

HOPE 2.0

March 9, 2018

Fire, Ready, Aim!

To date, this has been the most difficult HOPE Note to compose. It comes on the heels of another school shooting and brings with it a multitude of questions about our priorities, our ambitions and our progress. In a recent board meeting, I spent what I am told was a record-breaking 90-minutes presenting the district's strategic plan. My goal was to expertly demonstrate how every district initiative was aligned with our vision, mission and core values. Discipline, reading instruction, First-Choice, financial solvency, building renovations, parent surveys and much, much more were intricately woven to create a highly complex and equally stunning tapestry of our direction as a district. I was proud of the body of work that I had amassed. However, for many in attendance it was simply information *overload*.

I asked myself why there was such a stark contrast in what I perceived and what others had experienced. The answer came in one word: perspective. I have experienced HOPE from its inception. I was intimately involved in the design and mapping of our journey. I was in the room when we developed the Leadership Model. I led the writing of the strategic plan and I facilitated the crafting of our mission and core values. Essentially, my perspective is vastly different from practically **everyone** in the district. What an incredible and humbling realization. What a blessing and a curse.

Consider this, championships are not won through the efforts of a single player and even the MVP is incapable of playing every position simultaneously. Likewise, the best superintendent is incapable of single-handedly transforming a district. My presentation brought this staggering reality to light. If I am the only hope (pun intended) for this district, then we are all in trouble. Run now!

Just as the Super Bowl cannot be won on the strength of a single player, the course of our ship will not be turned on the basis of one person's vision. Substantive change can only be accomplished if individuals (administrators, teachers, support staff, etc.) identify with and commit to a shared direction (world class) and then behave every day in a manner that does not compromise the overall mission (the success of every learner).

Now, let's talk reality for a moment. We have mass overcrowding in some of our buildings, we are cutting the budget in order to maintain our financial solvency, and we are trying to reduce the impact of disruptive behaviors on the learning environment. We are trying to increase student performance, reduce staff turnover, improve staff morale and restore community confidence in our district. We are working diligently to ensure that 90% of our students are reading on grade level by the end of the third grade and we are securing our facilities for student and staff safety. More and more of our families are struggling to cope with generational dysfunction and debilitating poverty. Mental health needs among our youngest and most vulnerable students are taxing our staff in ways that none of us would have imagined just a decade ago. Ultimately, our collective plates are full. They are overflowing, in fact. Their contents are spilling onto the floor, rolling down the stairs and out the door.

I can hear someone saying, "So enough with this HOPE stuff! Let's get on with solving the issues facing us TODAY!" And, you would be correct in expressing this frustration, because we have failed to effectively explain and, more importantly, demonstrate what HOPE truly means to our district. Very simply, HOPE means that we are committed to finding solutions for our issues in more systematic, logical and purposeful ways. HOPE means that over time, we become more proactive and less reactive. That's it.

HOPE does not mean that we ignore current and pressing issues while waiting for a better tomorrow. For example, we increased the sub wage in order to address the substitute shortage. We sought board approval to hire more kindergarten and first grade teachers to address overcrowding at Sara Lindemuth/Anna Carter. Unfortunately, the modular unit presented additional challenges. However, our actions were aimed at addressing a pressing need facing that building.

HOPE means that when we see an increase in disruptive behavior, we examine the *full context* within which those behaviors occur in order to determine why the increase exists. It means that we strategically plan in order to eliminate the contributing factors rather than treating the symptoms. It means that we recognize the need to implement more rapid, short-term solutions like bringing Laurel Life to the district or hiring bus monitors, but continue to focus on long-term and sustainable solutions like developing shared norms for behavior across the district, developing a diversion program, improving relationships with students, and providing mental health supports for students and families.

HOPE simply means that we are not willing to subscribe to a “fire, ready, aim” approach. And, the journey continues.

Enjoy your weekend,

Tamara Willis, Ph.D.
Superintendent

Piece of the Puzzle



Please join me in thanking Dr. Stephen Sexsmith and Mr. William Burns at the high school for serving as the Internal Coordinators for our Middle States Accreditation process. Additional thanks to everyone who worked tirelessly on one of the committees in preparation for our review. I am thrilled to announce that the Susquehanna Township High School has been re-accredited for another 10 years! Well done team!