



Norwalk Public Schools

Spring 2009

Building minds...one child at a time

www.norwalk.k12.ct.us

Moving forward in difficult times

By Sal Corda



Sal Corda

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We have begun the difficult and painful process of reconciling the budget for the 2009/2010 school year that the Board of Education approved to the amount that the Board of Estimate has approved. That challenge will necessitate finding reductions that total approximately \$2.1 million. In addition to the staffing reductions that we made in order to arrive at the Board of Education approved budget, our task will be to reduce our expenditures even further. Make no mistake about it, one does not find \$2.1 million by reducing allocations for supplies. We are a people intensive business, and most of our costs are in salaries and fringe benefits. It is there we have to go, to find that kind of money. At the same time, we need to continue our efforts across our entire system in order for all of our students to perform at high levels.

Knowing the public angst that comes from cutting school budgets, I thought it would be helpful to share information about the work we have been doing and create some understanding about the rationale we will use to try to sustain our improvement efforts, while addressing the difficult task of reducing our budget by \$2.1 million.

Two initiatives, the District Improvement Plan and the School Growth Plans, guide our instructional work. We use a model developed by the Connecticut State Department of Education called the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI). Essentially, it is a goal oriented, data driven model that relies on the careful examination of student performance data to set specific student performance targets. Achieving these goals is done through the collaborative work of teachers and administrators that focuses on instruction. This means that teachers regularly come together to discuss student performance data, current student work, and what both students and teachers need to do in the classroom in order to improve student performance. Administrators provide leadership by participating in these meetings, observing and supporting teachers' work, and monitoring the implementation of the school growth plan. At the District level, our work involves creating systemic strategies to strengthen curriculum, improving teacher practice by focused professional development, creating benchmark and formative assessments, and ensuring that the District Plan, as well as the School Growth Plans, are being effectively implemented. Representatives from the State Education Department assist us, and we report regularly to the Board of Education about our progress.

We have developed, and the Board of Education has approved, three goals – improving student performance in (1) literacy and (2) numeracy, and (3) enhancing family and community partnerships.

The literacy goal is to improve student performance in literacy in reading and writing for all students in grades K-12 as measured by local and State assessments.

The math goal is to improve performance in numeracy of all students in grades K-12 as measured by local and State assessments.

The Family and Community Partnership goal is to improve partnerships with parents and community stakeholders to increase the academic performance of all students.

Beyond these goals is the work that continues in all content areas. Because we are focusing on math and literacy, it does not mean that we do not continue to move forward in Science or Social Studies, or any of our other content areas. This work continues, but our emphasis is on the three goals. The details of how we are addressing these goals with respect to instructional strategies, professional development, timelines, etc. are identified in the District and School Growth plans. Continued on page 2

Moving forward in difficult times — Continued from page one

These, as well as other important information about District improvement efforts, are available on the District website. I urge you to examine these documents in order to get a comprehensive understanding of our work.

Our challenge in the upcoming school year is to determine how we are going to continue to focus on achieving our goals in the face of diminishing resources. The task of budget reconciliation is going to be guided by examining budget decisions in light of the following question: In a school district that is committed to providing high quality instruction, demanding high levels of student performance, and ensuring appropriate and significant parental and community involvement, what are the initiatives that absolutely must be supported, and where can reductions be made in ways that will least impact meeting the goals?

If we say that we are committed to providing high quality instruction, these are the things we must do: We must engage in focused discussions about student performance, and observe the work of teachers in classrooms for purposes of improving practice and properly evaluating that performance. We must ensure that, in all classes, students are engaged in rigorous academic tasks that challenge them and require high-level thinking and problem solving. Resources must be available to do and support that work.

If we say that we demand high levels of student performance, these are the things we must do: We must provide a strong and rigorous curriculum; periodically assess students through a process of test determined evidence to adjust instruction or assist students in their refining their own strategies for learning; periodically assess students to determine their level of mastery of content, and provide specific and appropriate support for students across the entire spectrum of student needs, ranging from gifted students to special needs students to students for whom English is not their first language. Resources must be available to do and support that work.

