



"Moving from a system of Schools to a SCHOOL SYSTEM"

SUPERINTENDENT'S UPDATE

November 14, 2014

Superintendent of Schools, Larry Licopoli, Ph.D.

2014-2015: Focus on Literacy and Transition

1. Charter School Status

- a. Please note that after being advised that the Charter School Office would not be recommending that the Board of Regents approve the application of the Guardian Academy Charter School of Peekskill, the Guardian Academy withdrew its application.
- b. I want to thank the many teachers, parents, administrators, students, and community members for their support of our school system and the programs we offer our students. Special thanks go out to the Peekskill Pride Committee for all of their work in providing a voice for our children and school district.

2. What is next?

- a. Our work is really just beginning. To become the school district we envision (see b. for link of characteristics of a Peekskill graduate), we need to remain focused on our goals insuring high quality educational opportunities, literacy, and ongoing continuous improvement of student learning. We are on the correct path weaving exemplary professional development with new programs and high aspirations for student performance. This construct is facilitated through our reorganization and succession plan for developing a collaborative based professional culture that will help lead the way in meeting our goals - 100% student literacy and a 100% graduation rate.
- b. Click this link --- [Characteristics of a Peekskill Graduate](#)
- c. Some things to look forward to (in relation to informing our parents- public school and private school) include:
 - i. Open houses
 - ii. Invitations to all District events
 - iii. Curriculum nights
 - iv. Extra Curriculum nights
 - v. Athletics
 - vi. Performing Arts Night

3. Strategic Planning & Understanding by Design

- a. A strategy that is used to begin defining the mission or purpose of an organization often starts with a question that prompts a discussion on what the organization hopes its beneficiaries will achieve as a result of their experience. At the conference day, I asked you all to help us answer that question and I have attached many of the responses I received for your review. The net impact of this feedback provides us with a starting point as we begin revisiting our mission and core beliefs. Thank you for your contributions! We are off to a good start.

4. Peekskill High School's fall performance: The Breakfast Club

- a. Please come out and support our drama/theater students in their fall production of John Hughes' "The Breakfast Club," directed by our new theater/drama teacher, Mr. Terry Sandler. The Breakfast Club will be performed at the Ford Theater in the Central Administration Building, opposite Peekskill High School on the following dates and times:
 - i. Thursday, December 4 @ 7PM
 - ii. Friday, December 5 @7PM
 - iii. Saturday, December 6 @ 2PM and 7 PM
- b. [Click here](#) for a flyer with more information about these performances.

5. Article from Educational Leadership adapted from the Marshall Memo #560.

Student-Led Discussions (Originally titled "Talking to Learn")

"I chose this article because it provides substantive examples on strategies and practices that promote literacy." - L. Licopoli

"Some of my happiest, most rewarding moments as an educator have been hearing what comes out of learners' mouths when I get out of the way," says **Elizabeth City (Harvard Graduate School of Education) in this Educational Leadership article**. "Talking matters to learning. Although it's possible to think without talking – and to talk without much thinking – each can strengthen the other. Talking also provides windows into what students are learning."

Rich classroom conversations also go to the heart of democratic schooling, she says: the better students get at thinking, speaking, and listening, the better off we'll all be.

So why do teachers do most of the talking in classrooms? And why is so much student talk unimpressive? City believes there are five reasons:

- We have other priorities. Curriculum coverage. Test preparation. Even if "accountable talk" is in the school-improvement plan, other things push it aside.

- It's hard to step outside the traditional paradigm: the teacher steers discussions, the students follow in familiar roles.
- We're afraid. Teachers fear losing control. Students fear not knowing how to play the game of school. Both fear sounding stupid.
- We believe that only "advanced" learners can drive discussions.
- Everyone thinks silences should be avoided at all costs.

"There's no question that having rich, authentic discussions is difficult," says City. It involves balancing each of these elements: safety, challenge, authentic participation, and ownership. Students must feel safe from being attacked, but discussions shouldn't be so safe that no one takes risks. The level of challenge must be just right – not too hard and not too easy. This is tricky, but City believes we often underestimate what students can handle.

"Authentic participation means students offer questions or comments that deepen their own and others' understanding and make space for multiple voices and ideas to be heard," she says. And ownership is key: not anarchy, in which students "veer wildly from one side of the intellectual road to another while the teacher sits back like a powerless passenger," nor dictatorship, with the teacher saying, "I want you to discuss..."

"In a successful discussion," says City, "students ask most of the questions, connecting with and building on one another's ideas, taking responsibility for the tenor of the conversation, and talking with one another... The teacher is valued and respected as a member of the discussion community – albeit one with more experience and expertise – but she or he is not deferred to as the authority."

How can this happen?

- *Set the stage.* Students should be in a circle or "U" so they can see each other's faces.
- *Think-pair-share.* Getting students to think, jot down ideas, and chat with an elbow partner is an excellent way to ramp up participation and authenticity.
- *Use discussion protocols.* In *Save the Last Word*, students read a text in advance and choose a sentence or passage they consider important or striking. A group convenes, one person reads the passage he or she chose aloud, the others have one minute each to respond, then the first person gets "the last word," with 2-3 minutes to explain the choice and connect with what others said. In *Four A's*, students read a text with four questions in mind: What do you agree with? What assumptions does the author hold? What do you want to argue with? And what parts of the text do you aspire to?
- *Use texts.* "It's possible to have student-driven discussions without texts," says City, "but well-chosen texts are very helpful. They provide common ground for a conversation and offer pathways to ideas, experiences, and feelings. They don't have to be print – art, music, maps, primary documents, essays, political cartoons, and math problems are fine."

One discussion example City cited used two photographs of Abraham Lincoln, one taken shortly before he became president, one shortly before his death.

- *Focus on process.* “Content is the central focus,” says City, but “a little attention to process can make a big difference in quality.” Facilitators and participants can set goals – “Talk more,” “Listen more,” “Ask a question” – or a collective goal like “Let’s try to connect with one another’s ideas” or “Let’s refer to the text more.” And at the end of the discussion, it’s good to reflect on how it went. How did we do on safety? How challenging was the conversation? Who participated and who didn’t? How authentic and educative was it?

- a. “Talking to Learn” by Elizabeth City in *Educational Leadership*, November 2014 (Vol. 72, #3, p. 10-16), <http://bit.ly/1wMkBce>; City can be reached at elizabeth_city@gse.harvard.edu