

Sussex County Charter School for Technology
Board of Trustees
President's Comments
September 28, 2015

I want to thank the parents and members of our community who were able to attend this afternoon. I also want to thank those who took time last week to voice their concerns over the changes that our school has been going through and the challenges that we are facing. One main issue was that the fact that the school is on probation with the state was unknown by many, if not most of the parents. I would like to thank Nancy Rush for noting that efforts were made for over a year to inform the school community of this fact, and for her call for patience and understanding. That so many were unaware of the efforts by the school to get the message out is an indication that among our challenges is the improvement of our communications system.

I would like to briefly discuss how we arrived at our present point, and summarize some of the steps we have taken and plan to take in the next few weeks and months. During the public portion of the meeting, members of the public will have an opportunity to express their concerns and ask questions. Questions specific to the changes in the academic program will be addressed by Mrs. Lazariuk and Mrs. Mastandrea. We are all in new territory, so there may be questions that we are unable to answer.

After the move to this building, our scores on state assessments began to lag behind expectations in both math and reading. In 2012, after the addition of 25 more 6th grade seats that brought our total population to 225 students, it became clear that changes were needed. We tried to rearrange programs, make tweaks, and introduce new tools for use by the staff, for instance our purchase of "Study Island" and other technologies. These moves culminated in our providing each student with his or her own Chromebook. This move is aimed at deepening students' technical skills and broadening the educational opportunities available to them. However, in large part our efforts proved to be scattered, in many cases sufficient focus and follow through were lacking. In addition we have been faced with a growing challenge of absenteeism on the part of a few students. While they were few in number, the extent of their truancy had an adverse effect on our attendance records.

Our challenge is, and has been, how to meet the demands of the state in terms of test scores, while still delivering a program that promotes creative productivity, and instruction in technology and its real-world applications. In the 2013-14 school year those efforts were still unsuccessful, and we fell farther behind. A visit from the state early this year found our academic programs lacking in the areas of math and reading. They noted our absenteeism, a lack of efficient supervision and meaningful professional development. This led the Board members to initiate an in-dept internal review of our administrative and instructional practices,

the school's overall performance, culture and future expectations. We began to explore changes in the program that would allow us to better resolve our challenges.

By the Spring of this year it became apparent to the Board that, while our administrative structure worked well in bringing the school into its own buildings, new administrative skills were needed to deal with our current realities. It was at that point that we brought Mrs. Lazariuk on Board as Executive Director to guide the school through the probation period and past the renewal process that we will engage in early in 2016. With the retirement of Mrs. Eckle, we also appointed Mrs. Mastandrea as Principal. New approaches to professional development will be put into place, and new procedures for gathering data that is requested by the state to show our progress are being instituted. In order to gain time in the day for those students who are lagging, we have adjusted our Foundations program. We also began to reach out more to members of the community by monitoring the PTO Face Book page, and by my attendance at two recent PTO meetings.

Let me note here that all is not as bleak as it may seem when looking only at numbers and data points. Our students are involved in their community. A large percentage was accepted into the high school of their choice. Our graduates continue to excel in their studies after leaving this school. These, and outcomes like these, must not be lost. They too are data points that should be considered when assessing the school's success.

The school has adopted a "Mission to Educational Excellence." We believe that the demands of the state and the promotion of creative productivity can co-exist. In order to be effective managers, we must continuously measure our students, teachers, staff, and ourselves. This has not always been the case, but it must be basic if we are to continue successfully as a school for technology. Changes that you will see will include a clear statement of expectations, and the gathering of data to demonstrate that those expectations have been met or exceeded.

In the meantime, those areas where we have always excelled, for instance in financial accountability and sustainability will still be carefully monitored. Charter schools are the only public schools in New Jersey that don't receive any public funding for facilities. We must pay for our facilities from our limited operating budget. Notwithstanding all the challenges the Charter School faces, we are highly committed to achieving our mission, as stated in our Charter Agreement, under the guidance and oversight of the government, the parents, the students and community at large.

More change will come as we realign programs and introduce measurement criteria and new approaches to data collection. We will be working with our teachers, making professional development funds available to them directly, so that they can engage in meaningful self-directed learning. Responding to parents' comments, we will begin to schedule more Board meetings at times more convenient to working families. With the PTO, we will explore ways to more effectively communicate, inform and involve parents. We will remain fully committed to making the Sussex County Charter School for Technology a public school that is highly regarded by the community.