

Good evening. Thank you all for being here. We have a full agenda tonight, so I want to get right down to business. I will speak for a few minutes, and then Delia Garrity from Rockville Centre, NY, a system that has successfully de-tracked, is going to respond to my talk. After that, a panel of SPS educators will discuss their experiences with middle school education and thoughts about the transformation, then we'll have comments and questions from the audience. I will be here for as long as it takes tonight. I promise that I will address all of your questions.

Tonight I am going to discuss middle school transformation. I know we've been talking about middle school reform, but I have come to realize that our focus should be on transformation rather than reformation. Reformation suggests that we are correcting a wrong or patching up our current system. Transformation means that we are embarking upon total evolution, systemically becoming our better selves. Our children transform before our eyes when they go from being an infant, to a toddler, to a little kid, to an adolescent, to a young adult. Like adolescence, transformation can feel pretty uncomfortable because change, as the saying goes, can be scary. With our love and guidance our children will hopefully transform into good adults and people. So let us think about transforming our middle schools in Stamford – let us commit to being the stewards of their evolution; let us guide the transformation of our middle schools so that the practices that are proven to help all students succeed can be extended to each and every child before us.

I am going to spend a few minutes providing you with information about why we are transforming our middle schools, what we are specifically going to implement, and how we are going about our work. But first, I'd like to ask you to raise your hand if you think that our education system is currently meeting all of the needs of each and every one of our children. I want to know if you think we're good enough. I don't think that any urban public education system today is good enough; that's why I do what I do and why I am so privileged to lead the Stamford Public Schools towards excellence. Excellence is not about No Child Left Behind. Nothing that I have said or done over the last few years has been geared towards NCLB. While Superintendents live and die by test scores, I have been explicit in my public statements and directions to administrators and teachers that we are seeking a higher standard for our children. The State and NCLB require us to achieve proficiency – level 3 on the CMT or CAPT. I have set our sites on goal and advanced – levels 4 and 5. Excellence is about providing each and every student with a world-class curriculum. Our curriculum implementation over the last few years is designed to help our children be successful in an ever-changing world, not simply meet minimum standards. Eighty-three percent of today's jobs require some type of education beyond high school. We cannot help our students accomplish that if we continue to allow some of them to be in classes with inadequate curriculum.

Let me be specific about what we will be doing in the fall, in 6th grade. First, we will have standards-based curriculum in Mathematics, English language arts, Science and Social Studies. The SPS curriculum will raise our expectations for our students, no matter their school, background, or prior level of achievement. Students will be expected to leave eighth grade ready for a rigorous course of studies in high school. We will no

longer allow for the needs of some to be met while others are expected to do less, nor will we tolerate boredom among some students because they are not sufficiently challenged.

The curriculum that is being developed by our own teachers and administrators, with the help of outside experts, is raising the bar for our students. It builds on the work we have been doing for the last few years. In Math, our students are being exposed to the same kinds of instruction used in high-performing countries in Asia and Europe; we are teaching mathematics in a deep way rather than just drilling on basic skills. In English language arts, we are increasing the number of books students read and the amount they write. Our Science curriculum is challenging our students to use the scientific method in teams as they conduct hands-on experiments – just as professional scientists do. In Social Studies, our students are expected to be engaged in more inquiry-based activities and I want to see more participation in History Day.

There will be two instructional groups in sixth grade next year – Honors and College Prep. Instructional groups are simply ways to organize students to maximize teaching and learning. In math, all students, in both an Honors and College Prep class, will follow the Connected Math Program, which we began this year. Students in math Honors will move more quickly through the Connected Math curriculum, explore some concepts more deeply, and be on a path to take Algebra 1 in 8th grade, potentially for high school credit. In English language arts, all students will be held to grade-level expectations in text-rich environments. Students in English language arts Honors will follow the same themes, explore the same concepts and develop the same skills as the standard curriculum but will use more difficult texts.

