Greetings,

Typically the message before a much deserved break, especially Spring break, is jovial and fun. By this time, we're happy to be past the *Ides of March* and looking forward to the final stretch. For those of us that will be off - time off is always good, no matter how much you may love your work. And for those of us that will be around, it certainly is a bit more peaceful. Still, things feel different and understandably so.

We're still grappling with the reality of our financial challenges and the potential staff reductions. I want to reemphasize that the district is taking every conceivable step to minimize the reductions, but they are inevitable. We've conducted thorough, line-by-line reviews of the entire budget, scrutinizing all expenditures to identify areas for potential savings. We've worked closely with consultants to assess and restructure bus routes for greater efficiency, and we've engaged in discussions with vendors to renegotiate contracts wherever possible. In every department, we looked for ways to reduce costs without impacting instruction or student support. Despite these efforts, the rising costs in areas like transportation, special education, and health insurance have created a gap that simply cannot be closed through cuts alone. Reductions in staffing are a last resort, and we're continuing to explore every possible way to minimize their impact. Regardless, I know for many this is not totally reassuring.

Above and beyond our challenges here in South Country, I just sense that there is a general malaise in our world. I speak to so many people that seem to be going through some hardships, have experienced loss, or simply have a sense of hopelessness and it's troubling to me. On the one hand, I've lived long enough to appreciate that times come and go and as many of our elders have said, *this too shall pass*. Even if you subscribe to that belief, being in the midst of it doesn't feel good. So what can we do? I wish I knew. I actually asked Chat GPT for some suggestions and this is what it came up with:

"Acknowledge the struggle, lean into community, and seek small moments of connection and purpose. Even when the weight feels heavy, showing up for each other—through kindness, presence, and support—can remind us we're not alone. We can't always change the world, but we can uplift the corner we're in."

I thought that was pretty spot on. What really resonated with me was the *lean into community, and seek small moments of connection and purpose."* In many respects, this is what I felt when I stopped by the Julia Nofi basketball fundraiser at Bellport Middle School last Friday night. I'll confess, this is an extremely awkward time for me. I'll always be the perpetual optimist and really work hard at being positive in my leadership role. But I wonder, is being positive a little insensitive at the moment? I'm not sure. I mean it's important to validate feelings, but how can we *uplift the corner we're in* without being positive and optimistic? That said, it was fantastic to see so many staff members engaged in some friendly competition, tons of students, parents,

and community members at the game having a great time, all for a great cause. (Though some of the game play was a bit aggressive!) It was also great to stop by the High School for the College and Career Fair and see so many students engaged, staff in good spirits, being supportive and encouraging to the students, and of course our culinary students presenting an impressive spread. More than that, it was fantastic to stop by Brookhaven and engage in some parachute fun in PE class with the little ones today. There was even a dance party underneath the shoot and laughter and fun. All great stuff for our community.

Sometimes when we're going through difficult times, we lose sight of the many wonderful things that may be happening around us. We cannot lose sight of these things and more importantly, lose sight of the fact that we are resilient and have the ability to push through, especially when times are tough. All of the aforementioned experiences really reinvigorated me to do my very best, giving it my all, to navigate the challenges ahead as best as I possibly can with help and support form my team and all of you. I wish the situation was different, I really do - but we must forge ahead with the belief that ultimately, beyond the difficult decisions that will need to be made, things will settle and we will be on the other side of it. Until then, I know and appreciate how difficult the next few weeks will be.

So, getting back to Spring break, I really am hoping people will have an opportunity to decompress and relax and take their minds off everything that may be going on. Perhaps take a day or two to totally disconnect from social media and media all together and connect with each other. Play board games. Go for hikes. Just spend time with family and friends you care about. For those in our community who observe Passover, *Chag Pesach Sameach!* Or happy Passover holiday! And for those who observe Easter, I am wishing you a delightful Easter filled with hope, joy and the wonder of God's blessings. No matter what your belief, best wishes for a relaxing and joyful spring break. We need it.

Yes it's challenging, but it still is very much a true privilege serving you as your superintendent of schools.

Tony Santana
#clipper**PRIDE**