Greetings,

So as much as attending conferences can be informative, doing so two consecutive weeks can be a bit much. Conferences are both physically and mentally draining as you keep up with packed agendas and try to process all of the information being thrown at you. This past week I attended the New York State Council of School Superintendent's (NYSCOSS) conference up in Albany and yes, there was a lot. From topics like how AI can help me be more effective in my leadership role and help teachers in the classroom, to strategies for implementing cell phone policies, I left with my head somewhat spinning. Not to mention the discussions regarding all that's happening in our country and how it might affect our local school districts. This morning I participated in the Reform Educational Financing Inequities Today (REFIT) legislative breakfast and that too was a bit much in terms of the topics discussed and in terms of the stresses we are feeling as public school districts. As is the case in so many Long Island school districts, this is going to be a difficult budgetary season as many districts are finding themselves in situations that call for hard decisions to be made. We are no exception and I'll certainly keep our community posted as we continue to carefully analyze just exactly what it means for us.

Amazing how none of the aforementioned has anything to do with teaching and learning, save the bit about applications of AI in our classrooms. So I wanted to really touch upon instruction and what it means to me. *What really is the point of public education?* Sure, the easy answer is to best prepare people for college and career readiness, or more simply put, for life beyond high school. Our success should be measured on how our learners fare in their post secondary lives. Yet the focus tends to fall on state assessments and specifically, three to eight testing. Using this criteria alone, as someone who was an English Language Learner and always a few reading levels behind throughout elementary school, it can be argued that based on my scores alone, my school and conversely my teachers failed me. Yet, I caught up and eventually attended Cornell and have had a pretty good run as an educator. As much as I was fortunate to have lots of great people in my life that helped along the way, it was my public school education that propelled me forward. So I would argue that all of my schools, K-12, were effective in their purpose - providing opportunities for a kid growing up in poverty and limited English to grow, flourish, and have a pretty prosperous life, despite any adversity I've encountered throughout my journey. This, to me, is the purpose of public schools – to best prepare people of all walks of life for the pursuit and achievement of *their* American dream. I mean, can't the dream be different for each and every one of us? That is the crux of what we do, we serve *all* students.

Still, state assessments are state assessments and we really do need to focus on what we can do as a collective to see measurable improvements in our achievement. With so many great things happening in our classrooms, I feel like there is a big disconnect between who we are and what our scores indicate. There has to be a feeling of urgency that we all feel to really right the Clipper. Over the last five years, we've been recovering from the learning loss all learners experienced during the pandemic. We've had to restructure how we deliver instruction and in addition, incorporate character education and social and emotional learning as the needs of our community have dramatically changed during this time. Lots of credit goes to Beth Doyle who navigated the Clipper through these tumultuous times. Now I'm proud to have Jackie O'Hagan

take on the responsibility of continuing the momentum as we move forward. I'm excited to have her join our cabinet as the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Accountability. For over seven years she has committed herself to South Country and I know she is vested in seeing our district grow and flourish. This will be no easy task, but we are both more than optimistic - we are confident that we, and that's all of us, can make it happen because it's already begun.

Today I had the privilege of spending some time in two classrooms. When I first arrived at Ms. Rauch's class at Kreamer, the first thing a student asked was whether or not I wanted to see his math score. He was so excited about it because it had grown so much since the beginning of the school year. That set off a chain reaction with multiple kids rushing to get their chromebooks so that they could show off their respective scores. One boy confessed, *mine is not so high*, but he shared where he had started and ultimately he had quadrupled his score. I reminded the young scholars not to compare themselves to each other, but rather to themselves just to see how much they have grown throughout the school year. And that's just it, it's about growth. We should always be striving to get our highest score - always. Simply put, it was refreshing to see kids excited about their achievement.

Besides recovering from the learning loss due to the pandemic, we are also still recovering from the opt-out movement and have lost sight of the fact that assessments don't necessarily need to be a bad thing, they are an indication of where you are at in your learning. We should be encouraging our students to do their best, to show incredible growth each and every year, and to have pride in their achievement - no matter where they start. As we approach the assessment season, let's encourage our students to not only participate, but to really try their best to show us what they know. Besides instructional strategies and all of the interventions we provide, and it's a lot, I believe mindset and how we frame testing for our students plays a pivotal role on how they might perform.

It's always fantastic to visit classrooms and interact with teachers, staff, and our learners. As much as this morning's REFIT meeting may have been a bit of a downer, I left Kreamer, Frank P. Long, and the high school today feeling really great about what we do for our students. Sure, Ms. Salmon and Ms. McNaughton at Frank P. Long may have picked the silliest book for me to read, but we laughed and had a fantastic time. I even read the book twice. That coupled with witnessing our high school students and staff all present to celebrate our wrestling champions was a great way to end the day and exactly what I needed to push forward and meet the challenges ahead.

Thanks to everyone, in every building and office, for doing their part to make South Country such an amazing place and for continuing to maintain such a positive climate for our students and staff. I know I said this in last week's message, but I really do mean it. As always, it's a real privilege serving this community as your superintendent of schools.

Tony Santana

#clipper**PRIDE**