



# Shrewsbury Public Schools

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Superintendent

January 8, 2020

To: School Committee  
From: Joe Sawyer  
Re: State of the District

Continuing the process I have followed since 2013, I am providing you with my annual perspective regarding the state of the Shrewsbury Public Schools.

The intent of this report is to provide my analysis of our school district's position relative to progress toward our strategic priorities in the context of the conditions within which we operate. As we end one decade and begin another, there is certainly much in which we can take pride, while at the same time there are concerns and questions that will need to be addressed.

## **Our schools provide an excellent education to our students and great value to our community**

By traditional measures, such as [state MCAS testing results](#), [high school AP & SAT results](#), or [access to higher education](#), the Shrewsbury Public Schools excel. Our [results remain very strong](#) and are comparable to similarly strong peer districts within Massachusetts, which as a state has consistently been at or near the best in the nation on the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) and [on other measures of quality of public education](#).

Our students also excel in a variety of co-curricular endeavors, with the SHS Speech & Debate team winning another state championship for the second time in four years; the SHS musical earning the region's "best overall production" for the third time in four years; multiple musical ensembles and individual musicians earning festival medals and district and state recognition; several individual students honored in local and regional visual arts competitions; state championships in both science fair and Science Olympiad competitions; the SHS math team winning the league title; two state

championships in the inaugural seasons of “E-sports”; 90% of SHS athletic teams earning playoffs with multiple league and district championships and a state championship in rowing; and outstanding performances and experiences in a variety of other activities, from robotics, to model United Nations, to myriad clubs. This past year saw an expansion of opportunities for athletics at the middle school level, with the addition of interscholastic field hockey, softball, baseball, and track at Oak Middle School, and a continued expansion of after school and school vacation activities at the elementary and middle levels.

In addition to all these, the honor of which I am most proud during this past year is [Special Olympics’ designation of SHS as a “National Banner Unified Champion School.”](#) a recognition that only 179 high schools have received nationally for creating opportunities for inclusion of all students, especially those with intellectual disabilities, in sports, leadership, and whole-school engagement. This achievement signals that we are making wonderful progress toward our aspiration of providing all students with opportunities to thrive, regardless of their differences.

The success of our schools creates many benefits beyond improving the lives of our students and their families. Our community is a better place as a result, not only because our students continue to provide well over 10,000 hours of community service annually, but because strong schools that engage our youth make for a much better quality of life in our community and make our community a desirable place to live, do business, and raise a family. The return on investment for taxpayers is phenomenal, as our school district’s expenditures on public education (including funds spent by the School Department and other town departments on cleaning, maintenance, health insurance, etc.) [continue to place our community in the bottom 11% of all Massachusetts school districts](#) with regard to per pupil expenditures. When [broken down by individual category](#), our expenditures are significantly lower than the state average as well. However, as discussed later in this memorandum, this level of investment poses significant challenges to our continued success. There is no question that the quality of our schools results in the [continued strength of home values](#) within our Shrewsbury community.

The past year has demonstrated the confidence our community has in our school district through investments that community partners have been willing to make in our improvement. This past year, the improvements to the Shrewsbury High School athletic facilities were completed, thanks to raising \$1.8 million in sponsorships and gifts from local businesses and donors, including \$750,000 from Central One Federal Credit Union and \$250,000 from the family of the late David J. Adams. Additionally,

Shrewsbury Federal Credit Union committed to investing \$400,000 over five years to fund strategic innovations in real-world learning through a new program dubbed *Colonial Connections*. This includes funding of our new Assistant Superintendent for Community Partnerships & Well-Being, a role that has already begun further developing our district's ties with the local business community and Shrewsbury alumni, while also piloting a new, grant-funded mindfulness program to the district and facilitating a partnership with a local cancer prevention charity, the 15-40 Connection. This approach is significantly strengthening our district's commitment to the phrase in its mission: "in partnership with the community..."

The successes of our school district would not be possible without the ongoing strong leadership and stewardship of the School Committee; the constant support from students' families; the skill and dedication of our educators and support staff; the effective leadership of our administrative team; and collaborative support from Shrewsbury's municipal boards, administration, and town departments. Most importantly, our students continually work to rise to the high expectations held for them and demonstrate respect and responsibility as they strive for success. For all of this, I am grateful.

