

## **BOE Meeting, March 13, 2024**

### **Superintendent's Remarks**

#### **Superintendent's Conference Day**

I wrote about what New York State calls Superintendent's Conference Days in my March monthly newsletter. These are state-sanctioned days where students are home so teachers can engage in professional development and training that would be impossible if instruction had to take place with full classrooms.

The first two hours of last Friday's Superintendent's Conference Day were spent working with our entire K-12 faculty on our Rye Neck Strategic Plan. We gave a recap of the planning process, from the initial days with our Community Group and our consultant Judith Wilson to where we are now, with staff subcommittees finishing the drafts of our Action Plans for each strategic plan goal. Working as a district group in our MS/HS Dining Hall, we reviewed the new mission statement and began to unpack and understand the goals in detail. We looked at each goal individually and asked staff to identify words that stood out to them; what they thought when reading the goal; why the goal matters; and what the goal might look like when implemented.

The staff then engaged in a "Back to the Future" exercise where they shuffled their table groups and asked "if it were five years from now and we were successful in implementing the goals...what happened; what shifted; what resources came to bear; and what did it take to make the change?" For our professional development goal, for example, 15 of our teachers, TAs, and administrators are currently enrolled in a course from the Harvard Graduate School of Education called Teaching Students to Ask Their Own Questions: Best Practices in the Question Formulation Technique. Once action plans are finalized, the next phase is to engage the entire school community, starting with our students and our principal's advisory groups. To that end, staff took time to come up with various ways of communicating and branding the exciting work we have ahead of us. Everyone left the work session energized and excited for future work.

The balance of the day was spent as a group training on the new Workplace Violence Prevention policy approved by our Board last month and back in our various school buildings for work in all content areas.

## **Antisemitism & Snapchat**

Unfortunately, we were also responding to a social media issue last Friday. As described in my letter to our school community that day, it was serious enough to begin investigating then even though there were no students at school. Antisemitic words were reportedly shared on Snapchat the night before and were potentially viewed by a hundred of our middle and high school students. Our administrators spent many hours from Friday through today investigating and speaking with both students and parents. They discovered content that included material that was broadly discriminatory, and not limited to antisemitism. Although the content was largely shared as thoughtless and misguided humor, that doesn't change the fact that it is still antisocial and unacceptable. In cases like this, our student Code of Conduct is applied once facts have been established.

Codes of conduct and school consequences are a necessary reality when you have 823 students under one roof for 7 hours a day, so enforcement of rules is one way we work to prevent and address incidents like this. Some of those rules apply to student expression, including when the means of expression is through the use of electronics, which is why our students and families are given our Acceptable Use Policy for school hardware and network access at the beginning of each year.

Of course, as a school, rules and consequences must be balanced with varieties of education. From an academic standpoint our entire social studies curriculum is aimed at broadening the relatively narrow perspective of young people who have yet to benefit from age by offering history and perspective. Social studies and English classes feature lessons that are applicable to antisemitism and discrimination against other groups.

Outside the classroom we've had student-led presentations, guest speakers, including holocaust survivors and camp liberators, and we've been following the Anti-Defamation League's No Place for Hate program for over a decade. As I noted in my letter, the education director of the Holocaust and Human Rights Center, who addressed our entire faculty in January, had already been scheduled to present "Exploring the Language and Symbols of Hate," to grades 6 through 12 next Wednesday. Also, our own Rye Neck teacher, Kathie Offner, will be sharing her parents' experience as holocaust survivors with our students in April.

We also educate our students in online etiquette during Digital Citizenship Week at the beginning of every year and warn them about the dangers of social media, not to mention the content they receive through Bellows' town halls, or the Character Ed, Library Research Tech, and DARE courses 6th graders take. Again, it was last Wednesday that all middle school and high school students heard the Youth & Education Advisor to the

Center for Humane Technology speak to them about the pitfalls of social media and how to have respectful dialogues online.

Outside of school, our parents can help by monitoring their children's social media and internet activity. Children *may* have access to *anything*. Racism, hatred, violence, and pornography is all readily available online. Most homes don't have sophisticated firewalls and filters like we do: if parents need advice, or help with navigating technology when the kids are often more tech savvy than us parents, they should reach out and contact their respective schools for age-appropriate guidance or see the parent resources on our website.

I'll close by tying this topic to our strategic plan. Our goal that speaks to the heart, our commitment to "Build transformative environments that foster empathy, compassion, and connection to the world" sounds great in this context. A positive takeaway from this incident includes evidence that some of our kids do see the value of speaking against it when it's happening and also how easy it is to report when it occurs. They usually know what's right in time to avoid wrong, but we will continue to use the combination of rules and education to improve student decision making. As we move forward, let's collectively keep these lessons in mind and appreciate the importance of our efforts to act as a community.