

**To:** School Culture and Climate Steering Committee

**From:** Ken Slentz, Superintendent

**Date:** April 7, 2022

**Re:** *REVISED* Creating School Climate, Culture, and Expectations that Support and Improve Teaching and Learning at High Levels

**Primary Area of Priority and Strategic Focus:** (See Attachments A and B.)

- *Ensuring Student and Staff Wellness and Safety*
  - **Positive Student Behavior and Wellness** – By promoting student wellness through structured interventions which have a sound basis in educational research and by developing/enhancing staff abilities to identify and mitigate, minimize, and/or correct student (and/or staff) behavior which is disruptive to student learning so as to create a safe, secure, and supportive environment for teaching and learning;

**Secondary Priorities**

- *Providing Equitable Access to Learning and Advancement Opportunities for All Students and Staff*
  - **Curriculum development and implementation** – By creating, adapting, and/or adopting a K-12 cohesive curriculum which reflects the increasing diversity of our district, region, state, and country and develops/enhances students' on grade-level abilities in *reading* (across content areas and genre types); *writing* (to communicate to a variety of audiences on a variety of topics); *speaking* (to a variety of audiences and in a variety of contexts); *mathematical understandings* (in line with the standards of mathematical practices); and, as a result, students' *thinking* abilities as applied to a variety of complex problems.

- *Fostering a Culture of Support for Continuous Improvement in All Areas of Operations*
  - **Recruitment, Retention, and Development of Personnel** – By investing in promising practices for employee recruitment of diverse candidates and ongoing support including targeted professional learning opportunities, proven methods of evaluation, and feedback.

**Project Point Person(s)**: TBD

**Project Support**: Principals; Assistant Principals, Director of Student Support Services, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Director of Special Education, Director of Health and Physical Education, Special Education Supervisor, School Counselors, School Psychologists; School Social Workers; School Resource Officers; Students; Parents; Community Members

**Background**:

The purpose of schooling is to create the conditions for learning at high levels for each of our students such that they consistently meet and exceed grade level expectations (standards) in each of the domains of the District’s curriculum. Available curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular opportunities which are equitably provided to and reflective of the student body in meaningful ways can certainly *allow for the potential* for meeting our purpose, as can motivating each of our students to take advantage of these opportunities. Our encouragement of our students to want to meet and exceed expectations can be strengthened or weakened by the culture and climate<sup>1</sup> within our schools where every student is known and all staff believe that each of our students can learn and achieve at high levels. In addition to this belief, common beliefs in general, common language in communications with and about students, established and consistently adhered to norms, and establishing/strengthening a comprehensive network of student support can make school a safe place for students physically, socially, and emotionally, thereby minimizing distractions and empowering our students in their learning and development.

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<sup>1</sup> School climate is the conditions that are created in a school that support effective teaching and learning. The National Center for Safe and Supportive School Environments defines school climate as follows: “A positive school climate is the product of a school’s attention to fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community no matter the setting —from pre-K/elementary school to higher education.” In addition, Petrilli, Davidson, and Carroll note that “The values and beliefs that a school community put into practice each day define its culture. Schools with positive cultures have shared narratives, habits of mind, and effective ways of getting things done. They have articulated a coherent vision for excellence and can draw on that to flexibly respond to challenges, craft solutions, and reinforce practices that promote student success. The conditions that support such cultures are influenced by the schools climate – a distinct but related quality that determines the mood and feeling of a school community, the nature of the relationships among adults and students, and expectations for physical and emotional security.” *Follow the Science to School: Evidence-Based Practices for Elementary Education*. Petrilli, MJ, Davidson, B, and Carroll, C. 2022.

While the District has provided professional development and focus on certain areas related to school climate and culture in prior years, a whole-district approach was not taken or did not take root. The purpose of this project, then, is to develop an envelope of safety, security, welcoming, and wellness for our students that removes barriers that might otherwise prevent them from taking full advantage of the opportunities for learning provided to them without fear of physical, intellectual, or emotional harm. Over the past three years, the District has focused on seven *Strategic Points of Focus* from which annual *Priorities* and specific *Goals* developed (see Attachments A and B).

