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SED's new My Sister's Keeper program seeks to interest girls in STEM careers

By Sara Foss
 SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

In 2014, former President Barack Obama launched My Brother's Keeper, a nationwide program to help young men reach their full potential. The goal was to close opportunity gaps related to race or socioeconomic status, which can make it harder for boys of color to succeed.

New York became the first state to fund its own My Brother's Keeper (MBK) initiative with the passage of the 2016-17 budget, and currently there are 50 MBK communities throughout the state. Districts craft their own programs, but there are some common features. All MBK programs connect youth to positive role models and mentors, cultivate leadership skills and aim to put children and teens on a positive life path.

This spring, the State Education Department (SED) announced the launch of a parallel program for girls called My Sister's Keeper (MSK). The initiative encourages girls to pursue careers in

science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

Angelique Johnson-Dingle, deputy commissioner for P-12 instructional support for SED, doesn't think the programs will be targeted by the Trump administration, which has voiced opposition to some school and university programs that serve minorities because they are viewed by the administration as inconsistent with civil rights laws. Johnson said in an interview that MBK is open to all boys and state-funded MSK programs will be open to all girls. "It's about all boys, it's about all girls," she said. "When we say all means all, we really mean all means all."

Also, the programs could be insulated from changes in federal education policy because they are state-funded. In the current budget, the Legislature boosted the annual allocation from \$18 million to \$28 million. The extra funds give SED what it asked for to establish My Sister's Keeper. "(My Sister's Keeper) is really in response to what the field has been asking

See **KEEPER**, page 4



The Schenectady City School District created a program for girls called Shades of Sisterhood in 2024. One of their first activities was to make bracelets as a bonding activity.

Photo courtesy of the Schenectady City School District

Supreme Court decision in *Mahmoud v. Taylor* could be a game changer for public education

By Pilar Sokol
 DIRECTOR OF LEGAL SERVICES

Just before the end of this year's session, a majority of the U.S. Supreme Court issued a decision which many have referred to as a game changer for public education.

In *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, the high court issued a preliminary injunction in favor of parents in Montgomery County, Maryland, who are in the process of challenging their school district's refusal to excuse their children from classroom instruction that involves the use of certain books in grades K-5. Some of the books tell stories about same-sex relationships, including same sex marriages, and some involve the topic of gender identity.

The injunction requires the school board to restart a prior policy of giving

parents advance notice of when the books would be used in the classroom and allowing parents to excuse their children from that instruction.

The court sent the case back to a lower court for further proceedings consistent with the high court's majority opinion. Still, the opinion foreshadows the *Mahmoud* majority's disposition regarding resolution of the merits of the case. Thus, it is important to understand what the case is and is not about, and why the high court's majority (five justices and one concurrence) determined a preliminary injunction was warranted in this case.

The district began incorporating the LGBTQ+ texts into the English language arts curriculum after determining the current books were not representative of many in their school community because they did not include LGBTQ+ characters. While books were included in grades PK-12, the *Mahmoud* decision involves only the

storybooks assigned for use in grades K-5 (students ages 5-11).

The district expected teachers to include the storybooks in classroom instruction in the same way as other books. The district issued a guidance giving teachers suggested responses to potential questions from students and parents.

In response to parental push back regarding the introduction of the books, the district initially agreed to give parents advanced notice when any of the books in question would be used in classroom instruction and allow opt-outs. Due to a high number of opt-out requests, the district discontinued both the advanced notice and opt-out arrangement.

According to district staff and the school board, the number of opt-out requests made the process unmanageable. The court commented in the majority decision that

See **SUPREME COURT**, page 4

News analysis

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Federal issues loom for NYS schools



Sandra Ruffo
NYSSBA President

I have had the privilege of serving on a school board and a BOCES board for 40 years. It is a responsibility I take seriously and have found deeply rewarding over the years. As school board members, we take into account the needs of the whole child. A well-rounded offering of services and programming ensures that each student is provided with opportunities that inspire them and help them thrive. We develop

policies with the success of every student in mind.

As president of NYSSBA's board of directors, I have a front-row seat to NYSSBA advocacy. I am certainly proud of the many "wins" that our organization scored in the most recent legislative session. I am proud to say I played a role in one item of NYSSBA's advocacy that ultimately led to ensuring that all New York State students are guaranteed free meals at school.

While we proponents of public education can be happy with the progress we have made involving state policies and the state budget, we are facing setbacks at the national level. As a result of the reconciliation bill, signed into law on July 4, an estimated 1.5 million New Yorkers will lose their Medicaid coverage, according to the office of Gov. Kathy Hochul. And 300,000 households will lose the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program) benefits administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The effects of these losses will trickle down to schools both directly and indirectly, and we need to be prepared to continue to meet the needs of all of our students.

Special education will lose funding as families lose Medicaid coverage. School districts have been able to routinely bill Medicaid for various services including certain medically necessary services for families with Medicaid coverage as well as for early and periodic screening, diagnosis, testing and various services included in a child's Individualized Education Program (IEP). As individual families lose Medicaid coverage, school districts will no longer be able to bill Medicaid for services rendered to children in those households.

The reconciliation bill will affect school meal programs, too, because one way of identifying students who qualify for free meals under federal school meal programs is whether their households participate in SNAP (or Medicaid). If those numbers are reduced, so will the amount of money school districts receive from the federal government for school meals. While the state has promised to fill in any reimbursement gaps to ensure school districts are fully compensated for the meals they serve, it is reasonable to be concerned that the funding appropriated by the state might not be enough to make up for a large reduction in SNAP and Medicaid coverage.

There will be indirect forms of impact, as well. Students come into our buildings hauling an invisible load of baggage they carry with them from their homes to the classrooms. Mom or Dad might have a chronic health issue that they can no longer afford to deal with. The family might struggle to put dinner on the table, and school might be the only place a child gets a full, nutritious

meal. As school leaders, we see the struggles as well as the successes, and we need to orchestrate a suite of services and programs that will uplift all students.

Another concern at the federal level involves the administration's plan to create a \$2 billion block grant program available to states for education. Why is that a problem? Because it would be a band-aid on a surgery without anesthesia; the administration has proposed consolidating or eliminating 28 distinct federal funding streams (\$8.5 billion nationwide), and that would mean less federal money for schools.

Here's an example of the direction of the change: The U.S. Department of Education has also ordered an immediate freeze to five grants targeted at vulnerable populations and wraparound services such as afterschool programming. As a result, \$400 million promised to recipients in New York State is being held up in Washington. Congress has the power to require the U.S. Department of Education to unfreeze those dollars.

