

'Dale Dispatch

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Is the New "Normal" Really Normal?

By Dr. Thomas Hagerman,
Superintendent of Schools

"Normal" is undoubtedly a current buzzword, but it is also a rather strange one. Its definition connotes being regular, typical, or naturally-occurring. It stresses conformity and lack of individuality. In a world where people often compete to stand out as unique or different, it should perhaps surprise us that normal is also one of the most coveted words today. There is no doubt that people yearn for the routines, freedoms, and relationships that they enjoyed (and took for granted) before the Covid-19 pandemic.




The opposite of normal is, of course, abnormal. Depending on the context, it can be an unsettling and frightening word. No one wants to hear their medical results are aberrant, uncommon, or atypical. But, it isn't an inherently bad word per se. An artist might appreciate hearing the feedback that her work created abnormal, or exceptional, enthusiasm among museum-goers.

As we continue our Journey Forward efforts with a goalpost of returning to normal, we must carefully consider the implications of our individual and collective decision-making while on this pathway. As we begin to see more positive trends in public health metrics, some individuals, families, businesses, organizations, and politicians believe that a full return to pre-pandemic conditions and behaviors is fully-warranted without intermediary steps or on-going mitigation. However, the CDC, WHO, and other public health, expert organizations remind us that we are walking a "proverbial plank" between the positive health trends we are experiencing today and a full return to the life we once knew.

For us as a school community, this path involves an ongoing and wholesale commitment to three areas:

Mental Health:

The mental health impacts of this pandemic on children and youth have been profound. Pervasive isolation and anxiety, along with other family stressors like illness, financial insecurity, and remote



and hybrid learning models, may result in difficult transitions for many students returning to school. From separation anxiety from parents, to meeting new classmates and teachers, to managing school life with ongoing risk-mitigation practices, students will need support from both parents and our faculty and staff to successfully navigate all the changes ahead. From the District's perspective, we remain fully committed to continuing the emphasis on social-emotional learning, family-school partnerships, building and sustaining relationships among and between students and teachers, and providing appropriate resources and support. We welcome and encourage students and parents to reach out to us with concerns, questions, or requests for specific assistance.

PPE/Risk Mitigation Efforts:

In spite of crowded beach scenes with throngs of unmasked sunbathers in Miami and other places, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is alive and well in many other parts of the country, including right here in Scarsdale's schools. While we have been willing to consider social-distancing at less than six-feet with the availability of vaccinations and increased use of barriers, our commitment to other risk mitigation efforts remains unchanged. Wearing appropriate masks, practicing hand hygiene, and self-monitoring illness are still personal responsibilities. Providing appropriate ventilation, using barriers, and conducting contact-tracing (along with any resulting quarantines) will continue to be the District's responsibilities. To continue on our positive trajectory of reopening, it is critical that everyone understands and holds these as unwavering commitments.

A Blueprint for Opening, Staying Open, and Returning in the Fall:


While our plans for reopening are exciting for many of us, we do have to acknowledge that they are being made and implemented within a fragile ecosystem—one which needs our careful and continuous tending. Likewise, opening and staying open are not synonymous occurrences. Full return to in-person learning is an act of optimism that, under our current circumstances, we believe can be mitigated in a safe and healthy way for our students and staff. However, keeping the doors open every day thereafter is dependent on the individual and collective choices of the entirety of our school community. While we understand that Covid-19 spread in schools is low, community spread does have an impact on how our schools function and serve students. Specifically, infections and quarantines limit our ability to appropriately staff our buildings and provide high-quality, in-person instruction. We ask that everyone consider this reality while making decisions about outside-of-school activities that could endanger the effective functioning inside our schoolhouses. The District also recognizes its obligation to do the same, and we will continue to limit large group events, curb travel and field trips, and refrain from using outside individuals/vendors for school clubs and activities, to name a few practices that will remain in place to help ensure a Covid-free environment.

