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School Safety: The Eternal Vigil

Of all of the duties of a local school board, are any more fundamentally important than keeping the children who are in our care safe from harm?

NJSBA has devoted considerable resources to the issue of how to keep schools safe. In the wake of the Newtown, Connecticut school shootings in December of 2012, the Association convened a task force to study the issues surrounding school safety. Last fall, NJSBA released the final report of the NJSBA School Security Task Force, “What Makes Schools Safe?”

The report was the work of a dedicated committee that labored over the course of many months to consult with experts in law enforcement, school climate, architecture, building design and emergency response systems. The task force surveyed school districts on their security practices; reviewed current developments affecting the implementation and funding of security measures; identified best practices; and called for changes in statute and regulation that would promote student safety.

We presented the findings to interested audiences at Workshop 2014, at regional forums in the northern, central and southern parts of the state, and here in School Leader magazine. Our intention is for local boards of education to use the report as a resource to guide their decisions on safety in their schools.

I am happy to report that school districts are doing just that. In my travels around the state to county meetings and various training programs, local board members have told me about their district initiatives to improve safety. These include measures such as making facility alterations that limit building access, hiring school resource officers, and implementing school climate programs to ensure healthy emotional development in our students and reach those who are troubled.

In my district, we made changes to the physical plant of our schools to make them safer. In one school, for example, we added a set of doors in the main entrance hall and covered all glass surfaces in ballistic film to create a secure vestibule for those entering the school. Elsewhere we added cameras and fencing. These steps will help “deter, slow and detain,” intruders; a major goal of any security measure.

I am also involved in the work of the New Jersey Task Force on School Security, a group appointed by the governor. While our work is still ongoing, I have shared the final report of NJSBA’s task force with the group, and it was well-received. I expect that some of our findings and recommendations will be included in the final state report.

School safety is an ongoing concern, not a matter to be addressed once and then forgotten. NJSBA will continue to update members on any advancements or news about the topic, and I know that our members will continue to ask the same question I regularly ask myself and my district administrators: What more should we be doing to make sure the children in our district are safe and secure?
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Congratulations to the Class of 2015

School board members often tell me that the reward for their service comes in June. It is exemplified by the smiles and handshakes that go with handing out diplomas at graduation. The ceremonies – whether for high school, middle school, elementary school, or even kindergarten – symbolize the mission of local boards of education, and put the countless meetings, hours and decisions into context.

As a district superintendent for more than 32 years, I share this perspective. Each graduation ceremony was special. But for me, some were particularly meaningful.

I’ve often told the story which concludes with my handing a blind girl her high school diploma. Years earlier, the girl’s mother had come to my office with a request that her daughter be placed in a general education setting—something the child study team thought was not possible. It was one of the few times I overruled a child study team, and the student proved to us all that she was more than capable of learning in a general education environment.

This story has a post-script: Last year, the same young woman participated in another commencement exercise, one at which she received her master’s degree.

I also recall handing a diploma to a student who had battled back from near-tragedy, a suicide attempt in her sophomore year. With the support of her family, her teachers, and her counselors, she became a healthy, happy and vibrant young woman, and I will always remember how she looked on the day she celebrated her graduation.

This issue of School Leader celebrates our graduates and the incredible contributions made by school board members across the state. I am sure you will enjoy the article, which begins on page 30. The content – consisting of photos and excerpts from speeches – was provided by school board members. One of my favorite excerpts came from NJSBA President Don Webster at the 2014 Manchester Township High School graduation ceremony:

“Continue to pursue your dreams and ambitions. Remember that you never really stop learning on the journey through life. Never compromise your value system or your integrity.”

Congratulations to the graduates of 2015, and the parents, educators and school board members who contributed to your success!

[Signature]

Dr. Lawrence S. Feinsod
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A Superintendent’s Salute to a Departing School Board Member

BY DR. SCOTT D. RIPLEY

“There are two primary choices in life: to accept conditions as they exist, or accept the responsibility for changing them.”

—Denis Waitley

Service to a local board of education demands a degree of sacrifice and commitment of which few members of the general public are aware: there is a significant time commitment, late nights, copious committee meetings, possible scorn and derision from one’s neighbors, and the constant weight of responsibility. In spite of the challenges, a few intrepid souls endeavor to lead so as to inspire their communities.

Community involvement is a seminal component of the success of our educational institutions. Board members are community leaders whose impact is often difficult to quantify; they can initiate necessary change to the climate and culture of schools.

For the past four years, Mr. Paul Derin has been such an inspiration to his community, while serving as a board member and president of the High Point Regional High School district.

