

Superintendent's Newsletter

CANTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

To develop students who are competent and creative thinkers, curious and confident learners, and compassionate citizens

John D' Auria, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

Alan B. Dewey
Assistant Superintendent for Student Services



Robin R. Billing
Director of Curriculum, Instruction
& Technology

Kenneth D. Leon
School Business Administrator

December 8, 2009

Grit by John D' Auria

The beginning of December often brings back a vivid memory. Four minutes of the opening game had expired. As the clock ticked down, my 17-year-old son, in a drive to the basketball hoop, stepped on an opponent's foot. The next thing I remember is that I was helping the coach carry him off the court as I watched his face express pain, fear, and sadness. I am not sure how long it took us to get to Children's Hospital because our collective sense of time had been altered. Moments that seemed to evaporate so quickly before the injury became frozen stuck during our trip to the emergency room. Hours later, my son exited the hospital with a pair of crutches, a very tender ankle, and a long recovery period.

Compared to issues of life and death, this setback in my son's sports' career was trivial. Yet, from his perspective, this was a trauma that felt excruciatingly painful. Excitement about the winter sports season had been building for him as soon as his senior year began. Many of his dreams and fantasies had coalesced around the game of basketball ever since he was a little boy. He wanted to play for his high school team, score 1000 points, and have a chance to be part of a college team. Basketball is an activity that was always enjoyable to him. The fact that he was now sidelined from his favorite game was simply hard to accept.

Dealing with disappointment is a life-long challenge. Setbacks sometimes can be anticipated, but more often they come unexpectedly. Obstacles to forward progress can occur every once in a while or in clusters. They show up in our children's lives disguised in a surprising variety of forms: a party without their name on the "guest list," notification that one did not make a sport's team, a test grade that is lower than desired, a favor denied, a phone that does not ring. How a person thinks about these disappointments is critical to regaining one's composure, momentum, and confidence. Those who analyze these setbacks, responding to the "data" these events provide, and make plans to rebound, demonstrate what is often referred to as grit.

In my quest to provide my own children with knowledge, practical skills, and values, I never quite understood how invaluable grit could be. It is an emotional vaccine that strengthens our children's resourcefulness and helps them combat disappointments, failures, and setbacks. In the past, I used to think that grit was personality based. One child may have more of it than another. I am now beginning to understand better how one can learn to reframe the effects of disappointing outcomes and convert them into steps towards a new goal. Learning how to do this in my own life has taken decades and I am still far from successful in applying these lessons consistently. Step one in the process is recognizing how important a skill, rebounding from defeat is. As we look at our children's strengths, we often list good grades, sports accomplishments, artistic performances, and community service activities. A less common lens through which to view their development is how they respond to their setbacks. Our children sense what is valuable and important based on what draws the attention of adults. By noticing their responses to failure and disappointment, we help young people understand that inner grit, like other skills, can be practiced and strengthened. Once we start to focus on this area, we begin to make room in the "trophy shelf" that holds the listing of our children's accomplishments, room for their demonstrated courage and mental toughness- too often missed or underrepresented when we think of what our children have achieved. While no one will get a real trophy or an award for his or her grit, life will no doubt reward those who demonstrate it.

School Committee Notes 11/19/09

Acknowledgements:

Stephanie Shapiro-for her skillful direction of *The Wiz*. The musicianship of the actors and actresses, the creativity of the sets, and the diverse and inclusive nature of the cast made this show an outstanding success.

John Young and Jim Farrington-for their quick and responsive approach to an alarm at the Luce, preventing the potential significant loss to the school.

Canton Co-Cooperative Bank- for their donation of two cases of hand sanitizers for use in the schools.

Terri Khouri, John Ciccotelli, the volunteers associated with the Canton Board of Health, GMS & CHS staff, and Janet Donnelly-for their orchestration of two successful in school H1N1 clinics.