If we say that we intend to improve partnerships with parents and community stakeholders, these are the things we must do: We must acknowledge and support a focus on what the school can do to support families and capitalize on whatever means that parents have to support their child's academic achievement; identify and remove school based barriers that inhibit parental engagement, and aggressively reach out to those parts of the community that have traditionally had difficulty in connecting to the school community by enhancing our welcoming atmosphere. Resources must be available to do and support that work.

Apart from refinements that can be made in planned expenditures because of new information (for example, we can reduce estimates for copying costs because we are renegotiating existing agreements), no reductions will be made that will not have an impact, because there is no fat in our budget. The challenge will be to make those reductions with as minimal an impact as possible in light of the goals we have set.

The news to know

College Bound Seniors

For more college bound information, visit <http://www.collegeboard.com/splash/>

Correction

In the winter newsletter, Tracey's achievement in the ConnCann was incorrect. Tracey was recognized as sixth in the state for the achievement of its Hispanic students on the CMT.

Send us the news!

If you have news or would like to contribute information for the next newsletter, contact Sheri McCready, mccreadys@norwalkps.org

New student club at BMHS

A new club, has started, under the direction of Elaine Ganat, the school nurse. Ms. Ganat has begun this activity because of her commitment to BMHS students. "Studies have shown that teens who are happy and healthier, are more successful in school, and have the capacity to fully enjoy life. Winning at life is what brings the

Ponus Ridge parent donates posters

Ms. Janet Evelyn, a Ponus Ridge Middle School parent and Media Director of Rethink Group, presented the posters to Dr. Sal Corda on January 13, to coincide with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day. All nineteen schools and the Superintendent's office each have a copy of the

commemorative poster.

"I was motivated to design the poster because I was looking for a way to capture that moment in time, and show the fact that our Union has progressed from the Civil Rights Era," notes Ms. Evelyn.

Student attends conference

Loizos Karaikos, a 5th grader from Silvermine School, attended the Junior Presidential Youth Inaugural Conference. Loizos was one of 2,900 middle school students participating in the Junior Presidential Youth Inaugural Conference from January 16-21. The students, who came from all over the country, were chosen to participate in the program because of their academic achievements, leadership skills, and school involvement.

NPS Congratulates:

Student wins volunteer service award

Druha Karaunakaran, a Brien McMahon High School student, was recognized for volunteer service. Druha has been honored for is exemplary volunteer service with a President's Volunteer Service Award. The award, which recognizes Americans of all ages who have volunteered significant amounts of their time to serve their communities and their country, was presented by the Prudential Spirit of Community Awards program on behalf of the President's Council on Service and Civic participation.

The Norwalk/McMahon boys swim team has been recognized by the National Interscholastic Swim Coaches Association with a Scholar Team Award for the 2008-09 season. The members combined to earn a GPA of 3.241 to earn the 'Bronze Level' status.



Congratulations !

*** *The Spot Light Corner* ***

Brien McMahon

Brien McMahon High School senior, Charlotte Sawyer, received the high honor of being selected as one of the two Connecticut high school students selected as delegates to the 47th Annual U.S. Senate Youth Program held from March 7-14, 2009 in Washington DC. Ms. Sawyer received a \$5,000 scholarship award presented by Senators Dodd and Lieberman on March 11, at a reception ceremony in Washington, DC. The United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) is an intensive week-long educational experience and scholarship sponsored by the United States Senate for outstanding high school students who are interested in pursuing careers in public service.

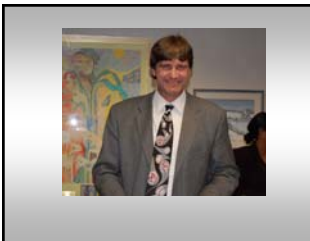


Lisa Kaplan
Tracey Elementary School

schools, workplaces and communities. The SENG Honor Roll provides a special opportunity to give credit to educators of all levels who demonstrate commitment to helping a gifted child or young adult. These special people are pivotal in the lives of gifted individuals. Educators nominated to The SENG Honor Roll receive a letter of honor, a listing on the national SENG website and a listing in the annual SENG Conference Program Book.

