District to Engage Community in Charting Future Course

The Wallingford-Swarthmore school board is proactively addressing the prospect of maintaining an excellent educational system during difficult financial times, which the District will likely face in coming years.

School Board member Rick Sonntag said that “A large projected increase in pension contributions requires that we look critically at the most effective mission, and how to serve that mission, within the financial constraints that will apply.”

The Board’s strategic planning process has begun with the convening of an advisory team of about fifty community members from various constituencies: teachers, parents, community members, administrators, board members, students and higher education leaders. The advisory team will meet for three half-day sessions throughout the fall months. The team will work to generate a set of advisory recommendations that can inform the critical financial and program decisions the board and administration will need to make in the years to come.

To assist in this effort, a comprehensive school community satisfaction survey will be developed for administration in the fall. Penn’s Center for Educational Leadership will take the lead in organizing the survey.

Superintendent Rich Noonan sees the strategic planning initiative as a proactive effort by the schools to chart their future budgetary and educational course. “Unfortunately, we see more and more school districts overwhelmed by a need to drastically cut budgets and drop programs, without the benefit of any advanced study or community dialogue. We can do better than that.” He also believes the district has yet to fully tap into what the community can contribute to an examination of the ends and means of education today. “There are so many bright, well-educated individuals in our community who’ve had tremendous life experience - we miss a great opportunity if we don’t invite their thoughts on how the schools should adapt to the times.”

“The bottom line,” Rick Sonntag concluded, “is that we can either take control of events, or let events take control of us.” The WSSD strategic planning process is an affirmative step to involve district residents and leaders in planning the best way forward.
Meet Moodle

What's Moodle? Moodle is an interactive web-based service that allows teachers and students to communicate and share material, resources and work. Several years ago, WSSD’s Technology Vision Team set the goal of developing an internal capability for online learning and curriculum support. Last year, a team of Strath Haven High School teachers, students and administrators finished an 18-month evaluation of various options, settling on Moodle. During the 2013-14 school year, all SHHS teachers will have Moodle up and running.

Why Moodle? SHHS Principal Dr. Mary Jo Yannacone said: “Moodle is primarily meant to mimic the experience students will have at the university level, where they will typically use interactive services to review curriculum information, submit work, and contribute to online discussions and collaborations. Moodle has more versatility than other options, enabling teachers to upload video recordings of lessons, survey students, provide links to resources and research, and post assignment info, all features teachers wanted.”

Teachers will be able to link their Moodle sites to turnitin.com, which is used by many teachers as a homework submission portal, and also incorporates tools for self assessment and quality control, which Dr. Yannacone said “mimics the rigor they will face at the college level.”

Who teaches with Moodle? SHHS English teachers Miriam Drew and Tabatha Duffy were early adopters of Moodle. Drew said: “I want to have a skill set that will be meaningful as blended learning and distance learning become more prevalent. Moodle seemed like a tool that would make lesson planning and tracking student performance easier.

“It has turned out to be good both for me and my students, who are relieved to have what they need all in one place, which helps them stay organized and makes them more accountable,” Drew said. She emphasized that it’s good for students to read online resources as well as print, and other traditional paper products translate well into a virtual platform. “As I check journals and notebooks hosted on Moodle, I can see who’s getting along and who’s not. Moodle is also an easy platform for delivering reading quizzes and vocabulary lessons, which have always been a struggle to fit into curriculum.”

Drew and Duffy were peer instructors of a nine-hour Moodle introductory course at last summer’s SHHS Staff College, and have served as go-to resources for many teachers implementing Moodle. The two will extend the lessons this summer in “Moodle: Sandboxing and Best Practices.” Subject-specific Staff College courses are also developing for and from SHHS teachers: Carolyn Esposito will teach “Moodle Geared for HS Math Teachers,” and Julie Schrader and Suzanne Stadnicki will teach “Moodle for Language Teachers.”

