

## Editorial 2014

The turn of any year is a time for reflection and planning ahead. We are grateful to work in this community that cares passionately about the well-being of Westerly Public School students and staff. We have accomplished some great things together in 2014. Our Hour of Code efforts have allowed Westerly to be present on the national stage and one of our staff is a member of a hand full of educators nationwide trained to be a CODE Ambassador. Two teachers were selected state winners in the national Samsung Solve for Tomorrow contest. We recently celebrated a high school student's national Scholastic Award; she has been asked to speak shoulder to shoulder with Harvard professors to tell her amazing story. For the first time in its history our high school is ranked in US News and World Report. Recently we developed an excellent report to guide our thinking about K-12 schools through the efforts of the School Redesign Advisory Committee. We continue to be looked to by other communities for our consolidation efforts within our town. There are many more successes accomplished by individuals and groups working for the betterment of our entire district.

As we move into 2015, we will continue to work every day to keep our staff and students safe. We accomplish this work by focusing our efforts on keeping our buildings clean and secure; collaborating with health and security partners and our community; and supporting the efforts of our mental health professionals as they keep the well-being of students at the forefront of our work.

One of the most elegant ways we support the well-being of our staff and students is by supporting their efforts to give back to the community. Our world is ever more complex. We are inundated by new information and technology. Heightened anxiety has become the norm rather than the occasional event. However, when our students and staff give back to the community, their focus changes and an uplifting sense of wellbeing emerges. Our high school students provide a variety of community services and receive credit toward graduation; middle school students shop and make Thanksgiving baskets for families; elementary students perform Feinstein good deeds that include food drives and other activities; districtwide, families in need are "adopted" during the Holiday season; support is provided to homeless families; school nurses provide free clinics; culinary students cook for the Supper Table and the Warm Shelter year round.

Adults as well as children persevere through stressful times by learning and practicing patience, forgiveness and kindness. This learning often takes place without celebration and fanfare, but is crucial to the health and character of our community. There are many places in our community where generosity is a state of mind, and we witness many moments of quiet strength where one person reaches out to give another a moment of relief and peace in an otherwise trying time.

With thoughts of compassion, acceptance and investment we extend a districtwide "Thank You" to every single person who has in any way helped an educator, a classroom, a family or a student. By standing together we lighten each other's load and will continue to improve our school district and our community. Have a peaceful and joyous holiday season.

Roy M. Seitsinger, Jr., Ph.D.  
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## Quiet Burdens by Roy M. Seitsinger

Recently someone uttered, “If we do not address fresh water, little else will matter.” How true. As educators, there are many issues that press our thinking and our need to act – student achievement, dropouts, poverty, pensions, charter schools, testing, the selection of a new commissioner, and yet none of these issues compare to the immediate and growing need regarding our children’s mental health. In short, if we do not address the mental health and well-being of our children, little else will matter.

It is likely that we will not move quickly enough as a society to head off any of the fresh water shortage that is coming. It is likely that we will be unprepared for the coming medical crisis when antibiotics stop working. Often, we can see things coming at us and we just cannot seem to manage to amass enough focus, energy, brain power and action to respond in a timely manner.

In 2010 the Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry reported that 49.5% of U.S. adolescents met criteria for mental health disorders. Washington County Coalition for Children reported that 29.2% of southern Rhode Island high school students admit to signs of depression and thoughts of suicide. Of children seen in emergency mental health circumstances 58% required psychiatric or acute residential placement. Education, medical and counseling practitioners across the state and around the country are seeing younger and younger children struggle with mental health disorders. Trying to learn, participate in class, present an oral defense of work while struggling with depression, anxiety, or other mental health disorders requires a large amount of courage and personal fortitude and perseverance not all students can maintain.

It is hard for us to know what quiet burdens others carry. But we do know that these burdens are starting to create a wave of distress and disruption in our schools that is unprecedented. Our school psychologists, social workers, teachers, principals, behavior specialists and student interventionists along with parents and caregivers are being overwhelmed. When we reach out to the broader community for help, there simply is not enough support. Dedicated practitioners who run private practice are fully engaged with many children in need waiting too long for appointments.