Staff recognized

Mr. Bob McCain, principal of Nathan Hale Middle School, and Ms. Lisa Kaplan, teacher at Tracey Elementary School, have been nominated to the SENG (Supporting Emo-



Bob McCain
Nathan Hale Middle School

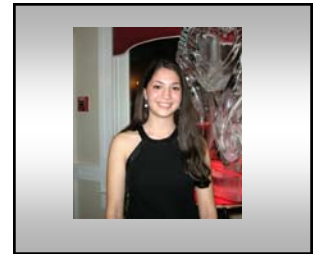
tional Needs of the Gifted) Honor Roll, a prestigious national award by SENG. The SENG Honor Roll provides national and local recognition to educators and schools that have demonstrated a commitment to serving the needs of a gifted child. Since 1981, SENG has been dedicated to fostering environments in which gifted adults and children, in all their diversity, understand and accept themselves and are understood, valued, nurtured, and supported by their families,



Student Art

Student artwork will be on display at an exhibit at the New Canaan Library. The library will be hosting The 2009 International children's Art Exhibit, with a piece of artwork selected from participating schools. Kendall Elementary student, Aaliyah Celestin and Roton Middle School student, Akshat Misra, will display artwork in the exhibit. The exhibit is the culminating activity of this year's *Art Link* program sponsored by *Creative Connections*. The program allows students to exchange art with their peers around the world. The seventh grade artistically talented class at Roton exchanged art work

with students in India. It is expected that the students' art work will be on display among art work from students in 30 different countries around the world. The exhibit will be on display from May 15th through June 15th.



Despina Sidiropoulos

Odyssey of the Mind

Eleven teams competed in the state Odyssey of the Mind Competition in **Bethel on March 28th**. The Brien McMahon team won a Gold Medal; The BMHS/Roton team combo won a Gold Medal. The Rowayton School was recognized for outstanding OMER (Odyssey of the Mind mascot—a raccoon) award for outstanding sportsmanship and exemplary behavior. Odyssey of the Mind is a highly competitive academic international competition that stresses creativity, divergent thinking skills and teamwork in students. Teams of seven students have worked together for over five months to solve a long-term problem, which is presented to judges. Teams must think of the ideas and create the solutions themselves with no outside assistance from coaches or parents. On competition day, teams are also judged on their ability to solve an unknown problem spontaneously. One problem, Earth Trek, was co-sponsored by NASA this year. This is the first year that Brookside Elementary was in the competition.

Honor Society, whose chapter name is in memory of Kevin.

Applicants submitted a preliminary application in October.

Academically, Despina was ranked seventh in her class, with a 3.9 grade point average as of the end of junior year and is a member of the Kevin M. Eidt Chapter of the National Honor Society. This year Despina's academic load includes advance placement courses in, English, Spanish, and Psychology and an Honors Physics course. She has attained a 4.5 grade point average through the first half of senior year. Despina is co-President of the Spanish Club, a member of the year book staff and a Peer Academic Leader. She is a four year member of the lacrosse team and three year member of the field hockey team. In the community Despina has volunteered for the Norwalk Seaport Association, Stepping Stones Museum for Children, and has participated in the Darien Book Aid project and the Whittingham Cancer Center walk-a-thon. Despina has been accepted at Bentley, Boston College, Connecticut, Fairfield, Fordham, Northeastern, Providence, and St. John's. She is awaiting decision from Columbia, Dartmouth, and Villanova.

Norwalk High School

On Saturday, April 4th, Despina Sidiropoulos was declared the winner of the Kevin M. Eidt Memorial Scholarship at its tenth annual benefit dinner dance at The Shore and Country Club in Norwalk. Despina was selected from a pool of applicants in the Norwalk High School

Quotable:

"If you see a snake, just kill it. Don't appoint a committee on snakes."