As we continue on our trek towards normalcy, we do so in a spirit of cooperation and partnership. While “the plank” we are walking from here to there might seem challenging, if we continue to keep complacency at bay and focus on those efforts which keep our school community safe, healthy, and happy, I believe it can be achieved successfully. Moreover, I am convinced that ending this school year the way we would like to begin it again in the fall is critically important for students, staff members, and families to begin the healing process and prepare for a new, revitalized future, both within our schools and beyond.

What is Kept

By Dr. Edgar McIntosh,
Asst. Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment

April is officially Poetry Month, but since the next Dale Dispatch is not until May, I thought I would honor the month early with my poem of introduction:



*Through innovation, triumphs, and quick iteration,
Experiments, reboots, and mask mitigation*

*Educational experts will wonder and mention-
"What have we learned through our time of invention?"*

*What will we take with us as we proceed-
Through post-pandemic learning when classrooms are freed?*

*And what precious things have we gone long without-
That we'll welcome back with a hoot and a shout?!"*



These really are the two big questions out there in the educational community right now. What specific knowledge have we gained through virtual and hybrid learning that are methods and practices that we'll take with us as we go forward? And what are the conditions and practices that we have most missed being able to return to? In my conversation with educators, there are recurring themes in both areas.

Not surprisingly, through necessity, teachers report that their understanding of the educational application of technology has grown exponentially. In Scarsdale, we are fortunate to have internal expertise through our computer and technology teachers, a structure to deliver timely instruction on platforms, hardware, and software through ST@C classes, and have collaborated with outside partners. As digital natives, our students' absorption rate of new technologies is impressive, and we expect to continue to explore and expand our most meaningful resources.

Another area of learning has been in the area of assessment. There have been limitations placed on traditional testing especially when done remotely. From a recent issue of EdWeek, Trena Wilkerson, the president of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, said "I think we've been seeing this shift [in assessments] in the last few years," said "[The transition to remote instruction] has helped continue the momentum. ... I think teachers are thinking creatively and out-of-the-box in how to assess student understanding and student thinking and then how to use that to support instructional decisions." This is certainly in evidence in classrooms throughout the District. Students are often being evaluated on how they explain their thinking, problem-solve, and demonstrate their understanding in ways that go well beyond a typical quiz. Also, students have reported that there is an increased focus on integrity when tests look more typical, and the peer expectation has been about performing with honesty at a time when cheating can be a Google away. This experience has created an authentic need to expand our assessment practices, in ways that are both meaningful and holistic.

We have seen the true power of working with small groups of students, both virtually and in person. We have known that working with smaller groups can be helpful for guiding learning, and formative assessment. Teachers have reported that working with half classes and break-out groups have allowed them to engage more fully with students. They also report moving successfully through essential curriculum, even with time constraints. As we move into more normal times, we look forward to exploring methods, structures and strategies for small group instruction, even in the context of a larger classroom, to engage our learners.

While there are lessons and learning we'll take with us, there are surely things we look forward to leaving behind. An obvious one: we can't wait to lose the masks. They get in the way of communication and block us from seeing smiles. And smirks. And frowns. There are many ways to assess students, and masks block our most effective way of evaluating their mood.

We could do with less screen time. We have managed truly creative ways to allow students to digitally cooperate and we'll build on that, especially as it has allowed us to connect with our global partners. But we look forward to groups of students huddling together working on projects. We miss opportunities for students to build together and manipulate materials with peers. Our educators have done an amazing and nimble job teaching the essential skills and concepts but some report missing the time to engage all the integrated projects and student driven inquiry activities they love.

We cannot wait for live arts to re-enter our schools. We miss singing! We long for plays and partner dancing, and live musical instrument concerts with live audiences. We know that our athletic program as well will enjoy the day when the highest perceived "risk" is losing to Irvington.

This list really goes on and on- and I'm sure it's different for everyone in our community.