The remainder of this report will provide reflections on our district's standing relative to the [strategic priorities](#) that the School Committee has set forth to advance its [vision](#) of a *Portrait of a Shrewsbury Graduate*. Below, I attempt to outline how we should focus our energy across our four strategic priorities.

### **Learning environments where everyone's success matters**

***We are making strides toward becoming a district where "all means all" when it comes to ensuring that all students are getting what they need to succeed; it will take additional time and effort to get there.***

Our practices to be more inclusive of students with disabilities in typical classroom settings continue to evolve, as we work to match our approach to research that demonstrates that all students are served better when instruction is differentiated effectively in a heterogeneous setting (such as in a co-teaching model). Programs such as the Unified Club and Unified Athletics are helping to promote this shift in the culture of our schools, but it must happen with the day-to-day work in our classrooms in order for our district to become truly inclusive of all of our students. I am confident that the more students feel that they are unconditionally accepted and belong in our schools for who they are, the more effectively they will learn; when combined with

skillful implementation of instructional strategies, we will succeed in helping our at-risk students achieve at higher levels.

Our commitment to honoring diversity must be backed by action, and the upcoming equity audit is one way in which we will determine where we have strengths and needs relative to ensuring that we understand and respond to our students and families who come from different cultural backgrounds. This audit will guide future plans for professional development on this topic.

We are piloting ways in which we can measure our successes and challenges related to inclusive practices, since measures such as the Department of Elementary & Secondary Education's (DESE) [accountability tool](#) show gaps between different "subgroups" of students relative to various measures of achievement. What I stated in this report last year remains true: If we believe that "all means all" when it comes to our students, we must invest time, energy, and resources to ensure that every single student's needs are being met in ways that promote their academic, social, and emotional growth, and to do this in the most inclusive manner possible.

### **Enhanced well-being of all**

***We have taken steps toward addressing stress and other social, emotional, and behavioral health issues, but we have much more to do.***

During the past year, we have responded to feedback from students, families, and staff that coping with stress and improving social, emotional, and behavioral health are key needs for our schools. I am pleased that we have been able to add important resources to help address this area of responsibility, including the addition of three adjustment counselors at the elementary level (for the first time), the addition of 1.6 additional adjustment counselors at Sherwood (including the grant-funded addition of a "transitions" program, modeled after the successful program we have at SHS), and an additional adjustment counselor at SHS. As mentioned earlier, mindfulness programming for students, staff, and parents is being offered, primarily at SHS, through a no-cost pilot partnership with the Mindfulness Director Institute. The School Wellness Advisory Committee is almost done with creating an online resource for students, families, and staff that addresses several wellness topics, including key youth health challenges such as vaping and marijuana use. A new grant-funded partnership with Sandy Hook Promise through the Massachusetts Attorney General's office will address social isolation, suicide prevention, and school violence threat identification. We are awaiting data from the regional youth health survey given this past fall to see how it compares to prior data, and while we can't isolate variables, my hope is that we

will see some progress regarding student mental, social, and emotional health indicators. Anecdotally, there are still a small yet significant number of students who experience major challenges with behavioral and emotional health, and we are working to provide ongoing professional development to staff regarding identifying, preventing, and addressing student needs in this domain.

Overarching work in this area has included various approaches to strengthening school and classroom culture and climate with a focus on kindness and respect, while seeking ways to implement best practices in social emotional learning, or SEL. As you know from [this recent report](#), we are making solid progress in adopting various approaches to SEL so that this work is intentional, purposeful, aligned with best practices, and guaranteed to all students regardless of what school or classrooms they are in.

This work is all the more important given the remote, but real, threat of violence occurring in our schools. While we continue to take steps to make our schools more secure and better able to respond to emergencies, the most important work of preventing school violence is ensuring that we are addressing our students' mental, social, and emotional health needs.