Teachers have had access to continuing education on Moodle during fifth block sessions and trainings on in-service days, and the resource has been welcome, Schrader said. “The initial stages of setting up your Moodle can be extremely frustrating and very time-consuming. The layout is not always user-friendly. For example, to create a quiz on Moodle is not a quick task the first time around. However, once you get the hang of it, you can use it more efficiently.”

How do students Moodle? During first semester 2012-2013, Strath Haven senior Ian Everbach was among students asked to consult with a Technology Advisory Board on how the high school should move forward.
“We viewed some presentations on several platforms and we felt that Moodle could be workable. It’s more useful to have an integrated platform than to use a clumsy combination of online and printed material,” he said.

SHHS Social Studies teacher Jeffrey Kahn uses Moodle to get documents to and from his ninth grade Western Civilization students, and to engage them in short response questions. “I find that I can give much more detailed feedback when responding to student work online. I think as all the faculty move to using Moodle, students will gain familiarity with how it works and will be more used to checking it every day. That’s the biggest change I want to see - more use by students.”

Kahn, who was part of the team that designed faculty training, thinks it would be great if there was a training program for the students. “They say this is the ‘digital generation,’ but that’s not the same as every student knowing how to navigate a web system like Moodle.”

Why not Moodle? Moodle has a lot of fans at Strath Haven, and it promises to add dimension and efficiency to the experience of teachers and students at the high school. Ian Everbach did get at one concern that will resonate with anyone who has taken a laptop or iPad on vacation. “When we were considering our recommendation to the Board, we also talked about the downside: As a student, you’re always at school as long as you have a device with access to Moodle.”

After eighteen years as Principal of Wallingford Elementary School (doubling as The Kids’ Place principal for five) and forty as an educator, you might think there were times when Dr. Ellen Milgrim was counting the days ‘till retirement. In fact, Dr. Milgrim says, “I never had a retirement date or goal. When you love the thing you do and the people with whom and for whom you do it, it’s difficult to say that it’s time. But in the last few months, I just knew it was the right moment to do this, while I’m young and healthy enough to do the other things I want to do.”

Dr. Milgrim “knew from the time I was in second grade that I wanted to be a teacher,” and set about it first as a reading specialist, then as a district reading coordinator in West Chester. She moved to Upper Dublin, serving that district for eight years as an elementary principal, then working as UD’s director of curriculum for two years, during which she realized she wanted to get back to being principal. The job she took was in Wallingford, a community she “had to look up on a map” but which immediately embraced her.

“This was such a difficult decision, because I love this community so much,” Dr. Milgrim says. “What I will miss most in my retirement are the relationships with kids, parents, teachers and the community.” Among many accomplishments – managing the school’s growth, change and construction of a new building – and distinctions – the naming of WES as a Blue Ribbon School in 2004 – she is “most proud of the environment that exists at WES, ensuring that kids feel safe and loved and respected, and that families feel that same way.”

Dr. Milgrim, a longtime Philadelphian, recently married and moved into a home she and her husband built in Queen Village. From her new home office, she plans to be involved with volunteer and philanthropic work, and to follow a postponed passion: Retirement “will enable us to travel in a way I couldn’t do on a school schedule; to go to places like India for which you need a long period of time.”

Finally addressing the question WES parents have pondered: “How do you remember everyone’s names?” Dr. Milgrim says: “Well, I’ve always been good with names…and it’s my priority that I know all my kids, that they know I know them, and that I know their families.”