On January 6, 2015, Paul Derin made the difficult choice to decline his elected seat for the High Point Regional Board of Education, to which he was voted in November; his decision was due to health concerns about which his community is well aware and supportive.

Mr. Derin, the board president during the past two years, has been a community leader and advocate for more than a decade; his impact on the High Point family cannot be emphasized enough. His passion for our children, staff and community is clearly evident to all residents of the five sending district townships. Paul is a family man whose family extends to all who look to High Point as the center of our community. A visionary leader, Paul courageously confronted a district climate and culture which some had deemed “toxic.” Paul endured many battles in his efforts to see High Point championed as the best school in the state – a reality more likely after his tenure as board president.

As a retired district employee, Mr. Derin was acutely aware of the challenges confronting the district, and he boldly addressed the prevailing status quo. He accepted nothing but the best for the children of the community and worked tirelessly as their advocate. On the night he was elected president, three members of the board immediately tendered their resignations and walked out of the meeting. Mr. Derin quickly established compassionate leadership and brought a level of stability to the board and district which has subsequently contributed to greater student achievement.

Although, Mr. Derin has stepped down from his position on the board, he has not stepped down from his position as a community leader, friend and inspiration. Paul is a man of singular courage who seeks to right what he believes to be district and relational wrongs; while this makes him a controversial figure to his critics, it makes him a champion to others. And so it is with great respect that the High Point community accepts Mr. Derin’s decision to step down from his position on the board of education; his legacy as an intrepid leader of our community will long endure.

Dr. Scott D. Ripley is superintendent of the High Point Regional High School district. He can be reached at sripley@hpregional.org.
Thank You to Our Donors

The Educational Leadership Foundation of New Jersey (ELFNJ) is the non-profit arm of the New Jersey School Boards Association. Formed in 2008, ELFNJ was founded to advance the governance of the state’s public schools by supporting training and research. It provides a tangible link to schools and students by securing resources that support school board member and charter trustee training.

Thanks to the support of contributors to ELFNJ, several training programs are provided to school districts at no cost. Corporate contributors to ELFNJ receive acknowledgment on program materials, the ELFNJ website and signage at training programs. Contributors who wish to make a difference in the lives of New Jersey’s students can do so by supporting ELFNJ, which helps fund training for school leaders statewide.

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Safety Tips for Prom and Graduation Season

From New Jersey Manufacturers Insurance

Prom and graduation season should be an exciting time for students. The right guidance from parents and teachers will help keep it safe and enjoyable. In a survey conducted last year by AAA, 41 percent of teens said that they or their friends are likely to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol during this season. Also, 84 percent of the teens think their peers will drive under the influence rather than call a parent for a ride and risk getting in trouble. Help safeguard students during prom and graduation season with these tips:

Talk to Students – Be clear to teens about all of the consequences and dangers that can come from driving while intoxicated, from loss of license and fines to the risk of severe injuries or death.

Pick Chaperones – Gather a group of teachers and/or administrators to be present before, during and after the event. They will be able to watch students and make sure they are celebrating responsibly.

Sponsor an After-Party – This can be held at a different location from where prom or graduation is being held, but it helps ensure students can enjoy these special times in a safe and supervised environment.

Require a Check-in – Make sure all the people who attend prom or graduation are supposed to be there. This can be done by requiring guests to have a ticket or to check in before attending the event.
What’s Next for ESEA? 
On the 50th anniversary of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, a look back – and forward

BY SHARON SEYLER

Fifty years ago, the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was enacted by President Lyndon B. Johnson. This law represented a major new commitment by the federal government to “quality and equality” in educating public school children. The official act was to “declare a national goal of full educational opportunity.”

The purpose of ESEA was to provide additional resources for vulnerable (at-risk) students. ESEA offered new grants to districts serving low-income students, federal grants for textbooks and library books, created special education centers, and created scholarships for low-income college students. The law also provided federal grants to state educational agencies to improve the quality of elementary and secondary education.

Nearly two decades after the passage of the law, a report was issued by President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education. The publication of “A Nation at Risk: the Imperative for Educational Reform,” in 1983 was a landmark event in modern American educational history.

The report lent credence to a growing belief that American schools were failing students, and that students were under-achieving in comparison with students in other industrialized nations. One memorable quote from its opening pages jolted readers to attention: “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

The report issued recommendations about academic standards and expectations, time spent in school, teaching, leadership and fiscal reporting. The report touched off a wave of local, state and federal reform efforts.

No Child Left Behind In 2001, with strong bipartisan support, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in order to reauthorize ESEA, and President George W. Bush signed the law in January 2002.