### **Connected learning for a complex world**

***We have increased opportunities for students to participate in project-based and other authentic, connected learning experiences that help develop the skills they will need to be successful citizens, and we are making plans to do more.***

In addition to the nascent work of the *Colonial Connections* project (mentioned earlier) to provide learning opportunities outside of the walls of our schools in connection with businesses and other organizations, the district is also adjusting curriculum to match new state expectations and standards for both more [hands-on and inquiry-based science](#) learning and [project-based approaches to learning civics](#). Students doing research and taking action on topics that are important to them have been implemented in various classes across grade levels, such as those featured in the [front page article of this issue of the Shrewsbury School Journal](#). Our students are getting opportunities to learn new skills such as coding, both at the elementary level using small robots in our media centers and through a new computer science offering at the high school level, as well as electives such as cybersecurity and biomedical science at SHS (using grant funding for materials). Our middle schools continue to utilize available technology to connect student learning to the outside world in innovative

ways that provide outlets for students' voices through publishing websites, podcasts, and videos, and the re-imagined Design Lab at Oak Middle School is providing students with highly authentic opportunities to practice design thinking to solve real-world problems solicited within the school community. The key is to grow these practices so that all students have access to authentic learning experiences across the grade spans.

### **Space and resources to support effective learning**

***It is critical for our district to have the space and resources necessary to achieve what the community expects of us.***

The most concrete (pun intended) example of where our district is benefiting from our community's investment in space is the [construction of the new Beal School](#), which is on schedule and trending under budget. When the new building opens in August of 2021, it will provide much-needed space to relieve overcrowding in our elementary schools and provide equity of instructional spaces across what will then be five kindergarten through grade four schools.

Our middle schools and high school also remain above design capacity regarding student enrollment. Sherwood Middle School is designed for 900 students and has almost 1,000 students attending, and Oak Middle School is also designed for 900 students and has about 990 students. The high school is particularly affected by overcrowding, with approximately 1,900 students in a building with a design capacity of 1,475 and a core facilities capacity of 1,700. The enrollment at SHS has increased by over 200 students in the past five years, and given the overcrowding virtually every room is utilized every period of the day (99% room utilization), creating issues where teachers often need to change rooms for different instructional periods and limiting any potential additions to the instructional program. As one would imagine, hallways are extremely crowded during passing periods and there are overflow crowds at lunches. While enrollment is projected to remain fairly stable in the 1,800 range over the coming five years, the school facility study that is planned for the year ahead will be important to determine how these crowding issues might be best mitigated.<sup>1</sup>

With regard to resources, this category is where our district's greatest challenges will be in the year ahead. The structural realities of the public education funding model we are subject to, combined with the facts that we are still increasing our enrollment

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that this paragraph was unintentionally omitted from the version in the materials for the School Committee meeting of January 8, 2020

slightly each year while mandated costs, particularly those associated with special education, are increasing, will require a significant investment to maintain our current levels of programming and staffing. While we have made modest strides in increasing our capacity in some key areas (such as counseling services), we still need to address areas where our capacity is lagging behind what is necessary for a district our size, both for our educational program and for our operations. I will provide more specific information on our budget projections later this month, but it is important to note that our district will not benefit very much from the large infusion of state spending into an updated school finance formula, as our community is perceived by the formula to not have significant need of new state funding based on our relative property and income wealth. As we look ahead, we must not only look at our needs to maintain the important resources we already have in place, but we also know it will take significant additional resources to scale up our elementary program when the new Beal School opens in 2021. We have been working with the Town Manager on looking ahead at our budget needs, and I am confident that we will collaborate productively as we tackle the specifics of how to maintain the greatest level of funding possible for the School Department in the short term while looking ahead at our longer term needs. We will also continue to seek alternative funding sources, such as grants, partnerships, and philanthropic gifts, in order to provide other means of supporting our educational programming.

As I stated in my last two State of the District reports, I fear that without creating additional capacity, the ability of the district to deliver on the expectations the community holds for us will be significantly compromised. The best of goals and aspirations will not come to fruition without the means required to achieve them.

### **Conclusion**

The state of our district is very strong in many, many ways, mainly because of the people who populate it, work within it, and support it – thanks to them, there are wonderful things that happen for children in our schools every day. The Shrewsbury Public Schools have a well-deserved positive reputation for being innovative and successful in providing a meaningful education for our students. The culture is respectful, positive, and hard-working, and we are making progress toward fulfilling the vision and strategic priorities set for the district by the School Committee, which reflect the aspirations of our community and best practices in education. However, in an increasingly complex environment, there are challenges ahead, especially if resources are not able to keep up with the demands placed upon us.

As always, it is my honor and privilege to serve as the superintendent of this outstanding school district in a wonderful community. I look forward to working with the School Committee, my colleagues, municipal leaders, families, and students to help maintain and improve upon the excellence of our schools.