassuring to me as a superintendent. I'm not gonna front, I was a bit apprehensive about the process and really didn't know what to expect, despite the evening being structured and facilitated by Blueprint Strategic Planning, a consulting firm with a really great reputation. In my 27 years in education, I can't say I've ever participated in such a collaboration. Over 70 people participated in this process, all with the intent of helping South Country grow. While there might have been some participants who may have been frustrated by certain aspects of our district or negative experiences they may have had, everyone worked towards shared goals and provided meaningful and insightful feedback. The atmosphere was positive and validating as everyone was given an opportunity to contribute. Additionally, the process yielded lots of ideas and actionable items that we are going to work into a strategic plan that will be implemented over the next couple of years. The final plan will be published and shared with our community in the next couple of months. I have to give a shout to Dr. Kevin McGowen, Superintendent of the Brighton School District in upstate New York and one of the cofounders of Blueprint Strategic Planning. He really did a fantastic job facilitating the meeting and it's no surprise that he was named National Superintendent of the Year in 2024. It really was a great experience.

I would also be remiss if I didn't give a shout to everyone who volunteered their time to participate in last night's meeting. I especially want to thank our administrators who volunteered their time to present their *Five Minutes of Fame* and participate in an on-the-spot Q&A; in addition to the cabinet for facilitating the breakout groups. Talk about Clipper PRIDE!

So there might be a lot going on in the world that is a lot less than positive, but here in our little niche there is a lot to be proud of and I'll take it! In fact I'm gonna take it into the weekend feeling really good about being a part of this wonderful learning community.

As always, it's a real pleasure serving the South Country community as your superintendent of schools. Thank you all again for everything you do for our community.

Tony Santana

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