NCLB put in place important new measures to expose achievement gaps, and started an important national dialogue on how to close them. By promoting accountability for the achievement of all students (not just at-risk children), the law has played an important role in protecting the civil rights of at-risk students.

However, while NCLB has played an important role in requiring transparency, it also has significant flaws. It created incentives for states to lower their standards; emphasized punishing failure over rewarding success; focused on specific test scores, rather than recognizing growth and progress; and prescribed a pass-fail, one-size-fits-all series of interventions for schools that miss their state-established goals.

Teachers, parents, school district leaders, and state and federal elected officials have recognized that NCLB needs to be fixed.

Flexibility Under NCLB In 2012, after six years without reauthorization, and with strong state and local consensus that many of NCLB’s outdated requirements were preventing progress, the Obama administration began offering flexibility to states from some of the law’s most onerous provisions, in the form of waivers. To receive flexibility, states demonstrated that they had adopted and had plans to implement college and career-ready standards and assessments, that they put in place school accountability systems that focused on the lowest-performing schools and schools with the largest achievement gaps, and that they ensured that districts were implementing teacher and principal evaluation and support systems.

The flexibility required states to continue to be transparent about their achievement gaps, but provided schools and districts greater flexibility in the actions they take to address those gaps. Today, 43 states, Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico have flexibility from NCLB. New Jersey is among the states that have received a waiver.

The administration and the U.S. Department of Education remain committed to reauthorizing ESEA to ensure that all young people are prepared to succeed. This would protect the underserved school districts, and ensure that those schools, principals, and teachers would have the resources they need to succeed.

A New ESEA In January 2015, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan laid out a vision for a new ESEA. The vision continued on page 12
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includes an ESEA that expands access to high-quality preschool; ensures that parents and teachers have information about how their children are doing every year; gives teachers and principals the resources and support they need; encourages schools and districts to create innovative new solutions to problems; provides for strong and equitable investment in high-poverty schools and districts; and ensures that action will be taken where students need more support to achieve, including in the lowest-performing schools.

The New Jersey Waiver

New Jersey received a one-year extension for flexibility from certain provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), after implementing education reforms.

This extension will allow the state to continue the work of implementing reforms developed to improve achievement for all students. The extension runs through the end of the 2014-2015 school year.

Currently, the NJDOE has just submitted an application to renew the waiver for the next two years. However, if ESEA reauthorization should become a reality, the waiver would discontinue immediately.

The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) has established a model curriculum aligned to college- and career-ready standards and has implemented the monitoring of priority and focus schools.

When the state receives the expected renewal of the waiver, beginning in 2016, New Jersey has to take additional action. The state must describe how school districts will be required to implement intervention in Title I schools with subgroups that did not meet annual measurable objectives, or did not meet graduation rate targets. Currently, Title I funds support the regional achievement centers (RACs) throughout the state. These RACs are charged with restructuring specific schools that are categorized as “priority” and “focus” schools. “Priority” schools are the lowest-performing 5 percent of Title I schools based on proficiency, growth, and graduation rates, and any non-Title I school that would otherwise meet the same criteria. Focus schools include at least 10 percent of Title I schools identified by achievement gaps between subgroups and low performance or graduation rates among particular subgroups, and any non-Title I school that would otherwise meet the same criteria.

In the new waiver application, the excess Title I funds are to also target schools that are categorized as “high-risk” schools. These schools are performing slightly better than priority or focus schools, but still have not shown growth or improvement in student achievement measures.

In order to receive an extension, states must demonstrate they have resolved any state-specific issues. States could also request state-specific amendments to the waiver to support improvement efforts. The USDOE is reviewing requests from states for one-year extensions to ESEA flexibility on a rolling basis.

In the meantime, there have been two bills drafted by the U.S. House of Representatives and by the U.S. Senate to reauthorize ESEA. The House bill is called the “Student Success Act” and the Senate Bill is the “Every Child Achieves Act of 2015.”

The provisions of the House bill, the Student Success Act (H.R. 5):

• Replaces the current national accountability process, based on high-stakes tests with state-led accountability systems, returning responsibility for measuring student and school performance to states and school districts;
• Ensures parents continue to have the information they need to hold local schools accountable;
• Eliminates more than 65 ineffective, duplicative, and unnecessary programs and replaces this maze of programs with a Local Academic Flexible Grant, helping schools better support students;
• Protects state and local autonomy over

continued on page 14

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The prognosis for this bill is uncertain. There has been no vote on the bill because it hasn’t yet garnered enough support from the Republican majority. The best guess at this point is that the bill has a 15 percent chance of being enacted.