Don't assume that your voice won't make a difference. It can, and NYSSBA exists to make sure the sentiments of school boards are heard loud and clear in Albany and Washington. NYSSBA will be inviting school board presidents and advocacy liaisons to participate in virtual congressional meetings throughout the summer (and likely into the fall). Please join us if you receive an invitation.

In the meantime, we encourage you to forge your own relationships with your local members of Congress. For talking points and more information, refer to NYSSBA's 2025 Federal Priorities document at bit.ly/4nR2Sym.

Join NYSSBA and the National School Boards Association for a free webinar on how federal policies will affect school funding from noon to 1 p.m. on Wednesday, July 30. Go to www.nyssba.org/events/webinars to register.



Chemistry by Dr. G

Hilton High School science teacher Carl Gaupp demonstrates the power of chemical reactions during a Science Fun Day in the Hilton Central School District. A graduate of the district, Gaupp has a doctoral degree in organic polymer chemistry.

❖ Photo courtesy of the Hilton Central School District

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Ahead of schedule, Regents adopt new academic expectations

'Portrait of a Graduate' reflects Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework

By Sara Foss
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

At their July meeting, the state Board of Regents adopted an updated "Portrait of a Graduate" – a vision of what New York students should know, be able to do and embody by the time they finish high school.

The Portrait of a Graduate is part of NY Inspires, a state plan for overhauling graduation requirements. Regents exams will become optional as the State Education Department (SED) identifies alternative pathways to graduation, such as allowing students to complete rigorous capstone projects.

The Regents originally planned to adopt the Portrait of a Graduate in November. But after listening to a presentation from SED staff and discussing the plan in detail, the board decided to take action.

Board of Regents Chancellor Lester Young Jr. led the push to adopt the Portrait of a Graduate immediately, saying that if the board waited until November to do so, schools wouldn't incorporate the new portrait into their expectations for students until the 2026-27 school year.

"Why can't we communicate our expectations today?" Young said. "We're

in a situation right now that begs action ... It's important to communicate to the entire state that this is our expectation. We're attempting to address the needs of the students that are in front of us now, not the students we used to have."

"This has been two years in the making," said Regent Hasoni Pratts. "This is not anything that's new. We've talked about this at almost every single Regents meeting since I've been on this board. Many students cannot wait for this. So many have been left behind already ... Why would we wait for three more months when we can start now?"

The plan includes requiring education in finance and climate effective in the 2026-27 school year. New graduation measures and the Portrait of a Graduate won't be fully phased in until the 2029-30 school year. Then, every high school graduate will be expected to be:

Academically prepared. Graduates will demonstrate a strong foundation in the state's learning standards and be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve success in college, careers, civic engagement, service and life. "Academically prepared" replaces a draft characteristic called "literate in all subject areas."

A creative innovator. Graduates will use their imagination, curiosity and "flexible thinking" to solve problems

creatively and develop new ideas and products while adapting to evolving circumstances and challenges.

A critical thinker. Graduates will analyze information thoughtfully, evaluate evidence critically and identify patterns and connections between different pieces of information to address complex issues and navigate the world with insight.

An effective communicator. Graduates will articulate ideas clearly and confidently through speaking, writing and the use of different types of media for various purposes, while engaging with diverse audiences and actively listening to different perspectives.

A global citizen. Graduates will act responsibly and ethically within local, global and digital communities, employing civic knowledge skills and mindsets to promote global sustainability and contribute positively to a culturally diverse, democratic society.

Reflective and future-focused. Graduates will engage in self-reflection to identify strengths and areas for growth, setting meaningful goals, using social awareness to maintain supportive relationships and demonstrating responsible decision-making that prioritizes social, emotional and mental well-being. "Reflective and future-

focused" replaces a draft characteristic called "social-emotional competence."

The original Portrait of a Graduate, unveiled in November 2024, included cultural competence as one of the attributes graduates should possess. The updated version places culturally responsive-sustaining education at the center of the six attributes, "emphasizing that every Portrait of a Graduate attribute should be viewed through a culturally responsive and sustaining lens," said Santosha Oliver, assistant commissioner for standards and instructional programs at SED.

"This is a key revision," she said. SED materials describe what it means to be culturally responsive: "A New York State high school graduate who is culturally responsive builds strong, respectful relationships, valuing diverse perspectives as essential to a rigorous, inclusive learning community." Students who embody cultural responsiveness and academic readiness "will be prepared to learn, grow, innovate and contribute meaningfully to society."

The Portrait of a Graduate "is a statement about who we are in New York state when it comes to education," said Regent Nancy Wills. "We're sticking to our beliefs about the welcoming and inclusive environment, and one that values every human being."

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- Recent Decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court
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THURSDAY, OCT. 23 9:00 A.M. – 4:00 P.M.

Fine-tune your board leadership skills at the **Pre-Convention Board Officers Academy – One Vision, Many Voices: Resolving Conflict and Building Consensus**

Session topics will include:

- Keynote Address: Conflict and Decision Making: Harnessing The Power Of One
- Leading Through Conflict: Strategies for Resolving and Moving Beyond Disputes
- United We Stand: Building Consensus for Stronger School Boards

Includes a special board officers recognition ceremony.

View the full agendas at nyssba.org/convention

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KEEPER, from page 1



In Schenectady, students who participate in Shades of Sisterhood have adult mentors called Mavens. They facilitate the activities, lead discussions, encourage healthy choices and promote positive relationships. ❖ *Photo courtesy of the Schenectady City School District*

us for,” Johnson-Dingle said. “This is our commitment from the state to say, ‘We see you, young ladies, and we’re here to support you.’”

Through MSK, girls will have opportunities to do community-based service-learning projects and engage in hands-on STEM experiences. They will meet women in STEM fields, partner with local businesses and colleges and hold workshops to teach life skills and strategies such as resume-building and interview skills.

“All we’re doing is listening to children, learning to understand what they need from us as adults and figuring out ways to provide the support that they need,” Johnson-Dingle said. “As a parent, I would imagine everyone would want their schools to be able to engage in such programs as that.”

Johnson-Dingle noted that several MSK-like programs already exist due to local initiatives. For instance, the Schenectady City School District created a program called Shades of Sisterhood in 2024. The initiative emerged from the district’s relaunch of its MBK program during the 2021-22 school year, which prompted people to ask why there wasn’t a similar program for girls, said Carlos Cotto, the district’s superintendent.

Shades of Sisterhood has 30 to 40 participants in middle school and high

school. Cotto said MBK “provided the template” for Shades of Sisterhood but the program is “more specific to the needs of young ladies.”