What can we do? How can we encourage action before our systems of supports are more than overwhelmed but collapse under the weight of growing need? We can:

- Start talking! The first step in solving any problem is recognizing that there is one.
- Build solutions: Support national, state and local leaders that are aware and trying to respond. For example: The Washington County Children Coalition and southern Rhode

Island superintendents have come together to support grant efforts: (1) Youth Mental Health First Aid training, and (2) South County Healthy Bodies/Healthy Minds collaborative. Others in leadership in government and throughout the state are taking similar steps.

- Create awareness. Read, think, discuss, and learn all we can as family members, neighbors, community and state leaders on how to provide for a healthy mind and body.
- Construct a better system. Even with good intentions efforts seem disjointed. In the past there was an experimental trial between state agencies to find a way to break down system barriers and provide families and children in need with a universal single point access. The experiment worked but the system change faded. There is a need to focus the collective impact of individual and interagency collaborations in the name of families and children.
- Support parents and families, especially those struggling with children that have manifested challenging behaviors. Compassion, patience, and understanding are the necessary frames of mind in providing support to children. There are local Health and Wellness Committees who can be conduits for additional supports.
- As part of our economic development plan, include supports to families as part of the plan. There are no job types or income barriers to mental health issues.

We do not know what quiet burdens our children carry but we do know that much of what they carry in their hearts and minds comes out in the classroom and hallways of schools. Building our capacity to care for our children who are struggling with mental illness must be a priority. Let's see if we can relieve some of those quiet burdens before they become deafening. Nothing else will matter if we do not act.

*Roy Seitsinger is the superintendent of schools in Westerly. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect represent those of the district School Committee. May is mental health month!*

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## Celebrating Last Year, Looking Forward to this Year!

The anticipation of a new school year is always exciting. Westerly Public Schools has been active all summer particularly at Westerly Middle School where we hold our summer school programs and at Tower Street Community Center where we conduct innovative student, family, and adult education all year round. Students have been engaged in many activities not the least of which is that some of our children took part with Governor Raimondo in her rollout of the new School Building Authority. We are so very proud of all the student and staff accomplishments and anticipate many more to come.

We ended the 2014-2015 school year with a fantastic outside graduation ceremony (the first in three years!) and a successful year for our students and staff alike. During the last few days in June we held a very constructive professional development day where we celebrated student and staff achievements and looked to the future.

During the 2014-15 school year much has been accomplished. Here are just some of the many achievements of the staff and students of WPS.

- Multiple tasks completed for curriculum alignment
- Programming implemented for safety, transportation, human resources, and technology
- Building redesign takes the next steps
- Committed to training 50 staff in Youth Mental Health First Aid
- Expanding Restorative Justice practices through a grant
- Teacher Bev Smith and Student Darline Manfred nationally recognized by Scholastic
- WPS participated in the National Hour of Code
- Eight FBLA students compete at the national level
- FLESS elementary foreign language in full swing K to 4
- John Perino winner of "Who wants to be a Mathematician"
- Three state championship teams- WHS Freshman Football, WHS Boys Lacrosse, and WMS Girls Track
- Financial audit on time and no major findings
- Royce Foundation sponsors grades 3-5 at VMA with the RI Philharmonic
- Several new courses at the high school including advanced manufacturing and robotics
- Arts Alive, STEM expo, and Attack the Track become yearly traditions
- MJ Utley and Thomas Albamonti winners of the state-level Samsung Solve for Tomorrow contest
- Environmental learning with the Westerly Land Trust
- Enthusiastic support for the partnership with CCRI, EB, Royce Foundation, RI Foundation, The Commissioner of Higher Ed and the Governor, and so much more.