While the District is implementing new academic and behavioral curricula as well as a detailed Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) for those students who are not meeting expectations, we need to look more closely at our overall climate, culture, and student and staff support structures within our buildings to ensure that they are as conducive as possible to effective teaching and learning. Critical to a strong school climate and culture is the consideration of “a day in the life” of each of our students as viewed through the lenses of belonging and acceptance; high expectations and high support of our students in both academics and behaviors; a common intolerance by students, staff, parents, and community of bigotry, racism, bullying, discrimination, and harassment; and a common desire to consistently do better for our students, families, staff, and community. As a case in point, over the past few years issues of gender, cultural, and religious insensitivity, and racism have been brought to the attention of administration and we know that we need to develop a better understanding and common community approach to educating students, staff, and parents about how we will address these issues so as to allow every student and staff member to feel safe and secure – physically, socially, and emotionally – in our buildings and on our campuses.

**The Project Charge:** The purpose of this project is to intentionally develop or enhance an envelope of safety, security, and wellness for our students that allows them to take full advantage of the opportunities for learning provided to them without fear of physical, intellectual, or emotional harm. This will be done by addressing each of the following critical questions:

1. **Who are we at BSCSD?**
  - a. Demographics:
    - i. What does the most recent census data tell us about who we are as a community and student body compared to the last census?
    - ii. How does the census align with our registration data?
    - iii. How do we best communicate with staff, parents/caregivers, and the community about demographic changes that are happening/expected to happen within our district?
  - b. Philosophical:
    - i. What does a successful Ballston Spa graduate look like relative to our criteria for a Meaningful Diploma?

2. **Are all of our students *ready* for learning?**

- a. Do all parents regardless of income, race, religion, or family need have access to high quality early childhood learning opportunities?
- b. Do our families have access to high quality medical and mental health care for their children? Do we as a district provide awareness of these services available to our families?
- c. Are our students consistently provided with breakfast at home or do they consistently eat at school?
  - i. Do our students feel comfortable accessing the meal options that we provide for them?
  - ii. Does our school schedule allow for students to access meal options without causing students to miss class?
  - iii. Do our meal options reflect health and nutrition standards as well as the diversity of our students and staff?
- d. For students who bring their lunch, do their options meet minimum standards for healthy meals and caloric recommendations for their respective age group? Do parents generally understand what the minimum requirements are?
- e. Do students have equitable access to healthy food options during the day outside of the school breakfast and lunch programs (food closets, vending machines, etc.)?
- f. Do we have valid and reliable screening and diagnostic tools and procedures in place that allow us to have an accurate sense of the physical, social, and emotional health of our students when they enter school each year? If yes, do any of these tools have a research history of bias towards any particular group of students? If no, what is the process for procuring such tools?
- g. Does the District educate parents and guardians on the value of consistent student attendance in school?
- h. What processes, practices, programs, and/or personnel are currently in place that we want to continue to support and build upon in this area?
- i. What data do we/should we rely upon to support decision-making in this area?
- j. Do we have ready-access to the needed data?

3. **Do we have a *climate* within our schools that is safe, secure, and supportive for all students?**

- a. What do we believe is the optimum school climate for supporting teaching and learning at high levels?
- b. Do all of our students, particularly those who have been historically marginalized, feel safe physically and socially when they come to and are in our schools/on our campuses? Do they feel supported and cared for in our schools/on our campuses? Do they have at least one adult in the building who they know knows them and cares for and about them?
- c. Do our parents feel that their children are safe, secure, and supported in our schools/on our campuses? Do parents feel supported and welcome?

- d. Do our staff members feel safe physically and socially when they come to and are in our schools/on our campuses?
- e. Do our staff members believe that they have the training to deal with a culturally diverse set of students?
- f. Do our physical structures and learning environments support the optimum school climate that we envision?
- g. What processes, practices, programs, and/or personnel are currently in place that we want to continue to support and build upon in this area?
- h. What steps must we take to achieve the optimum school culture?
- i. What obstacles exist that prevent us from achieving the optimum school climate?
- j. What data do we/should we rely upon to support decision-making in this area?
- k. Do we have ready-access to the needed data?