The district has also brought together local non-profits that work with girls, such as Girls Inc. and the Working Group of Girls of Schenectady, to discuss how to collaborate to support the girls in Shades of Sisterhood.

Meanwhile, the program for boys has a presence in all of Schenectady’s schools, including its elementary schools. The organization pairs students with mentors and has older MBK fellows mentor younger students and lead events. In small groups, they discuss issues such as coming of age, masculinity and their responsibility to the larger community. They also visit colleges.

MBK gives students “an opportunity to shine,” Cotto said.

Another local initiative began in 2023 at Queens South High School. “We were inspired by our strong My Brother’s Keeper chapter and wanted to ensure girls had similar opportunities,” said Josephine Yeboah Van-Ess, superintendent of QSHS.

Sixty-four girls attended Queens South High Schools’ inaugural event. Today, there are more than 350 inductees and 18 chapters across 29 high schools. Called My Sister’s Keeper, it provides girls with mentorship, leadership development and support.

Natasha Knight, a 15-year-old rising junior, joined the MSK program at Queens South High Schools at the invitation of a friend. She said the experience has made her a more social person. “In society, girls are not really taken that seriously,” she said. “In MSK, we’re coming together as one. It builds confidence.”

Serenity Dickerson, a 16-year-old rising senior, was introduced to MSK through a dance group that’s part of the MSK program at QSHS. After she joined the dance group, some girls suggested she join the group’s parent organization, too.

Serenity said the most important thing she’s learned through MSK is to uplift other young women rather than cut them down. “There’s always issues with drama when it comes to boy issues or stuff about grades,” she said. “A lot of these things were put in place to break women apart from each other. It’s important to strengthen your relationships with other young women.”

Through a new MSK pilot program, Natasha meets regularly with middle school students to share advice and discuss topics such as hygiene. “We’re relatable (to the younger students), because we’ve been through it,” she said.

“Our girls have communicated that MSK has had a profound impact on their social-emotional wellness, confidence and

academic performance,” Van-Ess said. “By providing accountability, love and support, we’re helping our girls navigate the complexities of the world and become productive citizens.”

Johnson-Dingle said districts that have been funding their own MSK programs can apply for state funding “to help create more opportunities for these young ladies.”

Obama founded My Brother’s Keeper in response to the death of Trayvon Martin, who was fatally shot by a neighborhood watch member while walking home from the store, sparking nationwide protests and outcry.

The impetus for My Sister’s Keeper is different, which is why its focus is different, Johnson-Dingle said. “We looked at our own needs and our own data, and that’s why we focused on STEM,” Johnson-Dingle said.

“Children don’t know what they can do in the future if they are not exposed to it,” Johnson-Dingle continued. “What we plan to do with My Sister’s Keeper is to expose them to the many different fields that exist. We haven’t been able to figure out why young ladies typically don’t go into science and tech careers like we see with young men, but I do know they’re just as brilliant and fully capable.”

My Brother’s Keeper mentorships to continue post-graduation

The newest My Brother’s Keeper program is called MBK Coaching, and it will target students after they graduate from high school. It will seek to connect MBK alumni through regular, online meetings of support.

MBK graduates expressed interest in maintaining their relationships with school mentors as they navigate the challenges of college, the workplace or military service, according to Angelique Johnson-Dingle, deputy commissioner for P-12 instructional support at the State Education Department.

“A couple of kids have asked for help finding scholarships or additional funding to help offset the cost of college,” she said. “Or they just need advice around time management. Trying to manage that freshman year in college can be a doozy.”

— Sara Foss, *Special Correspondent*

SUPREME COURT, from page 1

school districts “cannot escape free exercise [of religion] obligations by crafting a curriculum so cumbersome that a substantial number of parents elect to opt out.”

The parents argued that they have a religious duty to train their children according to their faith regarding what it means to be male or female and matters involving marriage, human sexuality and other related themes. They asserted that the district’s actions violated their right to the free exercise of their religion, and the high court majority agreed.

To grant a preliminary injunction, a court must make certain determinations, including the likelihood of the litigant’s success on the merits of the underlying claim. In that context, the court determined that the district’s actions “substantial[ly] interfere[d]” with the parents’ free exercise rights under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. They also presented a “very real threat” of undermining the

parents’ ability to instill in their children their religious beliefs, and this further imposed an unconstitutional burden on the exercise of those beliefs.

In the majority’s view, the district’s actions substantially interfered with the parents’ exercise of religious rights for a variety of reasons based on the combination of the introduction of the books, the district’s instructions to teachers and the discontinuance of the notice and opt-out option.

The court found the books were normative. That is, they presented “certain values and beliefs as things to be celebrated and certain contrary [ones] as things to be rejected.” Teachers were encouraged to reinforce the values and beliefs to be celebrated, and children encouraged to adopt those specific views.

The district’s actions also posed an “objective danger” to undermining the parents’ teachings based on their

children’s susceptibility to their teachers’ influence.

As to the imposition of an unconstitutional burden, the district’s actions, in part, conditioned the parents’ access to public education on their acceptance of a burden on religious exercise. Although the district had an interest in maintaining a safe school environment for all to learn in, their actions were not narrowly tailored to advance that interest.

So where do school districts go from here? As a starting point, school officials should examine whether their current policies or practices resemble any of the circumstances in Montgomery County. While creating an automatic, universal opt-out policy is an option, be sure to discuss practical implications with district administrators and the concept of a sincere religious belief with your school attorney. Your policy should be well-suited to local needs and realities, including demographics.

Possibly with the assistance of your school attorney, identify any policies and practices that might be impacted by *Mahmoud* and may be in need of possible revision.

To learn more about the case itself, open questions and possible answers including its impact on curriculum, and future potential challenges such as the expansion of opt-outs into other areas, attend NYSSBA’s Summer Law Conference in person in Albany on July 31, or virtually on Aug. 5 and 6. In the meantime, feel free to contact NYSSBA’s Legal Department with questions you might have at legal@nyssba.org.

Correction

The actress Donna Douglas, who appeared in the *Twilight Zone* episode “Eye of the Beholder,” was misidentified as Janet Jones in the June 30 issue of *On Board*.

Budgeting is more than an annual process

How can your district get better at long-range fiscal planning?

By Mark Snyder
SENIOR LEADERSHIP
DEVELOPMENT MANAGER

Many school board members have shared with me the various ways their school district had to get creative in budgeting to provide what the students and staff need for success while only asking the public for tax increases that they would support. They succeeded; overall, 99.6% of school budgets passed in April and June voting.