WES Principal Ellen Milgrim Retires

Past and present WES students, parents, neighbors and other members of the Wallingford community are invited to celebrate Dr. Milgrim with light refreshments and reminiscences at WES on the evening following the last day of school, June 14, 5 to 8 PM at the WES multi-purpose room. Those who wish to recognize her contributions with a gift may donate to the Ellen Milgrim Scholarship Fund at the Community Arts Center. Donations should be directed to CAC Executive Director Paul Downie, 414 Plush Mill Road, Wallingford, PA 19086; phone 610-566-1713.
Catherine Stambaugh, Excellent Teacher

This April, Strath Haven High School mathematics teacher Catherine Stambaugh was one of 19 teachers presented with the Delaware County Excellence in Teaching Award at the annual Partners in Literacy Celebration at Drexelbrook. “I am honored to have been chosen,” Stambaugh said. “There are so many outstanding teachers in our school district who are deserving of this award. I consider myself lucky to be able to work with such talented and dedicated colleagues.”

In her thirty-ninth year of teaching, Stambaugh has continued to expand her horizons. In addition to teaching Calculus during the spring semester at SHHS, for the past two years she has also served as a teacher on assignment, in the position of WSSD Mathematics Coordinator, full-time in the fall and part-time in the spring. “It has been a hectic but exciting time,” Stambaugh said of her work helping to manage this year’s SHMS implementation of the Math in Focus program in grades 6-8, and planning for its implementation in grades K-5 next year.

As Head of SHHS’s Math Department, Stambaugh has long had her eye on the big picture in secondary math education. “Six years ago the SHHS Math Department began exploring a revision of the high school math program. Anticipating the new state standards, we decided to move from an integrated to a subject specific approach, adopting the Center for Mathematics Education series to teach Advanced Algebra 1, Geometry, and Algebra 2.” Thus SHHS students have become familiar with the approach tested through the new statewide Keystone exams, which began this year with Algebra 1.

Cathy Stambaugh said that nearly four decades of teaching have brought her great satisfaction: “I have had the opportunity to work in five school districts in three states, with teachers and students who share my love of teaching and learning about mathematics. I am particularly proud of my former students who have also entered the teaching profession.”

Hard Work Keys Haven’s Lacrosse Seasons

Jef Hewlings, finishing up his first year as Strath Haven boys’ head lacrosse coach, said “We had our bumps in the road, with a lot of young kids and a really energetic freshman class. I want to make sure these kids have a good experience. My message is: ‘You may not know how to play when you come in, but if you give 100%, good things will happen.’”

Hewlings and his assistant coaches emphasize effort as the key to opportunity, and there has been steady movement of players between Varsity & JV. “You’ve got to earn your spot. We got better and better performances as the season went on, with a lot of young kids playing really well and hard. We’re looking forward to continuing training in the off season.”

Strath Haven’s girls’ team has benefited from veteran leadership, said coach Rachel Busza. “Last year’s seniors were freshmen under a phenomenal coach, Margie Garrity, who taught the girls what they needed to do to succeed. That knowledge was passed on, and the strength and leadership of this year’s seniors was huge and helped us become a dedicated and patient team. This group of kids is really proud and hardworking.”

As the team (recently ranked #24 in the nation) prepared for PIAA District One playoffs, Busza was optimistic. “We definitely have more speed than in 2012. Because of youth, we tend to get a little hasty, but if the girls make the right decisions on the field, we can go far. And our junior class is big, so with their leadership, our speed and a little more experience, we have a lot of potential for 2014.”
Foundation Announces Major Project Initiatives

Continuing its support of innovation and educational excellence, the Foundation for Wallingford-Swarthmore Schools will begin funding two major projects to benefit the students of WSSD. Foundation leaders conferred with the School District’s Office of Curriculum and Education to identify the needs within the district.

The first initiative will fund and improve classroom libraries in grades 3-6, ensuring that every child can choose among books appropriate for his or her reading level and interest. This helps teachers institute book clubs, reading workshops, and literature circles in classrooms. The Foundation will provide initial funding of $12,000 toward the $46,000 total cost of the Classroom Libraries Project.