The Senate Bill
Sen. Lamar Alexander, a Republican from Tennessee, and Sen. Patty Murray, a Democrat from Washington, unveiled a bipartisan bill this year to overhaul the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that the two have been brokering for more than two months. The compromise measure includes education policies that are attractive to both sides of the aisle. The current version of the bill was unanimously approved by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee.

The Every Child Achieves Act recognizes that states, working with school districts and educators have the responsibility for creating accountability systems to ensure all students are learning. These systems will be state-designed but must meet minimum federal parameters, including ensuring that all students and subgroups of students are included in the accountability system, disaggregating student achievement data, and establishing challenging academic standards for all students. The

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www.njsba.org/legislative-corner

decisions in the classroom by preventing the Secretary of Education from coercing states into adopting Common Core or any other common standards or assessments, as well as by reining in the secretary’s regulatory authority;

• Empowers parents with more school choice options by continuing support for magnet schools and expanding charter school opportunities, as well as by allowing Title I funds to follow low-income children to the traditional public or charter school of the parent’s choice; and

• Strengthens existing efforts to improve student performance among targeted student populations, including English language learners and homeless children.

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Although it has been more than a half century since the U.S. Supreme Court struck down school-sponsored prayer, controversies concerning religion in the public schools continue to plague school districts across the country.

The landmark court decision *Engel v. Vitale* was handed down in 1962, and since then, courts have repeatedly opined that the U.S. Constitution prohibits public schools from proselytizing religion to children.

However, it is often difficult for school districts to determine precisely what constitutes proselytization or school sponsorship of religious activities.

The discussion of legal issues concerning religion in the public schools must begin with the constitutional framework within which school districts must conduct themselves. Specifically, the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution contains three pertinent provisions, the Establishment, Free Exercise and Free Speech Clauses. While the Establishment Clause prohibits schools from establishing religion by acting with a religious purpose or effect or by entangling themselves with religion or endorsing religion, the Free Exercise Clause requires that public schools do not impinge upon the free exercise of any particular student’s religious beliefs or expression. And, the Free Speech Clause prohibits “state actors” such as public school districts, from “abridging the freedom of speech.” The tension between constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom and the prohibition of endorsing religion causes schools great difficulty.

To determine whether a public school violates the Establishment Clause, the courts apply a three-part test developed by the Supreme Court in a 1971 case, *Lemon v. Kurtzman*. The Lemon test provides that an activity of a governmental entity will pass constitutional muster only if it complies with the following three pronged test:

1. There is a legitimate, secular, non-religious purpose for an activity;
2. The primary effect of the activity neither advances nor hinders religious belief or practice; and
3. The activity does not foster excessive entanglement between the governmental entity and religious concerns.

**Holiday Displays and Programs** Although decades old, the Lemon test continues to be the standard our courts use in assessing Establishment Clause cases. For example, take the cases involving holiday displays and religious music programs at public schools. In the earliest of these cases, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a policy statement and rules adopted by a public school board which permitted observance of holidays having both a religious and secular basis. The court encouraged tolerance of diverse religious views and recognized that advancing “students’ knowledge and appreciation of the role religion has played in the social, cultural and historical development of civilization” as an educational goal of the district.

Applying *Lemon* to its analysis of the school district’s policy and rules, the court concluded that they were not promulgated to serve a religious purpose, but rather they were adopted with educational motives. The court further found no violation of the Free Exercise Clause and noted that the school did not need to remove all materials from the curriculum that could offend any religious sensibilities nor could it compel participation in religious activities. Decades later in 1993, the Cherry Hill School District policy governing the use of cultural, ethnic and religious themes in the educational program was challenged. The purpose of the policy was to foster mutual understanding and respect for the rights of all regarding their beliefs, values, and customs. The policy permitted three types of displays including religious symbols used as part of a planned program of instruction, displays of calendars in each elementary and junior high classroom and in one central location in each building and displays dealing with cultural, ethnic, or religious customs and traditions during the appropriate season. If a religious symbol was displayed, it had to be accompanied by at least one other religious and cultural or ethnic symbol.

The District Court applied *Lemon* to the Establishment Clause claims and found no constitutional violation, noting that the purpose of the policy was the advancement of a secular program of education, not religion. That court emphasized that the displays were temporary and did not force children to participate in any religious event and also opined that the absence of any display could indicate hostility toward religion.

