

Wolcott Public Schools

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A Note of Thanks

As we begin to wrap up the 2018-2019 school year and as I reflect on my first four years of serving as your superintendent, I find myself impressed, amazed, and thankful for the progress that we have accomplished as a team. Across both quantitative and qualitative measures of our students' successes, our work together should be something about which we are all proud.

While I'm sure that you know that I could go on and on about the quantitative improvements that we have made in our measures like SBAC and SAT scores or in our CSDE Accountability Score, I'll summarize these improvements with an excerpt from my most recent report to our Board of Education at the May 13, 2019 meeting: *"Where, just a short time ago, our performance was similar to districts like Cromwell, Region 14, and Berlin, we now outperform many more affluent districts such as Bolton, Canton, Glastonbury, East Lyme, Westbrook, and Madison."* I know that comparisons to other school districts don't tell us everything that we need to know about our work, but take a moment to pause and consider the fact that four years ago we ranked 102nd out of 166 school districts in SBAC ELA and now rank 59th. Or similarly, four years ago we ranked 89th in SBAC math and now rank 49th. That means in just four years of work we have surpassed the performance of 43 and 40 school districts respectively. I have worked for and with many school districts in our state and growth like ours is exceedingly rare. We've accomplished all of this while remaining one of the most fiscally efficient school districts. Everyone across all levels of our organization deserves credit. Also from my recent report to our Board: *"These accomplishments would not be possible without a strong dedication from all facets of our school community: our supportive Board of Education, dedicated Central Office staff, school administrators, teachers, counselors, mental health professionals, and support staff of all types. We are proving what can be accomplished when all members of an organization collaborate and hold each other to high expectations."*

Our impressive quantitative results notwithstanding, I am even more impressed with our dedicated, ongoing commitment to finding small but meaningful improvements in our own practice as educators. Back in the summer of 2016 at the start of my second year with you, I gave my first convocation speech. You might remember that I was a little nervous and skipped a few slides in the PowerPoint. The crux of my talk and what I hope that you left there with was a feeling for my commitment to informed practice and teacher empowerment. I talked a little about the idea of "kaizen" or constant incremental improvement. I asked you to think of those wonderful 32 meetings that you have after school each year and I asked you to make a small but meaningful promise to improve just two percent of your professional self each time you had one of these meetings. I showed you this chart that demonstrates mathematically what happens when you multiply 100% by 102% thirty-two times. You end up at almost twice the capacity with which you began. Well, as I now visit your schools and classrooms three years later, I'd like to thank you sincerely for committing to this idea and tell you that your growth has been impressive and has had a direct impact on the lives of the 2,256 students that we serve each day.



When visiting your classrooms and schools I see such remarkable changes that are benefiting Wolcott's kids. I see more collaboration, more humility, more confidence, and more use of informed decisions. Today I visited an elementary school and, as usual, this visit included classroom observations with Frank Purcaro and the principal. Here's what was remarkable and wonderful. The first room we were about to visit was already being visited...by the teachers from a grade-level data team from that same school. This may sound small but it represents a large leap forward in our practice together. Not only was the hosting teacher at ease with the visit, but so were the visitors. A short time ago, this was not something with which we were very comfortable. Now, it's become commonplace across the district. So not wanting to overload that particular room with visitors, Frank, the principal, and I went down the hall a couple doors to another classroom. By chance, the data team teachers visited this same room too. Now, there were six adult visitors simultaneously in the same classroom. Again, the host teacher was very comfortable but what was most noteworthy was the fact that the kids were too. This was a primary-grade classroom so, of course, there were a few smiles and waves from the kids but that was the extent of the disruption caused. This told me that the experience of having adult visitors in classrooms was perfectly normal for our students and this shows me that we're taking advantage of opportunities to learn from each other as colleagues.

At another school, where very traditional instructional methods were once the norm, corridor walls are now festooned with evidence of teaching that engages students in deep thinking and inquiry. Within our limited budget at Central Office, we do our best to provide thorough, high-quality training for you. At this school, teachers have taken to this training with aplomb and we see the benefits for kids every time that we visit. Lessons are now much more likely to begin with a big, probing questions followed by time for collaborative student thought and deliberation – leading them to deeper understandings and engagement.

At another school, I recently observed grade-level data teams. Teachers were thoughtfully and humbly engaged in viewing teachingchannel.org videos and reflecting on the practice that they'd observed. Deep professional conversations ensued. My favorite part of these visits were the arguments – professional and polite but arguments, none the less. Teachers were thinking deeply about level of Depth of Knowledge and the instructional setting for these viewed lessons and discussing whether the teacher could have made better decisions in the structure of the lesson on the video.

Thanks for reading and pardon my long-windedness but I really want for you to go into the summer of 2019 with a mix of confidence and humility. We should be proud of all that we've accomplished together to the benefit of Wolcott's kids but I want us to remember that we've gotten here through the willingness to challenge our own personal status quo and to look for the 2%.

In partnership,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Tony Gasper".

Tony Gasper
Superintendent of Schools