The Foundation will also provide $10,000 toward the $30,000 total cost to establish a comprehensive Middle School robotics program, which will build on the success of the Strath Haven High School robotics team. Previous Foundation teacher grants funded fourth and fifth grade robotics programs, which suggested the need to establish a robust middle school robotics program. More information about the nonprofit Foundation and its work is at http://supportwssd.org/.

Score! School Board Approves Turf Field

The WSSD board approved installation of a turf surface at George L. King Field, the District’s workhorse stadium field. Site preparation will begin immediately following the last day of school, with the field expected to be ready for play by the fall sports seasons. More than $200,000 of the total project cost of $690,000 will be funded by the Team Up For Turf fundraising effort, which involved hundreds of families, businesses, teams, staff members, community recreation programs, and alumni. Team Up for Turf continues, with approximately $10,000 to go toward full funding. To make a donation, go to http://teamupforturf.org/help/donate/.

Girls coach Rachel Busza exhorted her team at halftime in the “Play For the As” fundraiser, where Haven’s boys and girls teams raised $2,000 for the Alzheimer’s Association and Autism Speaks.
On Earth Day at Strath Haven Middle School, the entire 6th grade joined in planting the Zach Rufo Habitat Garden, doubling its size. In May, the garden was officially dedicated to Zach, a SHMS student who died suddenly last spring. Photo by Caitlyn Locke.

Spring in Bloom

At Nether Providence Elementary School, Earth Day was full of hands on activities for every grade level. The Kindergarten theme was: My Own Backyard, First grade: Weather, Second grade: Soils, Third grade: Plant Development, Fourth grade: Water and Land, and Fifth grade: Ecosystems. The activities were developed and coordinated by parent Beth Moore, the PTO and teacher Cheryl Hendershott. Parents ran projects and workshops on subjects such as landfills and conservation. In addition, the students met and learned about live animals in a much-anticipated annual presentation from Great Valley Nature Center. Photo by Jessica Getty.

Swarthmore Rutledge Schoolers celebrated Arbor Day with a procession to the Cherry Border at Swarthmore College’s Scott Arboretum, a historical skit and planting of a tree.
Wellness Committee Wants Parent & Student Input on Healthy Eating

Wallingford-Swarthmore School District values the health as well as the education of its students, and one great asset in support of our health agenda is the District’s Wellness Committee, which meets about five times per year to plan and carry out research and develop policy recommendations. The group comprises Strath Haven High School and Middle School students and parents, and administrators and nurses representing all District schools. Last school year, Wellness considered physical fitness, reviewing District PE curricula and activity levels; the year before saw the committee consider students’ mental and emotional wellness in the face of rising stresses. Starting last spring and continuing into next year, “Our focus is on healthy eating,” said Michael Marano, chairperson of the committee and Assistant Principal at Strath Haven High School.

By responding to a new survey to be emailed soon, parents and students will help the Wellness committee develop knowledge and plans for continued improvement of student nutrition. Marano said that last spring, “We surveyed elementary school parents to check attitudes toward healthy eating guidelines and ideas on possible changes in food service across the District. Based on this feedback, we made recommendations to Aramark [the District’s food service vendor] and implemented changes this year, which in some ways go beyond the new USDA standards,” which mandate more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and less salt and fat in cafeteria meals.

District parent Karen Shore, who has an MPH in nutrition policy and food systems from Johns Hopkins and is a longtime member of the Wellness committee, said: “We had an outstanding response from more than 600 parents to last year’s survey. Our goal was to make sure that healthy menu changes were informed by parent input to the greatest extent possible, and to direct District initiatives as opposed to individual efforts at each school. One great finding was that parents from all three elementary schools really spoke with one voice about their priorities for healthy eating.”

The online survey link will be emailed to families soon, Shore said. “All of the questions relate to ways to make school food healthier and more appealing, again in the context of more stringent upcoming USDA nutrition standards for school meals. We are looking for guidance on which foods to offer — for instance, which veggies the students really like, what healthier snacks parents would like to see, whether to consider a salad bar or smoothies in schools that do not have these.”