4. **Do we have a *culture* in our schools where we collectively believe that every student can learn at high levels and achieve a meaningful diploma<sup>2</sup>?**

- a. What do we believe is the optimum school culture for supporting teaching and learning at high levels?
- b. Do we have a common understanding of how all students learn and what instructional methodologies have evidence of causing the greatest levels of learning?
- c. Is our curriculum and instruction responsive to who we are as an increasingly diverse community and school community and what we want for outcomes for each of our students<sup>3</sup>?
- d. Do all students have access to high quality instruction, courses, academic opportunities and needed supports including explicit social-emotional learning and supports, and co/extracurricular opportunities?
- e. Do we have a systematic way of responding when children do not learn (academically and/or behaviorally) as we would expect?
- f. How do we systematically respond to chronic absenteeism of students?
- g. Do we have the necessary structures – personnel, program, processes, communications – in place that support students across the learning continuum in both general education and special education?
- h. Do we have a common understanding of the requirements of a Least Restrictive Environment for our students?
- i. Does our continuum of services reflect LRE in our placement of students such that they have as much access to the general education classroom and instruction as possible?
- j. Are the assessments that we use bias-free as supported by educational and psychological research?
- k. Are our grading policies and practices aligned with our expectations and with best and promising practices that are bias-free as supported by educational and psychological research?
- l. Do our outcome data reflect equitable opportunities for all of our students?

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<sup>2</sup> See attachment A

<sup>3</sup> See Attachments A and C

- m. Do we celebrate the diversity within our schools and of historically marginalized groups in meaningful ways including student input in the design of these activities?
- n. What steps must we take to achieve the optimum school culture?
- o. What obstacles exist that prevent us from achieving the optimum school culture?
- p. What processes, practices, programs, and/or personnel are currently in place that we want to continue to support and build upon in this area?
- q. What data do we/should we rely upon to support decision-making in this area?
- r. Do we have ready-access to the needed data?

**5. Are our students graduating *citizen-ready*?**

- a. What knowledge, skills, and dispositions should a BSCSD graduate have to be considered citizen-ready?
- b. What processes, practices, programs, and/or personnel are currently in place that we want to continue to support and build upon in this area?
- c. What gaps exist between what we currently provide in our practices, programs, and/or personnel and what is needed to ensure that each of our students graduates with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions noted in (1) above?
- d. What data do we/should we rely upon to support decision-making in this area?
- e. Do we have ready-access to the needed data?

**6. Do our curricula – behavioral, academic, social-emotional, and health education – and the associated learning opportunities support *and enhance* our schools’ climate and culture?**

- a. Do our curricula consistently meet and/or exceed the criteria for high rigor and high expectations relative to the NYS and, where applicable, national learning standards each respective area of teaching and learning?
- b. Do our associated instructional materials meet the level of expectations necessary for students to meet and exceed the NYS and, where applicable, the national learning standards for each respective area of teaching and learning?
- c. Do all of our students have access to the multiple pathways for learning that the district offers, particularly in the areas of accelerated learning, Career and Technical Education, Advanced Placement courses, International Baccalaureate courses and courses under Project Lead the Way, the Seal of Biliteracy, and the Seal of Civic Readiness?
- d. Do our professional development offerings and coaching/staffing support resources meet the needs of our faculty and staff?
- e. Are additional, targeted professional learning offerings necessary to build a better understanding of our curricula and how they support our school culture and climate work?
- f. Do we effectively engage with our parents to ensure that they are aware of, are knowledgeable about, and have an understanding of standards, curriculum, instructional materials, and instruction that is associated with our behavioral, academic, social-emotional, and health education work?

7. **Is our staff *reflective of who we are as a school and larger community*?**
  - a. Is our staff, faculty, and administration reflective of the increasing diversity in the district?
  - b. What specific steps are we taking to increase the quality and diversity of our staff, faculty, and administration?
  - c. What trainings are necessary to have in place that better inform our staff of our increasing diversity and evidence-informed ways of improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning for all students?
  - d. What data do we/should we rely upon to support decision-making in this area?
  - e. Do we have ready-access to the needed data?
  - f. What processes, practices, programs, and/or personnel are currently in place that we want to continue to support and build upon?
  