Currently, we use a combination of the 4th grade CMTs and the Stanford achievement test to place children in the same track for math and English language arts. Students rarely leave the track in which they were originally placed and their studies are not geared towards their strengths or needs. That system will cease to exist. Going forward, students will be placed in one group for math and science that is independent from the group they will be placed in for English language arts and social studies. For example, a student could be placed in an Honors math class and a College Prep English language arts class. And we will use the most recent data that we have to make these placements. Students will be placed in Honors or College Prep using their 5th grade CMT scores and the Otis-Lennon and Naglieri assessments.

An Honors math class will be made up of students who have achieved at Level 5 on the CMT and students who have scored at Level 4 on the CMT if they have also achieved at or above the 70th percentile on the Naglieri and Otis-Lennon. All other students will be in a College Prep class. Similarly, an Honors English language arts class will be comprised of children who have achieved at Level 5 on the CMT and students who have scored at Level 4 on the CMT if they have also achieved at or above the 60th percentile on the Naglieri and Otis-Lennon, and all other children will be in a College Prep class.

Based on our projections, approximately 25% of students will qualify for placement in an Honors math or English language arts class. Again, we will use 5th grade CMT results for

final placement. We also project that about 13% of students will be in an Honors class for one subject and a CP class for another.

The placement criteria will be the same for every school. No longer will we have different thresholds for excellence between schools. A student who qualifies for Honors or College Prep at Dolan will qualify for Honors or College Prep at Rippowam, Turn of River and Cloonan. There will be opportunities for students to move from College Prep to Honors at the end of the first and second quarters. My team is working to finalize this process. It is important to remember that flexible grouping within the classroom will be happening on a daily basis.

To support and further challenge children, we will have an Academic Enrichment period. There will be two mathematics and two English language arts AE periods each week. During this time, students who need additional help to reach standard will receive that help, and we have structured explicit programs in math and English language arts. If you have met or exceeded the standard, Connected Math has additional enrichment lessons and resources; in Language arts it will be an opportunity to explore concepts and themes in a deeper way.

One might ask if we are ready for all of this. I know that we are because we are using the same systematic approach to instructional improvement that has worked over the last few years. We have already provided significant hours of professional development for 6th grade teachers. We have provided subject-area professional development, taught new approaches to meeting the individual strength and needs of our students, and new ways to think about how to motivate them. Having two instructional groups will mean that, for the first time, we will actually practice the conviction that each and every child in Stamford will achieve the same high standards. This means that our teachers must have the requisite skills to challenge, engage and support each child, and I am confident that they do. The core of our work rests in improving teaching and learning, which means revising curriculum and providing teachers with quality professional development.

The new approach to instruction that we are teaching our educators is known as the Workshop Model. This model has 3 components. The first is a short opening, which is where the teacher introduces the concept or the lesson to the class. Second is the work time. This is where students work in pairs or groups on the task or activity. The teacher focuses student learning by interacting with the pairs or groups and by asking clarifying questions to assist students in their work. The third component is the closing. This is where the teacher and the pairs or groups of students summarize the learning to the class. The Workshop Model enables all students to be involved in the learning by having students work together and then report their findings to the teacher and their classmates.

In addition to having students more involved in their learning, the Workshop Model also provides the opportunity for teachers to assess students' needs and strengths so that instruction can be properly differentiated. Entering a classroom, you might see a group of students who have mastered a particular concept working on a task or activity that

challenges them to go beyond the standard. You might also see a group of students who are struggling with a concept working directly with the teacher for reinforcement before they are asked to work in their group without the teacher. If you visit this same classroom next week, you would likely see different groups of students working together because a new skill or concept is being taught. This is the essence of differentiated instruction.