— H. Ross Perot

Lessons Learned: Conversations with gifted minority youth in Norwalk, CT

By Joan Glass, K-12 Instructional Specialist Academically Talented Programs, Norwalk

The Norwalk public schools serve 11,000 students who represent a variety of religions, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Amongst these students are several hundred children in grades 3-8 who participate in the Academically Talented program, a program offered to students who meet a specific set of criteria including high scores on the Structure of the Intellect test, Connecticut Mastery Tests, and in some cases, the Slosson test. Teacher ratings and writing samples are additionally reviewed for identification purposes. Approximately 60% of our A/T student population is Caucasian, 20% is Hispanic, 10% is African American, and 7% is Asian American.

In grades 3-5 students take part in an enrichment program that includes thematic units such as architecture, law and mock trial, folktales, and inventions. In grades 6-8 students have "A/T" class daily and the curriculum is broken down into four academic components: math, language arts, social studies, and science. Within each academic area, students explore interdisciplinary themes such as "renaissance thinking," "empathy," "navigation," and "logic and patterns." Subject area teachers rotate to provide their area of expertise to students at each of our four middle schools.

Urban gifted programs should be highlighted, as we continue to face an academic achievement gap. Our many gifted minority students deserve recognition and celebration. By honoring their accomplishments I also recognize the support that they have received from their families, their school leaders, and their teachers. In the winter of 2009 I interviewed several gifted minority 8th graders. I asked them six questions: What was the most important and interesting thing that you learned in your A/T classes? What book, poem, or short story read in A/T class made an impact on your life? What do you want to be when you grow up and how did A/T influence that dream? What do you like most about being in the A/T program? What advice do you have for brand new 6th grade A/T students?

Joan Glass has been nominated to hold a Board of Directors position for the national organization Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) beginning January, 2010. Joan was additionally nominated to hold a formal seat on the Board of Directors for the Connecticut Association for the Gifted beginning September, 2009

As I conducted the interviews, I found common themes running through their responses. I learned that these high achieving, hard working, minority students are profoundly self aware and recognize the power of their actions (and inactions). They all described feeling as though they were empowered to make positive changes in their own lives and quoted poems such as "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost as having inspired them to think carefully about their paths in life. Taylor Stokes (Roton Middle School) explained that reading and memorizing that poem made her realize "how one decision can affect your life." She now "considers taking different paths" and "thinks carefully about [her] decisions." Andre Rodriguez (Roton Middle School), described his "auntie" as having inspired him to love learning, set goals, and remain focused on academics. His aunt was one of very few people in his family to go to college.

What was my most important lesson in interviewing these wonderful young people? Their answers made clear to me that although interesting content was absolutely crucial for their meaningful experiences, *meaning* emerged for them only as far as they connected that content with a message. The messages that would become clear to them depended upon their own unique experiences with their communities, teachers, families, friends, and selves. Find out who you are. Understand and appreciate the people around you. Work hard, focus on the positive, and don't spend time on unimportant matters. Make connections between people, ideas, events, and problems. Be of good will and of strong character. Inspire others and allow yourself to be inspired. Taylor Stokes eloquently summed up what I hope that our students glean from our program when at the end of my last interview, she softly said, "A/T makes us think about life lessons. Genetics, empathy...: it is all life through art really. All of it is connected."

You may reach the author at glassj@norwalkps.org

End of year

Elementary/Middle Schools
June 23 and 24, 2—hour early dismissal

June 25

Middle schools, 8:15-2:15
Early elementary, 8:45—12:45
Late elementary, 9:20—1:20
High Schools, June 19 —June 24, 2—hour early dismissal
June 25, 11:40 early dismissal

Graduation/Promotion dates

Middle School promotion
Tuesday, June 23, 6 pm

High School graduation

Briggs, Monday, June 22, 6 pm
Brien McMahon, Wednesday, June 26, 6 pm
Norwalk High, Thursday, June 25, 6 pm

Future Board Meetings

June 2, 2009
June 6, 2009
July 7, 2009

Note: all Board meeting minutes can be found on the NPS website. The Board meets the 1st and 3rd Tuesday of the month at 7:45 pm in room A-300