Good budgeting is more than just an annual exercise to “make the numbers work,” according to Government Finance Officers Association. There needs to be

a long-term plan. Long-term fiscal planning is a process that projects revenues, expenditures and financial obligations over a multi-year span – typically three to five years. External variables outside of the board’s control include potential changes in foundation aid and tax levy limits. Other changes are more predictable and depend on board priorities, such as staffing and contract obligations, facilities needs, etc.



A long-term fiscal plan provides a basic roadmap for a defined time period. It is good for a school board to have a financial outlook that includes not just the current school year but also subsequent ones. When something new arises, the natural question is: “How would this new expense or obligation fit into our long-term fiscal plan?” A district may need to respond to a change in enrollment or unexpected costs for special education. In some cases, a long-term analysis may help district leaders see the value in using shared services from BOCES.

It’s especially important to invest time in planning because most districts have established reserves and may have fund balances. Labor unions seeking to negotiate contracts will have questions about how the district plans to spend such balances.

Of course, no plan can predict the future perfectly. But a well-designed, long-term fiscal plan allows the district to navigate uncertainty with confidence, providing flexibility and foresight.

Also, having a long-term financial plan is good public relations. It communicates to district stakeholders



that the board is thinking ahead, managing financial threats and stewarding taxpayer dollars wisely. By integrating long-term fiscal plans into budget presentations, board workshops and community forums, districts can build public understanding of challenges and build trust with its stakeholders.

An important role of the governance team is to establish district goals and priorities. But these are only as strong as the financial commitments behind them. Long-term fiscal planning will help to ensure that budgetary funds are available to effectively target these priorities. It can help your board be more confident in decisions involving program expansions, staffing levels and investments in technology and curriculum. When school district budgets reflect long-term thinking, they

become tools to advance the board’s strategic vision.

While drafting the details of a long-term fiscal plan is largely an administrative function, the board should understand the key assumptions that underlie projections. Board members should ensure that the fiscal plan is aligned with the district’s strategic plan and/or the district’s vision, mission, goals and priorities.

BOCES can be helpful in fiscal forecasting, identifying grant opportunities and identifying service inefficiencies. As always, proactive communication with stakeholders about short-term and long-term fiscal health and decisions will help to ensure transparency.

On Aug. 1 and 2, NYSSBA’s Leadership in Education Event (LEE) will feature a session on long-term fiscal planning. The session, called “Navigating an Uncertain Fiscal Future,” will examine the ever-changing landscape of educational funding and the vital role of long-range financial planning. This session will explore how strategic resource allocation and intentional preparation can safeguard the fiscal health of school districts and ensure sustainable support for educational priorities.

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Pre-Convention Special Session
Why School Boards Matter

Drawing on history, research, and experience, author **Scott Levy** offers a practical roadmap for how school boards can transform our education system.

FRIDAY, OCT. 24, 10:45 – 11:45 A.M.

The Promise of Upstream Prevention:
Profound New Evidence on Reducing Youth Suicide

Sources of Strength CEO **Scott LoMurray** will discuss upstream, peer-led, public health approaches to prevent a leading cause of death by strengthening the leading causes of life.



FRIDAY, OCT. 24, 2:45 – 3:45 P.M.
SATURDAY, OCT. 25, 8:30 – 9:30 A.M.



The Dignity Index: A Deeper Dive

A follow-up to Tim Shriver's keynote address, UNITE's K-12 Senior Program Associate **Meghan Monroe** will teach attendees how the Index can be applied to education leaders and students alike.

FRIDAY, OCT. 24, 4:00 – 5:00 P.M.

A Fireside Chat with the Commissioner and Senior Staff

Join in a conversation with **Commissioner Betty Rosa** about what constitutes some of the most pressing new obligations school districts are required to put into effect.



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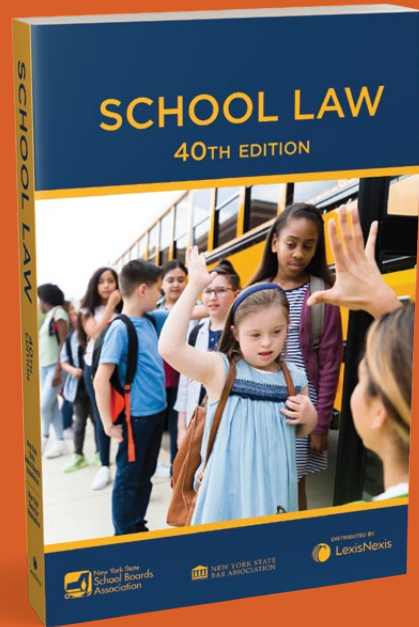
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Best practices in selection of curriculum and materials

By the New York State
Association of School Attorneys

The so-called “reading wars” have taken place mostly in academic circles as researchers have debated the effectiveness of various techniques of teaching reading and writing. But disagreements about educational approaches can become legal disputes, particularly in the context of whether schools are using the best methods to help special education students make progress.

Recently, a class action lawsuit involved how schools teach reading. On Dec. 4, 2024, a group of Massachusetts parents sued Lucy Calkins, a professor at Columbia University who founded the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project and created the widely used “Units of Study for Teaching Reading” program.

Also named as defendants in *S.C. v. Calkins* were other champions of “balanced literacy” including:

- Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, college professors who created the widely used “Fountas & Pinnell” programs.
- Heinemann/HMH, which published many books and curricular packages by Calkins, Fountas and Pinnell.
- Teachers College at Columbia University, which historically had been a standard-setter in literacy education.

The parents alleged that the defendants systematically marketed their reading programs despite being aware of significant evidence showing that the programs were ineffective for most students in learning how to read. The plaintiffs claimed educational malpractice based on false marketing.

If a defendant in a lawsuit that has been filed in state court believes the case could have been filed in federal court, they can petition a federal court to assume jurisdiction. That occurred in this case, and a U.S. District Court in Boston dismissed the complaint on May 22, 2025. The judge used the same reasoning that courts typically give when declining to hear claims of educational malpractice – that the court was not in a position to determine the quality of reading programs or the research supporting them.

In New York State, much of the responsibility for selection of curriculum and materials lies with school boards, as Section 1709 of the Education Law grants school boards the power to “prescribe the course of study.” Therefore, it is possible that the curricular decisions by a school board could become the subject of scrutiny and/or litigation.

Concerned parents or others might demand that a school board explain why it chose a certain approach to teaching reading or math. Complaints also may come from outside the district, as a number of advocacy groups across the country opposed content related to sexual orientation and gender identity, the discussion of race or certain forms of health education. A group may seek to have the district not use certain books in classes and/or remove certain volumes from school libraries.