8. **Are all District *policies aligned to the creation/continuation of the optimum school climate and culture that supports high levels of teaching and learning*?**
  - a. Do we have a policy that explicitly addresses issues of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion?
  - b. Do we have a policy that sets the expectation that high quality curriculum and instructional materials are to be used in all program areas?
  - c. Does our *Code of Conduct* provide a balance of support (e.g., restorative practices, counseling and mental health supports, family supports) and structured consequences that are supported by educational research?
  - d. Is our *Code of Conduct* sensitive to the increasing cultural diversity and research on effective behavioral management?
    - i. Are our policy and procedural responses to bullying and harassment of students of different races, cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, learning abilities, sexual orientation, and gender identity clear in expectations, supportive of explicit instruction for learning, and, where necessary, effective in the administration of discipline?
    - ii. Is our Code of Conduct enforced in ways that are equitable across student groups?
    - iii. Is the enforcement of our Code of Conduct aware of, respectful to, and instructive towards cultural norms and gender biases?
  - e. What personnel policies are in place that encourage seeking high quality personnel that are reflective of who we are as an increasingly diverse community?
  - f. Do we have a transparent and inclusive policy review process that allows us to increasingly align research, promising practices, with who we are and what are expectations are as a district?
  - g. What processes, practices, programs, and/or personnel are currently in place that we want to continue to support and build upon in this area?

9. **Is our *community* supportive of our envisioned school culture and climate?**

- a. What do we believe is the optimum model of community support and participation?
- b. Are we inclusive of community input and feedback in our initiatives and improvement strategies?
- c. Are our communication processes effective for and valued by our community?
- d. Does our community believe that we have safe, secure, and supportive school climates?
- e. What processes, practices, programs, and/or personnel are currently in place to engage the community that we want to continue to support and build upon in this area?

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## ATTACHMENT A MISSION, VISION, AND PRIORITIES

**District Mission** – The Ballston Spa Central School District will provide an excellent education that maximizes the potential of each student. In partnership with the family and community, our students will become responsible and well-rounded adults.

**Vision** – A meaningful diploma for all students which means that all students will be able to

- **Read, Write, Think, and Learn well** – because we intentionally, explicitly, and systematically taught them to
  - **ACROSS ALL CONTENT AREAS and IN A VARIETY OF SETTINGS**
- **Be well** – physically, socially, emotionally, and mentally because we know and support our kids
- **Be citizen-ready** – because of the opportunities and experiences that we provide them both in school and in the community

**Priorities** – To ensure that each of our students has access to a variety of rigorous learning opportunities on their way to earning a meaningful diploma, the BSCSD Board of Education and the Administrative Council will prioritize work in the following:

- *Ensuring Student and Staff Wellness and Safety*
- *Providing Equitable Access to Learning and Advancement Opportunities for All Students and Staff*
- *Implementing a Diverse and Rigorous K-12 Curriculum Supported by High Quality Instructional Materials and Assessments*
- *Fostering a Culture of Support for Continuous Improvement in All Areas of Operation*
- *Utilizing Proactive, Transparent, and Substantive Two-Way Communications*

## ATTACHMENT B

### OUR POINTS OF FOCUS

To ensure that all students are able to develop the knowledge and skills and accomplish the work required to attain a meaningful diploma which allows them to access as many post-secondary pathways as possible, we will focus on increasingly effective:

- **Curriculum development and implementation** – By creating, adapting, and/or adopting a K-12 cohesive curriculum which reflects the increasing diversity of our district, region, state, and country and develops/enhances students’ on grade-level abilities in *reading* (across content areas and genre types); *writing* (to communicate to a variety of audiences on a variety of topics); *speaking* (to a variety of audiences and in a variety of contexts); *mathematical understandings* (in line with the standards of mathematical practices); and, as a result, students’ *thinking* abilities as applied to a variety of complex problems;
- **Instruction** – by developing/enhancing teachers’ instructional abilities through an understanding of how students learn, research-informed instructional techniques and frameworks including the Response to Intervention (RTI)/Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model, and effective feedback models from peers and supervisors;
- **Assessments** – by developing and enhancing clear understandings of the purpose and design of effective assessments and how they can be utilized to improve teaching and learning;
- **Positive Student Behavior and Wellness** – By promoting student wellness through structured interventions which have a sound basis in educational research and by developing/enhancing staff abilities to identify and mitigate, minimize, and/or correct student behavior which is disruptive to student learning so as to create a safe, secure, and supportive environment for teaching and learning;
- **Recruitment, Retention, and Development of Personnel** – By investing in promising practices for employee recruitment of diverse candidates and ongoing, targeted professional learning opportunities, proven methods of evaluation, and feedback;
- **Communications** – By developing useful/helpful internal and external communications including two-way communications with families to generate feedback on the development of clear processes and protocols; and