In addition, we have been doing extensive professional development in changing the way we think about success and intelligence. Through our work with the Efficacy Institute, we are learning that smart is not something you are, it is something you become when you work hard. This is a fundamental shift in how we think about teaching, learning and success. Intelligence cannot be thought of as fixed. While certainly some people are more talented in some areas than others, the message we send our children must be that they can master a skill or learn a concept if they work hard at it. I never, ever want to hear anyone say again, I am not a math person. I was told that in 5th grade when I was placed in a lower-level math group and it stuck with me through graduate school. Today, everyone must be a math person. Yes, some people have a natural affinity for math and will go to MIT and become nuclear physicists. But we must expect every child to master the basic concepts of algebra so that they will be able to take college-level math. The same goes for English language arts. Not every graduate will write the great American novel or even read Beowulf. Our students need to be comfortable reading old and new classics in literature, they need to see reading as enjoyable and they need to be able to write well. If you ask employers about the most prized workplace skills, writing is at the top of the list. Our job is to make sure that our students feel that they can tackle any of these areas, regardless of their prior achievement. To separate students into different categories at the age of eleven and expect that some will achieve great heights while others are slated to mediocrity, is unjust. If we expect students to excel, if we encourage them to work hard, if we teach them that intelligence is not all innate but comes in many different forms, then they will believe it and they will achieve.

Once a week, in a twenty-five minute advisory period, we will work with our students to help them develop the mindset and attitude to be hard-working, efficacious young adults. We already have advisories in Scofield and AITE, and Westhill began implementing them this year. They are a proven approach to helping children develop the social-emotional competencies they need to succeed in school and beyond. And, they help promote strong relationships between adults and students, and among students.

There is one other key to our efforts to help each and every child achieve. Family engagement is a critical element and parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, brothers and sisters; we have some work to do. I know that our families are invested in their students' education. Involvement in your child's education is indispensable— from volunteering at your child's school, checking homework, asking questions of teachers, talking to the principal when there's a question or concern, reading with your child, or asking, "How was your day at school?" If we had a longer school day and a longer school year, if we had the resources to work individually with every family, perhaps I could tell you to leave your child at the schoolhouse door and everything would be okay. But that's not

enough today. Our children need so much more; they need us to understand the increased demands on them to succeed at higher levels; they need us to understand the complex social pressures of today; they need to know that their families expect as much, if not more, than what educators are able to provide. They need us to turn off the television, know their friends, set limits, provide nutritious meals and demand that they treat each other and adults with respect and kindness. We cannot do it alone and our families must continue to support our efforts to help our children achieve and hold us accountable if we are not meeting their needs.

The practices and methods that I have outlined above are known to be effective in successful schools. The changes that we have implemented over the last four years in elementary, middle and high schools are research-based and proven. In fact, many of them have been used for years in our most successful schools. I have been asked to show the research behind our reforms. In our reference guide is a bibliography. But let me be clear, I cannot point to a district that looks exactly like Stamford that has taken the exact same approach. It simply does not exist. There are few districts in the country that have the same demographics that we do, and fewer still that have the same commitment to integrating schools in order to meet the community's expectations for diversity. There are, however, plenty of districts and schools that have used the same methodical, well-thought out approaches to improving teaching and learning for each and every child. The practices that are used – and ones that exist in some of our most successful schools right here in Stamford, are, – consistently high standards and expectations for each and every child; rich curriculum; ongoing and regular assessments of student progress; time for teachers to collaborate; extensive professional development; and accountability, intervention and support for schools that are struggling. We have not yet met the standard for excellence in every one of those areas, but we are well on our way.

So the time has come for us to transform our middle schools. The time has come for us to ensure that each and every child in Stamford, whatever their family background, ethnicity or prior achievement, has the opportunity to succeed at the highest level. The time has come for us to have the highest expectations of ourselves – as educators, families, community members and policy makers – that through hard work and the strategic use of resources, we will develop the skills and capacities of our children and help them thrive in the 21st century. The time has come to release ourselves from the tethers of the past that bind us to practices that no longer serve our children well. And the time has come to get over our fears of what may happen if we reform our middle schools, so that we can focus on what will happen when we transform them. Finally, the time has come for us to realize the promise that is Stamford, to embrace our complexity and diversity, and to work together to create a more beautiful world for our children – each and every one of them.