Here are best practices in selecting curriculum and materials:

- 1. Consult with others.** Your school board may include former teachers or administrators, but the board should look beyond itself for expertise when evaluating curriculum and materials. School boards should consult with their district’s administrators, teachers, content-area experts and community members.
- 2. Comply with state regulations and meet state learning standards.** The Board of Regents and the State Education Department (SED) prescribe learning standards that all boards must satisfy when selecting instructional materials. For instance, SED issued new literacy standards in January 2025. (See www.nysed.gov/standards-instruction/literacy-initiative.)
- 3. Understand that federal and state authorities may issue conflicting guidance.** The Trump



administration is opposed to use of any public resources targeted at diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and has issued executive orders in an attempt to end such programs. However, the Regents and SED are committed to “culturally responsive-sustaining education.” Much of this work is based on the Board of Regents DEI Framework, which directs all New York State school boards to ensure instructional materials incorporate diverse perspectives, use non-discriminatory language and provide tools for critical thinking. (See www.nysed.gov/diversity-equity-inclusion/policy-and-guidance.)

4. Practice open and transparent decision-making.

When considering updates in the school’s educational program, school boards should consider holding public forums or listening sessions to better understand community expectations. School communities are comprised of individuals with varying perspectives, some of whom may have strong feelings about curriculum and materials. Practicing open and transparent decision-making does not guarantee an absence of criticism, but it can reduce the likelihood of ill-informed criticism and ensure that the discussion is not confined to a few passionate citizens.

5. Explain the rationale for the board’s decision.

Transparency includes clearly communicating the reasoning behind decisions that have been the subject of debate. In most cases, the school district can address

concerns by explaining how selected educational programs comply with state learning standards and are designed to foster higher academic achievement.

6. Document, retain and reference everything. Good recordkeeping is essential in school governance. Some examples of information that should be documented and retained include research findings relied upon, memos explaining the board’s reasoning for its selection, and communications by and between relevant individuals participating in the curriculum selection process. In the event of a legal challenge, much of the district’s defense will rely on the proverbial “paper trail.” It can also help the district answer questions from the public, the media or interest groups when they arise.

The curriculum selection process has a direct and significant impact on student achievement. Arguably, selecting suitable instructional materials may be one of the most consequential decisions a school board will have to make. To avoid implementing inadequate educational programs, school boards are encouraged to educate all members on relevant laws, policies and standards, encourage open, transparent and considerate dialogue, and document all relevant information. By following these best practices, school boards can successfully navigate the complex task of curriculum selection, provide quality academic outcomes for students and maintain the integrity of our public education system.



Ryan Hughes

Members of the New York State Association of School Attorneys represent school boards and school districts. This article was written by Ryan Hughes of Hodgson Russ LLP.

Value of phonics in reading instruction according to filing in dismissed lawsuit

Below are excerpts from S.C. v. Calkins, a lawsuit dismissed by a federal judge in May:

Literacy – the ability to read – is the foundation of early-childhood education. Accordingly, educators in kindergarten, first-grade and second-grade classrooms have long focused much of their efforts and classroom time on reading, understanding that their students’ success in later grades will depend in large part on their continued ability to read at grade level. As described colloquially, between kindergarten and second grade, the focus is on “learning to read.” From third grade onward, children “read to learn.”

For decades, scientists and educators have understood that the first step in teaching literacy is robust, daily and extensive instruction in phonics. Phonics is about understanding the connection between how the written letters on the page (the graphemes) relate to the corresponding spoken sounds (the phonemes) of a word.

A student learning to read the word cat, for example, is taught to “sound out” the word by breaking down the three graphemes (letters) into their phonemic components: the sounds c-, a- and -t. With proper instruction in how to use that “sounding out” tool, the student learns to blend the distinct sounds into a single word – “cat” – and to recognize the same grapheme/phoneme correspondence in similar words (e.g., rat or hat). Eventually, the decoding and blending process becomes second nature, enabling the

student to read new and complex words, and setting the stage for more advanced reading, writing and comprehension.

In 1997, Congress convened a National Reading Panel to study American early literacy instruction. The Panel published its findings in 2000, [concluding] that “teaching children to manipulate phonemes in words was highly effective under a variety of teaching conditions with a variety of learners across a range of grade and age levels.” It also concluded that teaching phonics to children “significantly improves their reading more than instruction that lacks any attention” [to phonemic awareness].

Many other studies subsequently replicated or confirmed the same findings, including research showing a neurological basis for the importance of letter-sound relationships.

Other research has shown that structured, repetitive and continuous phonics lessons are particularly important for certain sizeable populations of students for whom learning to read may be particularly challenging. This includes students with learning differences, like dyslexia; students learning English as a second language; and students whose backgrounds provide less exposure to reading and writing. Indeed, research has shown that a “structured literacy” approach that teaches phonics systematically has been shown to help re-code a brain predisposed to certain learning differences often connected to literacy delays.

Monroe One BOCES intrigues students with a 'Mystery Through History'

Zoom class calls attention to Erie Canal on its 200th anniversary

By Sara Foss
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Every year, New York's fourth-graders learn about the Erie Canal. In mid-June, classrooms from several school districts were given an unusual, time-traveling assignment. In 1826, when the engineering marvel was beginning to transform New York State into an economic powerhouse, a ring was reported stolen from a canal boat. Could they figure out who did it?

In a video mini-course, students interview actors who play the parts of suspects who had jobs involving the canal's construction or operation. Visual backgrounds change as the swiftly unfolding mystery covers relevant facts about why the canal was built and how it was used.

The hour-long program, called "Erie Canal Mystery Through History," has been offered by Monroe One BOCES for 16 years. It is open to fourth-grade classrooms whose districts subscribe to a BOCES Distance Learning CoSer, which delivers programs statewide.

Districts that don't belong to the CoSer can purchase a connection through the Minnesota-based Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration.

In recent years, about 1,600 students per year have taken the mini-course. That could jump this fall because the Erie Canal's bicentennial will be commemorated.

[Bicentennial events starting in September will include concerts, guided paddles on the river, hikes and other educational and recreational gatherings. One noteworthy event will be the 33-day voyage of the Seneca Chief, a replica Erie Canal boat that will travel from Buffalo to New York Harbor to commemorate Gov. DeWitt Clinton's historic 1825 journey on the canal. This ship will depart Buffalo on Sept. 25, docking at 28 ports along the Erie Canal and Hudson River along the way.]