- **Long Term Planning** – By investing in programs, structures, and strategies that are proven to positively impact student learning opportunities and outcomes.

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## ATTACHMENT C

### The 4 Principles of Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education<sup>4</sup>

1. **Welcoming and Affirming Environment**: A welcoming and affirming environment feels safe. It is a space where people can find themselves represented and reflected, and where they understand that all people are treated with respect and dignity. The environment ensures all cultural identities (i.e. race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, language, religion, and socioeconomic background) are affirmed, valued, and used as vehicles for teaching and learning.
  - a. RESOURCES:
    - i. School Climate and Culture Index
    - ii. Mental Health Education Literacy Schools: Linking to a Continuum of Well-Being
    - iii. English Language Learner/Multilingual Learner Parent Resources
    - iv. Social Emotional Learning: Essential for Learning, Essential for Life
    - v. Guidelines and Resources for Social and Emotional Development and Learning (SEDL) in New York State
    - vi. NYSED Information and Resources Regarding Restorative Justice and Trauma Sensitivity Training
    - vii. The New York State Dignity for All Students Act (DASA)
  
2. **High Expectations and Rigorous Instruction**: High expectations and rigorous instruction prepare the community for rigor and independent learning. The environment is academically rigorous and intellectually challenging, while also considering the different ways students learn. Instruction includes opportunities to use critical reasoning, take academic risks, and leverage a growth mindset to learn from mistakes. Messages encourage positive self-image and empower others to succeed.
  - a. RESOURCES:
    - i. New York State Board of Regents Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA Plan)
    - ii. New York State Next Generation English Language Arts and Mathematics Learning Standards
    - iii. New York State My Brother's Keeper (Initiative)
    - iv. New York State Early Learning Standards
    - v. Blueprint for Improved Results for Students with Disabilities
    - vi. State Systemic Improvement Plan Multi-tiered Systems of Support Model
    - vii. Blueprint for English Language Learner/Multilingual Learner Success
    - viii. Social Emotional Learning Benchmarks
  
3. **Inclusive Curriculum and Assessment**: Inclusive curriculum and assessment elevate historically marginalized voices. It includes opportunities to learn about power and privilege in the context of various communities and empowers learners to be

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<sup>4</sup> From NYSED's *Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework* <http://www.nysed.gov/crs/framework>

agents of positive social change. It provides the opportunity to learn about perspectives beyond one's own scope. It works toward dismantling systems of biases and inequities, and decentering dominant ideologies in education.

a. **RESOURCES:**

- i. Teacher Test Development and Participation Opportunities
- ii. Civic Readiness Initiative
- iii. The New York State K-12 Social Studies Framework and Toolkits

4. **Ongoing Professional Learning:** Ongoing professional learning is rooted in the idea that teaching and learning is an adaptive process needing constant reexamination (Moll, et al., 1992; Gay, 2010). It allows learners to develop and sharpen a critically conscious lens toward instruction, curriculum, assessment, history, culture, and institutions. Learners must be self-directed and take on opportunities that directly impact learning outcomes.

a. **RESOURCES:**

- i. Diverse and Learner-Ready Teachers Initiative
- ii. Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSELs)
- iii. New York State Teaching Standards
- iv. NYU Metro TAC-D 2018-2019 Regional Workshops

## ATTACHMENT D

### *Next steps*

1. Employee profiles – evolution of learners
- ~~2. Add MS team notes~~
- ~~3. Update policy slide to include PD, grading~~
4. Discuss PD including trans, café
- ~~5. Revise plan to include curriculum and course access~~
6. Finalize steering committee
- ~~7. Add SC&C tab to the website~~

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