*We thank all our students and teachers and families,
Who have managed such stress through these ongoing calamities,*

*But what this COVID-19 has boldly revealed
Is that a system in crisis is most likely healed-*

*Through kindness and listening and hard work and rest,
And relishing those things not seen on a test.*

Progress, Local Vaccine Heroes and the Dangers of Pandemic Fatigue

By Eric Rauschenbach

Asst. Superintendent for Special Education and Student Services

The past weeks have brought a number of changes to the school experience, most consequential the planned move to full day, in-person learning. These changes have been the result of steady improvement in containing the spread of the virus since February, the increasing availability of vaccines for teachers, and increasing data which shows that schools are not significant vectors of spread. These factors have provided the opportunity to move to a more normalized schedule and hopefully provide our community, teachers, and students with some much needed relief.



It is easy to get lost in the negativity of the pandemic; it has generated loss, high emotions, confusion, and conflict. However, it has also provided examples of the best within us. Mr. Rogers' often quoted advice for children when seeing something scary or tragic, was to "look for the helpers." This advice often comes to mind when I am feeling particularly overwhelmed or saddened by the current situation. In the midst of a very difficult year, there are so many examples of people doing their best to help each other, not just across the nation but also right here in our community. Early on in the pandemic, school staff and community members stepped up to make masks. Teachers pitched in to help each other learn new technology and adapt teaching techniques to a digital classroom. They continue to strive to make meaningful experiences for students in our changed circumstances. Local doctors have stepped forward to help the schools make common sense decisions around health and safety, and provided staff with help getting access to vaccines. Most impressively, one of our very own Middle School students, Sam K, developed a website to help senior citizens in his temple navigate the state vaccine portal and expanded that to teachers in the Middle School and then the District. Sam has helped over 2,500 neighbors book appointments to date! There are hundreds of other examples of people simply looking for ways to help. The suggestion by Mr. Rogers to focus on

the helpers doesn't make our challenges easier. What it does is remind us of our capacity to do good. It is that capacity that will eventually lead us to overcoming the virus.

As we enter what is hopefully the final stretch of this pandemic, it's important to remember all of the hard work the "helpers" have accomplished, and make sure our behaviors add to their work. Pandemic fatigue is real. Many of us, myself included, may feel tired all the time, be less motivated to engage in the activities we enjoy, be more irritable or angry, have changed appetites, or experience low mood. This is understandable. We have been asked to cope with constantly changing and complex situations for an extended period of time. This has drawn down our mental reserves and lessened our resilience in some cases. This fatigue also leads us to seek out the comfort of a pre-pandemic normal, and can tempt us to make poor choices. It is important that we focus on our own self-care to ensure we can sustain ourselves in the coming weeks and months. [Here are a few tips from the American Medical Association on combating pandemic fatigue.](#)

The coming weeks and months are our opportunity to reopen schools and take measured steps towards ending the pandemic, but they will require us to continue to be vigilant. The reduction of cases recently can be easily undone, especially with new variants being spread and evidence of wild spring break celebrations in Florida and elsewhere. We're in a fragile balance, such that it sometimes seems like the vaccination program is in a race with the current lessening of good pandemic hygiene.

As we move forward, I encourage all of us to continue being mindful of masking, stay distant when together- especially indoors- and continue to avoid high risk activities. If we all strive to be the "helpers" we can make sure this pandemic ends as soon as possible.

Long Term Planning for Green Results

By Stuart Matthey,
Assistant Superintendent for Business & Facilities

"A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in," or so says the ancient Greek proverb. The Scarsdale Schools have a strong history of effective long-term planning, from coming together to build our first school in 1784, to a focus on classical liberal education in the 1930's, to the commitment for greater sustainability as far back as the 1990's. The pillars of collaboration, humanization and sustainability have guided our work throughout Scarsdale's history.



Today, I write to highlight our more recent efforts towards improved sustainability, which often go unnoticed. Every repair and upgrade has been made with longevity and sustainability in mind- we want to ensure our buildings are all here for the next 100 years and that so is our earth.