To date, 9,500 New York students have taken the "Erie Canal Mystery Through History," which is aligned to the state's social studies framework. The

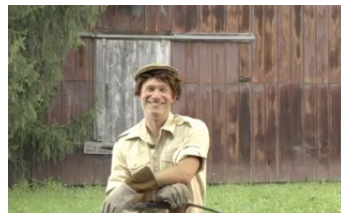
lesson also meets state standards and benchmarks for English Language Arts, computer science and digital fluency, social emotional learning and New York's culturally responsive-sustaining framework.

In June, an *On Board* reporter logged on to join fourth-grade sleuths from Bellmore Public Schools on Long Island (two classrooms) and the Pittsford Central School District in Monroe County. Students from the South Huntington Union Free School District in Suffolk County watched the class but did not participate in the interactive segments.

The story unfolds like a classic whodunit, with four suspects who each tell a story that sometimes makes them look a little bit guilty.

The action appears to be unfolding live, but the scenes with the characters from yesteryear were filmed in advance. Students are asked to read pre-written questions when prompted, and the characters look like they're responding to these queries in real time.

A detective named Inspector J – played by teacher Parker Ormerod of the Webster Central School District – lets students know they are going to be hearing from various suspects, including the person who reported the loss of the ring, a businessman named Michael Snobington played by Peter Robson, a retired educator from the Challenger Learning Center of Greater Rochester. "Keep in mind he is a businessman,"



Shamus MacDonald, a character in the Erie Canal Mystery Through History, explains the hardships that workers experienced building the canal.



Students in the Erie Canal Mystery Through History online class are shown an image of this oil painting depicting a packet boat transporting both passengers and goods on the Erie Canal. Called "Early Days of Rapid Transit", it was painted by Edward Lamson Henry. Inset: Anniversary logo courtesy of the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor.

Inspector J advises. "He knows how to make deals and talk around things."

Snobington is dressed in period garb. He is blustery and confident and says he was on the canal boat because he had goods that needed to be transported westward. The Erie Canal is a more efficient way to travel than horse and wagon, and "when you have efficiency, you have higher profits," he says.

When asked where he was at the time of the robbery, Snobington explains that he was with his business colleagues. "We were meeting to discuss problems along the Canal," he says. He explains that some people living near the canal are unhappy about the constant stream of strangers passing through their communities. Don't they understand the benefits of the canal?

As the first navigable waterway connecting the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes, it vastly reduced transportation costs, making it possible for farmers to grow crops that can be sold in New York City and elsewhere. The canal would

encourage the settlement of the Great Lakes region and be a key factor in the westward expansion of the United States.

The next suspect is Shamus MacDonald, an Irish canal worker played by Andy Raab, an educator at the Challenger Learning Center. Shamus explains that he and his family moved to America because they heard the streets were paved with gold. However, the reality was much different: Shamus notes that many men died of malaria and swamp fever in a "place called Montezuma" – a reference to what today is the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge in New York's Finger Lakes region.

The project required 50,000 workers and is believed to have led to 1,000 deaths due to malaria and cholera, as well as accidents including reckless use of explosives, structural collapses and drownings.

Next, the students meet the canal boat captain, Zeke Goodrich, played by

The inventor is, by far, the most suspicious character. He is emotional and talks about wanting to "invent something to make me rich and famous." His alibi is that he was putting out a fire that he started when the robbery occurred.

After each interview, students in each classroom hold a brief discussion. When they reconvene, classroom representatives present a fact and a clue – something they learned and something that might help them unravel the mystery.

Eventually, everyone agrees that the inventor robbed the packet boat. The video returns to the inventor, who immediately confesses. "I admit it," he says. "I needed the money."

While much of the focus has been on solving the theft, students have also learned how the canal fueled the United States' westward expansion. Teachers can reinforce how the canal became a symbol of American ingenuity.

The Mystery Through History class was moderated by D'Annunzio (students don't seem to notice that he also portrays a character) and Doreen Pietrantonio, an instructional technology specialist for Monroe One BOCES.

Students love the class, Pietrantonio said. "They're using their critical thinking skills," she said. "They're using the evidence that's presented to them."

Additional resources for students who take the Mystery Through History course are available to teachers through the Monroe RIC Distance Learning website at bit.ly/3Gw5cKm. They include slideshows and videos on African-American inventors, the impact of the Erie Canal on indigenous peoples, the Underground Railroad and female captains.

The Erie Canal Learning Hub, a joint project of the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor and the New York State Canal Corporation, includes lesson plans for teachers, information about field trips, videos and virtual tours and other materials at www.eriecanalway.org/learning-hub. Also available is a full schedule of Erie Canal bicentennial events.



Photo by David Warner



Photo by Stephen Abbey

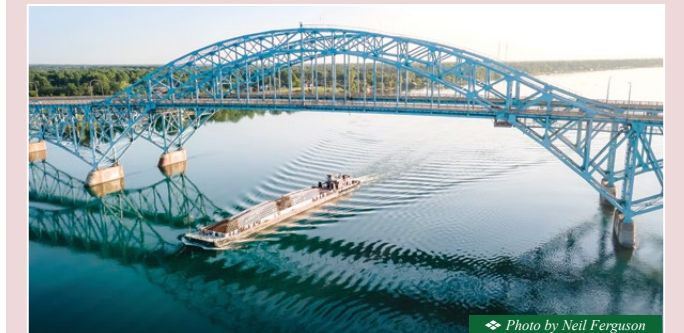


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The Erie Canal Today

Award-winning photos courtesy of the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor



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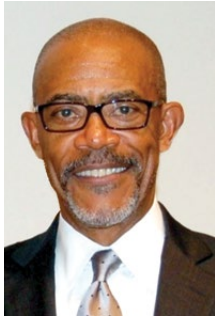
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There is no summer lull for school leaders, but it is a time to look back – and forward



Lester W. Young, Jr.
Chancellor, Board of Regents

The summer months are a critical time for schools and school districts. Teachers, administrators and school board members get a moment to catch their collective breath, evaluate the school year that just ended and plan for the one ahead.

By any objective measure, the 2024-25 school year was eventful and challenging, with significant changes emanating from both Albany and Washington, D.C.

This year, the state Senate and Assembly got a number of important things right. Despite uncertainty around federal revenues and the state's economic outlook, the Legislature approved an overall increase in foundation aid statewide, with every district receiving at least some additional funding. They also adopted changes to better support career and technical education programs and other vital programs by doubling the "BOCES-aidable" salary cap – something the Board of Regents had requested for more than a decade.