Performing Arts Overview

Sarah Gardner Collmer, K-12 Director of Performing Arts presented the Committee with an overview of department initiatives. Ms. Collmer acknowledged the tremendous work of her staff in providing increased opportunities for students to develop their musical interests and skills. Ms. Collmer spoke about how the staff has been deployed this year in a more specialized way allowing each teacher to focus on fewer areas but providing more specialized instruction. Additionally, we have an emerging strings program now that starts in elementary school and will continue through all three years of middle school and eventually become part of the high school program. The Committee also had an opportunity to hear the members of the CHS chorus sing the English Madrigal, "April is in My Mistress' Face" by Thomas Morley. Students sang from their hearts with beautiful tone and expression.

Capital Budget Planning for FY'11

The Committee continued its deliberations around the FY'11 Capital Budget. The Cash Capital Budget currently describes the Superintendent's recommendations for addressing needs in building repairs, technology, instructional program improvements, furniture, and extraordinary maintenance. \$911,000 dollars of important projects were considered and debated prior to the Superintendent recommending approval for \$306,000 worth of essential cash capital items. Additionally, the Capital Budget also contains system needs that can be addressed as part of long term debt. Within the long term debt portion of the Capital Budget, the Superintendent has recommended allocations for textbooks, a new data management system, building an addition onto the JFK, and refurbishing the Hansen modulars.

Currently, repairing the high school tennis courts is not part of the Superintendent's recommendations. However, the Committee discussed a memo from Athletic Director, Danny Erickson, and Wellness Director, Peter Boucher indicating that the 20 year old courts are "dangerously close" to becoming unusable. It is also unclear at this time if another season of use will be gained. Until the winter is over, it will be hard to define the extent to which that cracks will widen and the slope of the courts will be altered. There was a lengthy discussion about how the Committee might be able to address this important need within a very tight financial scenario. Since the courts are not only utilized by members of the tennis teams but also by physical education classes and regularly by the general public, a conversation ensued about whether a private fund raising activity could be organized to generate support for this important school/town resource. Chairman Schutt suggested that Committee members do some outreach to see if this idea had any traction within the town.

The Committee will at its next meeting on December 17 decide whether:

- 1) To go forward with building an addition onto the JFK with or without reimbursement from the Massachusetts School Building Authority
- 2) To purchase or bond new elementary Language Arts texts and a new math text series for the middle school
- 3) To enter into a "performance contract" that will allow the District to extend its ability to address major capital needs such as the conversion of the Rodman Building's aging heating system from steam to hot water through the savings that will accrue from energy conservation and upgrades
- 4) To purchase a new data management system that would integrate all the separate databases containing information about students and staff. The purpose of including this item in the Capital Budget is to respond to a pressing need to make access to data by administrators and teachers more timely, user friendly, and understandable. Currently, each data stream is a separate entity. The school department is looking to integrate all these functionalities within a single system. Currently, a student's demographic information, test data, emergency information are all in distinct databases. The goal is to integrate these data streams so that teachers and administrators can have a full perspective on students, groups, and classes. Furthermore, new regulations from the DESE (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education) require substantially more data collection from the local district. This proposal will expedite the delivery and upload of information to the DESE and relieve current administrators from the data acquisition and collection processes that draw them away from their central roles and responsibilities.
- 5) To upgrade technology and improve the deployment of computers in classrooms by the purchase of a series of laptop carts in lieu of desktop computers.

The decisions noted above must not only meet budget guidelines for the upcoming year but also fit within the five year Capital Plan for the School Department.

Superintendent Search Process

The Committee discussed upcoming steps in the search for a new superintendent. Members talked about the pros and cons of having the Committee conduct the search or using an executive search agency to assist them in this endeavor. Members of the Committee who had been part of past searches mentioned some of the challenges around this process including the considerable time commitment required if the Committee runs the search and at the same time is trying to prepare and approve a budget. Additionally, because numerous school districts compete for candidates from a relatively small pool of applicants, outreach becomes an important means of both extending the pool and finding individuals who are a good match for the District's needs. After discussing these considerations, the Committee voted to select The New England School Development Council (NESDEC) a private, not-for-profit educational organization to help them conduct the search. NESDEC will work with the Committee to develop a timeline, actively recruit and screen candidates, organize focus groups, complete reference checks, as well as help the new superintendent transition to the district.