Ronelle Myers, WSSD Food Service Director, said: “We have been serving fresh fruit and veggie cups since before the Federal recommendations came out, and in response to the last survey, we’ve added things like Meatless Mondays and Waste-Free Wednesdays every month. Almost all breads, pizza and pasta we serve are whole grain, which is a transition we began several years ago.”

Myers and WSSD’s Food Service department make their plans over the summer, so any changes are likely to be in place at or near at the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year.

In addition to healthier menu items, Strath Haven High School’s cafeteria now offers fresh fruit, veggie cups and a salad bar.
Wallingford-Swarthmore School District

WSSD Focuses on Academic Rigor, Anticipating Tomorrow’s Needs

Reports from colleges, universities and employers assert that many high school graduates lack basic skills, especially in the area of higher-order thinking which requires them to evaluate sophisticated texts, solve novel problems, and communicate results. In the Wallingford-Swarthmore School District, this concern has elicited attention to our graduates’ college and career readiness, through a two-year focus on “Rigor and Rigorous Practices in the Classroom,” launched in September 2012. The undertaking responds to the recent state-wide implementation of Pennsylvania Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which emphasize acquisition of skills and knowledge aligned with college and work expectations, as tested in the Keystone Exams given to high school students in English, Biology, and Algebra I. The CCSS reflect deep rigor, expecting that students will become more competitive globally.

To strengthen classroom instructional practices and curricular materials in the District, the Curriculum and Education Office formed an Education Vision Team of teachers to identify indicators of good rigorous practice. According to Denise Citarelli Jones, Director of Secondary Education, and Jennifer Gaudioso, Director of Elementary Education, “Rigor” can be difficult to define and quantify. “The goal of the Education Vision Team is to champion those instructional characteristics that provide opportunities for deep thinking, critical reading, and problem-solving. The CCSS move beyond merely expecting students to know certain elements of the Civil War, for example, expecting students to reflect on various opinions and perspectives of the war and to determine the extent to which it was avoidable or unavoidable.”

Director of Elementary Education Jen Gaudioso has worked with elementary teachers throughout the year on this task. She believes that the integration of book clubs and “Singapore Math” problem-solving strategies have led to more rigorous practices at the elementary level. “We want students as readers to do more than answer the questions in a traditional Q and A model. We want them to learn to pose the questions themselves, and find textual evidence to develop and support their own arguments. Book clubs and discussion groups help them establish these skills for confident analysis and expression of thoughts.”

Math in Focus, the new K-8 program incorporating Singapore Math, is a standards-based, highly rigorous program focusing narrowly to provide students with reliable mastery of the concepts of mathematical thinking, which they can apply to address deep, novel problems. Gaudioso says the model requires a culture shift to teach students to persevere through difficulty. “It’s a new habit for students to work through problems, and for adults to delay jumping in to help them. The reality is that some intellectual discomfort is necessary for new learning.”

In STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education, content knowledge will always be critical, but the Next Generation Science Standards recommendations (which complement the CCSS for English and math) increase the focus on inquiry and argumentation skills so students will be prepared for careers requiring creative, proficient problem-solving. WSSD asked a team of science teachers across all levels to study these standards through 2013-14 and to consider enhancing problem-based learning by infusing engineering practices. These may include analysis of problems and testing of solutions through models, simulations, and mathematical representations.

Teachers in all disciplines have worked across all grade levels and buildings to examine lesson plans, coordinate data reviews, and receive professional development on research-based strategies for taking thinking and learning to the next level. In 2013-14, the District will offer three days of teacher training on various classroom strategies that ensure rigorous quality. “We are fortunate to have dedicated, conscientious teachers who are willing to examine and adjust their own practices where needed,” says Denise Citarelli Jones. “Our students are ready, well-supported by their parents and community, and have the requisite skills to go deeper in their thinking. Not every district has all the components in place, but we do.”