The 2015-2016 school year will be one of both planning and action. A few highlights are as follows:

- We welcome several new staff at various levels but in particular we acknowledge Director of Pupil Personnel Melissa Denton, Springbrook Principal Susan Martin, and Westerly High School Principal Todd Grimes.
- As we plan our next steps in the elementary school redesign process, we have held an additional forum for input while concurrently taking all the appropriate steps to prepare for the presentation of our plan to the new School Building Authority.
- With new leadership at the Rhode Island Department of Education, it is likely that we will see strong direction from Commissioner Wagner with regard to PARCC.
- We will also be planning for our calendar change which we anticipate in the 2016-2017 school year. There will be a survey issued to seek parent input as to the best changes for our future calendar.

Finally, and most importantly, we welcome back our students to each new grade. As we continue to prepare our students for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are creating more science and math opportunities and more environmental and health activities and remain open to developing our staff and leadership to remain on the cutting edge of education. Additionally, there are a myriad of efforts in the areas of safety, facilities, programming, curriculum and instruction that will all have a positive effect on our school community and its trajectory. Although we can always do more, we are making continual progress on all of our major goals: closing the performance gap, restoring and building tradition, and improving our position as a strongly performing school district.

We undertake all of our efforts in partnership with the Westerly community. As always, our doors remain open to caring adults who wish to participate in the lives of our schools. We welcome your thoughts and invite you to engage with our schools as we continue our mission “to create an inspiring, challenging, and supportive environment where students are encouraged and assisted in reaching their highest potential.”

# Guest commentary: Positive mindset is key for students

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Working to establish the most positive learning environment possible for our students always includes a focus on student safety, classroom instruction, and a clear, well-defined curriculum. It also means working on infrastructure, tangential priorities that support families, and various community priorities.

Recently, the Westerly Public Schools was pleased to announce the return of the Relay for Life to our high school campus. This very worthy event is a fundraiser in the fight against cancer. Many of our families and community members deal with challenging illnesses and it is a continuing priority to do what we can to offer families a sense of relief, support and hope.

On Oct. 30 the Rhode Island Public Transportation Authority announced a pilot program for residents from Hope Valley and Westerly. The event marked a culmination of many years of advocacy and planning by the school district staff, Wood River Health, the Basic Needs Network and several months of investigation and planning by the transportation agency. Westerly Public Schools is proud to add its voice to this project that will bring 20 bus stops to our area.

We hear regularly of the struggles of students and families who are without transportation. We hope that this small pilot program will be the beginning of improved access to resources that will help improve the lives of families in the communities served by the new bus route.

On Nov. 3, Westerly Public Schools was featured in a story distributed by the Associated Press that focused on how schools can help parents understand math instruction and support their children at home. Staff members and the Parent Academy, organized through the Tower Street Community Center, are holding special classes for adults, entitled “Parents Can Help with Math,” to learn how to help their children with their math homework. The district is doing what it can to support children and their families.

As we move into late fall and early winter, the needs of many families increase. The need for heat, food, and companionship are ever on the minds of organizations that care for our families and children. Our schools do what they can to support these many organizations by collecting food donations or holding fundraisers. Our students and staff care deeply and do many things to improve the circumstances of others in our community.

Throughout the district, we are working to fully embed a growth mindset. As a philosophy and way to set priorities, the growth mindset focuses on the belief that skills and abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. No matter your starting point you can contribute, you can help make the community better and through this you can be better. A growth mindset also emphasizes that error, failure and mistakes are opportunities for learning, not events to be judged or branded. This growth mindset encourages a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for achievement and lifelong well-being.

The return of the Relay for Life and the creation of a transportation pilot program by RIPTA were accomplished by folks with a positive growth mindset. As we prepare Westerly’s children to face life’s challenges, the growth mindset is an invaluable tool for addressing the difficult issues that lie ahead for our students as individuals and as the next generation of parents, professionals, policymakers, and innovators.

Roy M. Seitsinger Jr., Ph.D., is superintendent of the Westerly School District.