Our most recent bond project has been no exception. We have upgraded and improved our heating systems District-wide, so that we can keep our buildings warm and burn less oil and electricity doing so. Ventilation and cooling system upgrades have also been critical not just to keeping our buildings comfortable during increasingly warm falls and springs, but have also been a key part of our Covid-19 mitigation strategies. Upgrades to windows, roofs and doors District-wide mean that heated and cooled air remains where it belongs. We've also been intentionally and incrementally replacing all of our lights District-wide with energy-efficient LED lights, which use a fraction of the energy to create a brighter light. As the bond project is winding down, we are beginning to see the fruits of those efforts, not just in our beautiful buildings and happy students, but also on our bottom line.

Our waste stream has been improved as a result of our long term planning. A combination of sustainability taught in our curriculum, improved waste management within the District and ownership of the process at home has resulted in a greatly diminished waste stream District-wide, with more recycling and composting than at any time in our history. The push towards greater electronic signatures during the pandemic has only helped.

The combination of curriculum, culture and action around the District has had a measurable outcome. Our District-wide energy consumption today is below what it was in 2009.

Scarsdale Middle School teachers Elyse Tenzer (Family and Consumer Sciences) and Cara Forray (Health) led the way in the recent designation of Scarsdale Middle School as a Green Ribbon School. When asked how they found the time to complete such a rigorous application process in this of all years, Ms. Tenzer said, matter of factly, that much of the work was already done.

"We're just recognizing what everyone here is already doing," she said.

Much of the focus around the award has been on the incredible indoor and outdoor biomechanical innovation curriculum, which is integrated into student life far beyond our Health and FACS classes. In science classes, students learn about composting and how to design greenhouses and plant shelters. In art classes, students study and replicate the various plants and specimens. Students can earn physical education credits by working in the gardens. They work with food service to design bento boxes which are more sustainable and serve specific dietary needs. Students have taken these lessons to heart and brought them home, so they are improving their environments not just at school but in the broader community as well.

"These are not lessons students are learning to pass a test," Ms. Tenzer said. "They become part of the fabric of who we are, of our school community. They take these lessons with them."

Ms. Forray also said every lesson taught is intended to build upon what children have already learned in elementary school and set them up for success in High School and beyond. It's about a long-range vision of sustainability and stewardship, not about grades at the culmination of the marking period.

I couldn't have said it better myself. Congratulations to the students and staff of Scarsdale Middle School for earning such a prestigious designation, and to the Scarsdale Schools Community who enabled it to happen.

Investing in Instructional Technology

By Jerry Crisci,
Director of Instructional Technology and Innovation, and
Co-Director of the Center for Innovation



Planning for our technology program involves an increasing amount of uncertainty, especially during this year's pandemic. My colleague, Rachel Moseley, and I work with members of the technology team to determine the funding that we need to support technology for students and teachers, and the budget undergoes several iterations before it is presented to the Board and the community.

This budget is guided by the goals in the District's Strategic Plan, as well as the Technology Plan adopted by the Board and approved by the New York State Education Department. The planning

process includes examining the costs of supporting the District's essential and mandated systems, like our infrastructure, website, and library systems, as well as the technology required to support the resources needed by the instructional program. During this past year, access to instructional technology resources has been more critical than ever, helping students connect with teachers and each other via Zoom, as well as using online learning tools that allow students to work remotely and use technology to support their work when they are in school.


Our computer teachers study the latest technology trends, and we consult with other districts via the NY Technology Educators' Network and the Lower Hudson Regional Information Center to validate our purchasing strategy. The budget is proactively planned to maintain a steady funding stream while always looking for cost savings and efficiencies. The Board and community have a long history of supporting our technology program, and the District has been able to maintain a relatively steady technology budget. Even though our core hardware spending has been relatively flat during the last four years, the costs for online technology services has increased as students increasingly use web-based resources to support their learning.


While the pandemic has not necessarily resulted in growth in new technology, it has resulted in the ACCELERATION of technological changes, and we believe that many of these changes are here to stay. For example, we adopted and anticipate the continued use of video conferencing services for some District meetings and professional development activities, even when the pandemic has ended. We are also thankful for the contributions from the Scarsdale Schools Education Foundation, who have supported us with the purchase of hardware that supports remote learning. We are thankful for our community partnership as we continue to use technology to enhance and transform teaching and learning.



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