These investments will help New York's students to thrive, while at the same time supporting you in your work to ensure the state's public schools operate as efficiently and effectively as possible.

But some changes enacted by the state Legislature will require hard work and planning over the summer

Students need to feel safe, seen, valued and uplifted.

months. As NYSSBA Executive Director Bob Schneider aptly noted at the conclusion of the legislative session: "Governance teams and school leaders will be plenty busy this summer getting ready to implement new education policies and practices regarding student cellphone use, temperatures in the classroom and the transition to zero-emission buses." These legal requirements present real challenges to your districts and will require careful planning, preparation and implementation.

The U.S. Department of Education has also made decisions and taken actions that require thoughtful, strong responses. The Regents and I are especially concerned about actions that turn Titles VI and IX of the Civil Rights Act on their heads, complete with federal intervention into local matters and threats to withhold federal dollars from your districts. We will continue to push back against any efforts to make our schools less supportive and less inclusive.

The core mission of our education enterprise – student learning – remains unchanged in the face of these challenges. Let me share the values that guide us at the state level.

One value is Hippocratic: "first, do no harm." Also, the Board of Regents, the commissioner and entire SED staff are steadfastly committed to ensuring that *all* students in New York State have equitable access to the educational opportunities they need to succeed in school and in life. To meet this responsibility, we work

tirelessly to design and build systems of support that prepare New York's students for a world that is changing at breathtaking speed.

Our schools must be more than places of learning. They must also be sanctuaries of stability, where students, families and educators find reassurance and refuge from uncertainty; spaces where every child feels safe, seen, valued and uplifted.

We face many kinds of disruptions and distractions, including policy shifts, economic hardships and executive mandates. These can send shockwaves through classrooms and communities, threatening the stability our students deserve. In these uncertain times, our schools must be *community anchors*, where dreams take root and voices rise, not with hesitation and doubt, but with purpose, confidence and conviction.

Passivity is simply not an option in turbulent times like these. Experience and research inform us that student outcomes are shaped by more than just practices and policies. We know that education is a social and a cultural endeavor, as well.

As we reflect on the work ahead, I urge you to embrace the challenges we face with urgency and hope. Together, we must build schools that nurture, uplift and empower every student, regardless of their race, identity or lived experiences.

I am confident that we are well positioned to welcome students back to school in September with a renewed commitment to our work. For now, though, I hope you will take some well-deserved time to enjoy the summer and reflect on the good you and your colleagues have achieved for New York's students and their families.

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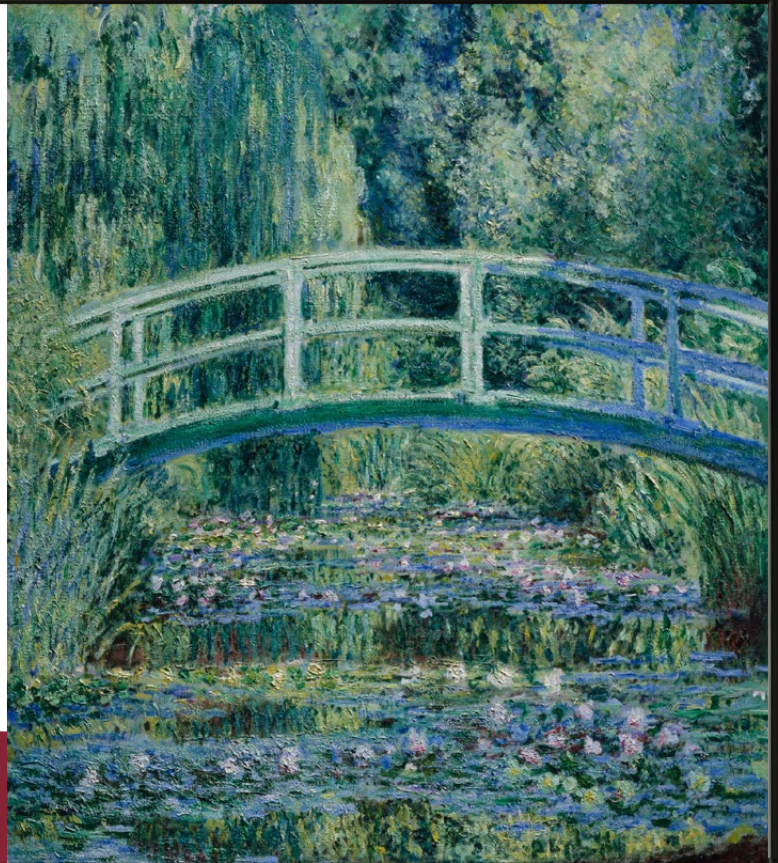
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How middle school students and 17 superintendents prompted NYS to improve access to menstrual products

By Marie Digirolamo
SUPERINTENDENT, ICHABOD CRANE
CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

In March of 2025, I heard about an important project by a Girl Scout troop in my school district: to ensure that girls bathrooms in my school district's middle school were stocked with high quality, age-appropriate feminine products.

Last fall, a group of five eighth-grade students supplied the first round of products after their Girl Scout troop conducted a fundraising effort. However, the school and its students ran into a challenge when it came time to restock. Unfortunately, the students' preferred items weren't available through the state's approved purchasing contracts.

They talked with our middle school principal, Anthony Marturano. It soon became clear that we needed guidance from the New York State Office of General Services (OGS), which oversees bulk purchasing.

Soon the students would be in high school, but they weren't ready to give up. One of the students, Annie Lockmer, shared: "We felt it should be fixed and the bathrooms should have the right products, even if it wasn't going to affect us, since we are eighth graders

and so close to being done at the middle school."

Annie, along with Lily Stevens, Addi Bickerton, Brooklyn Norton and Madison McGrath, met with me and other school leaders to share their concerns. I encouraged them to take their message to the Ichabod Crane Board of Education. At the April board meeting, Lily spoke passionately on behalf of the group, advocating for better product options for all middle school students.

I was so inspired by their voices and determination that I reached out to fellow superintendents across the region to see if they would co-sign a letter to the New York State Office of General Services on behalf of our students.

The response was incredible – 17 regional superintendents joined me in requesting special permission from OGS to purchase menstrual products that better meet the needs of younger students.

In the letter, we included an excerpt from the students' written statement to Ichabod Crane's Board of Education: "We believe that these should be provided because the ones given currently aren't fitted for young girls ... not all students are able to afford the necessary products and have no way for them to be provided. Most girls



Ichabod Crane administrators Anthony Marturano and Marie Digirolamo supported middle school students who found a civic cause: ensuring girls bathrooms in their middle school had high quality, age-appropriate feminine products.

also don't feel comfortable asking staff members for a pad or tampon in front of the class. Our goal is to have products provided that are appropriate for kids in grades 4-8."

OGS responded to our letter. Officials acknowledged that the products currently available on the centralized purchasing list do not meet the form, function or utility required for younger

students. They provided a way for us to purchase products through an alternate procurement method.

Thanks to the students' persistence and leadership, and the responsiveness of OGS, we were able to purchase and distribute the first batch of the improved, student-recommended products in May. The same students who started this effort helped place them in the middle school bathrooms.

"It was so exciting to hear the news that we could restock the bathrooms again," Addi said.

I want to personally thank Principal Marturano for championing the students' cause from the very beginning. I also want to thank the 17 regional superintendents who stood in support of our students.

But most of all I want to thank the students. We are deeply proud of these five young leaders for their advocacy, determination and commitment to making a lasting difference for their classmates and future students.

I see this as a powerful example of student voice in action – and the kind of civic awareness and involvement that we all want to encourage in New York State. When students feel empowered to speak up, real change is possible – especially when adults are willing to listen!

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Ensuring district messaging reflects district priorities

By Heather Swanson

DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS
GENEVA CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Our school district sets new priorities every school year. Unlike a strategic plan that prescribes the next five years, or a mission statement that may remain unchanged for decades, our priorities have the flexibility to shift over time in direct response to community values and needs.

Generally, we identify three priorities per year. Themes tend to be safety, academic achievement and opportunity. For instance, our 2024–25 school year priorities were:

- **Safe and supportive learning environments.** The district will increase access to mental health services, proactively focus on social-emotional learning and strengthen positive behaviors within our schools.
- **Academic achievement.** The district will provide engaging learning opportunities and instructional supports that foster academic growth for every student.
- **Equity and inclusion.** The district will ensure every student feels welcome in our schools, sees their own experiences reflected in the curriculum and has equitable access to engaging learning opportunities.

We want everyone in our school community to understand and support our priorities. Ideally, each year's priorities become part of our culture and everyday school life as we pursue continuous improvement.

One question we have wrestled with is: What is the best way to ensure that our various stakeholders understand our priorities? What forms of communication can maximize support for our priorities?

Community involvement in developing our priorities is an important first step. It helps us identify what messages will resonate with our various audiences.

Each summer, we conduct a ThoughtExchange survey to find out what ideas and feelings are widely shared. Several days later, we convene a community forum to discuss refining the ThoughtExchange



Geneva Superintendent Bo Wright was pleased that ideas raised at a recent forum reflected annual priorities set last summer.

results to identify possible priorities for the coming school year.

This process is collaborative. It informs all participating families, staff, students and community partners what the priorities might be and gives them the opportunity to share their perspectives. This encourages buy-in among the participants, who tend to be highly involved and influential members of our community.

Once the new priorities have been established, they are announced in multiple ways. An initial announcement comes through direct school-to-home messaging on ParentSquare and personal emails to forum attendees.

We know this is not enough. So, we play the long game by working the priorities into regular communications throughout the year.

This includes focusing on one of the priorities in each of our fall monthly video newsletters. Typically, Superintendent Bo Wright introduces a priority and a staff member will provide details on the efforts

we are making in that area. But the real draw of the video message is the third part – interviews with students who have been impacted by the priority. Students are the people our families most want to see and hear from! They can speak to a district priority with an authenticity that no other spokesperson could ever achieve.

Strategic communications is about consistency and coherence. So, our newsletters and publications repeat information about our priorities. We weave in key words that serve as reminders about what we are prioritizing. These are drawn directly from the titles of our priorities, and, this year, included “supportive learning environments,” “academic achievement” and “equity and inclusion.”

Social media posts include keyword hashtags, and superintendent columns discuss progress. Also, employee newsletters provide updates.

Either explicitly or implicitly, our various communications mirror our priorities. That social media post about therapy dogs? We’re prioritizing safe and supportive learning environments. That story on our new ELA curriculum? It’s about access and opportunity for all students. And that press release on our valedictorian and salutatorian? Just another way to express our focus on academic achievement.

Also, any discussion of the school budget includes references to the priorities. This strengthens the message that our budget isn’t really about numbers; it’s about the programs (and priorities) that support students.

School principals are key communicators. Their school-level messages echo our priorities and are consistent with each other. Our high school principal, for example, used an annual ThoughtExchange survey to ask whether families felt the school had

created “safe and supportive learning environments” at school, and whether that focus should continue. Our middle school wove our equity and inclusion priority directly into their School Comprehensive Education Plan by making it one of their commitments.

By the end of the year, the priorities have become so much a part of the messaging that for many, they’re second nature. An early May Changemaker’s Hub forum on vision planning with our partners at World Savvy, for example, incorporated the priorities without explicitly referencing them.

At the day-long event, students, staff and community members were invited to collaborate in discussions of what the future of education could or should look like in Geneva based on what we value (i.e., our priorities). Some conversations centered around expanding the understanding of academic achievement. For example, how do we broaden perspectives and opportunities to ensure that pursuing a career in the trades is seen as an academic achievement? Other conversations looked at the many ways we might create *supportive learning environments* by rethinking the typical school day. Ideas included increasing outdoor time, allowing students the flexibility to stay longer in certain classes, or even doing away with the bell schedule altogether. Underlying the entire experience – and emphasized by the event hosts – was the power of bringing people together with varying experiences and perspectives to ensure we remain faithful to our commitments to *equity and inclusion*.

Social media posts and a video newsletter about the Changemaker’s Hub served to bring the story outside of the forum alone and into the wider school community.

What’s the most crucial piece of this process? It’s making sure everyone has a voice in determining the substance of our district priorities. The priorities are more meaningful because they were created by and belong to the entire community — not just a small group of school administrators.

Sending surveys, convening discussions and organizing forums to solicit opinion can be as important as any other kind of educational event on our calendar. Discussing our priorities during the school day leads to conversations outside the school day, and those conversations serve as word-of-mouth advertising of our priorities. Direct, unambiguous messaging announces the finalized priorities to the wider community, giving us a common language for the school year.

But it’s not enough to get our staff and community members talking about our priorities. Our goal is to ensure that our priorities are reflected in every decision that we make and every action that we take. When that happens, district communications become a strategic asset. Bringing your school community together is the only way to make real progress in the areas that matter most.



Forums in the Geneva City School District help identify the themes and values that the district seeks to reinforce through its communications vehicles.

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