The hostility toward religion argument was made years later in a Pennsylvania case by parents who complained about the lack of Christian symbols displayed at a winter holiday elementary school program. The display included several items associated with various religious celebrations and the Christmas program included songs from several religions. In that case, the court found no violation of the Establishment Clause because considering the display and musical performance as a whole, the school district’s purpose was to celebrate diversity and the freedom to choose one’s own beliefs. The court held that a reasonable observer could not conclude one particular faith was preferred at the expense of others.
Similar cases in other jurisdictions have also concluded that so long as a variety of religions are represented within the school’s programs, no Establishment or Free Exercise Clause violations are likely to be found.

The Pledge of Allegiance Another controversial issue related to religion in public schools involves prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. In the 1962 Engel decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Establishment Clause prohibited the recitation of school-sponsored prayer in public schools. One year later, the Supreme Court struck down a school’s daily bible reading exercise due to its inability to satisfy the predominantly secular purpose standard.

More recently, the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance came under attack. New Jersey law requires that all public school students salute the United States flag daily. However, that same statute permits those students who “have conscientious scruples against such pledge or salute, or are children of accredited representatives of foreign governments to whom the United States government extends diplomatic immunity” from having to recite the Pledge. Those students are required to be respectful during the Pledge by standing at attention and if male, removing headresses. The opportunity to remain respectful and not recite the Pledge was apparently not enough to appease the family of an atheist student in the Matawan-Aberdeen Regional School District.

The family, represented by the American Humanist Association claimed that the practice of acknowledging God in the Pledge of Allegiance discriminates against atheists, in violation of the state’s Constitution. The family sought to have “under God” removed from the Pledge of Allegiance – a request that would be more appropriately addressed to the Legislature. The lawsuit alleged that the daily recitation of the Pledge in the school district “publicly disparages plaintiffs’ religious beliefs, calls plaintiffs’ patriotism into question, portrays plaintiffs as outsiders and second-class citizens, and forces (the child) to choose between nonparticipation in a patriotic exercise or participation in a patriotic exercise that is invidious to him and his religious class.” The court dismissed the suit and found that the reference to God in the Pledge was more of a declaration of patriotism than it was of a religious belief and that the phrase does not have to be removed.

School officials often find themselves perplexed as to how to permit religious liberty without endorsing religion.

Prayer During the School Day Rights of students to pray during the school day also carries with it legal implications. The leading Supreme Court decision relative to this issue tells us that students do not “shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.” In fact, “nothing in the Constitution ... prohibits any public school student from voluntarily praying at any time before, during, or after the school day.” Students are also allowed to pray with fellow students during the school day on the same terms and conditions that they may engage in other conversation or speech. Schools even have the discretion to dismiss students to off-premises religious instruction so long as school officials do not encourage or discourage participation in such activity or penalize students for participating. The same is true for dismissing students from class to satisfy religious tenets which require prayer throughout the day so long as it is not disruptive or burdensome to other students.

Notwithstanding a student’s free speech rights, schools may restrict student speech if it “materially and substantially interfere[s] with classroom activities or the school environment.” Schools are not required to wait for the disruption to occur before they can restrict speech, but they must demonstrate that their actions are based upon a reasonable prediction that disruption will take place. Similarly, public schools maintain substantial discretion to impose rules of conduct and pedagogical restrictions (i.e. no lewd or vulgar language) on student activities but in doing so, they must not discriminate against student prayer or religious speech. When students engage in prayer during the school day or make remarks of a religious nature, the content is not attributable to the school district merely because the expression takes place in the school setting.

Regardless of the particular issue at stake, questions regarding religion are among the most challenging for public school districts. This is due to the inherent conflict between the Free Speech, Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses. School officials often find themselves perplexed as to how to permit religious liberty without endorsing religion.

What the cases tell us is that schools are precluded from targeting religion through policymaking but may develop and enforce religion-neutral rules even if they have a tangential effect on religion. Public schools must permit student religious expression unless it substantially disrupts or interferes with the school environment or is offensive, lewd or indecent. These basic legal principles have been reiterated and expounded upon by our courts throughout the past several decades but issues continue to arise in the public school context. To avoid the potential of infringing upon students’ constitutional rights, the facts underlying each issue should be carefully evaluated in conjunction with longstanding legal precedent.

Mariann Crincoli, Esq. is an attorney with the Machado Law Group. She can be reached at mcrincoli@machadolawgroup.com.
Digital Citizenship: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

An important part of the technical education of today’s students is understanding the right and wrong of using that technology

BY MATT SHEA

With access to over 700 million websites and more than two billion people online, students today live in a very different world than we grew up in. Students today have awesome opportunities to learn online from any Internet capable device – a laptop at school, their mobile device, or their Xbox at home. These endless opportunities are the good part of the Internet and educational technology today.

However, every day there is a story about the bad and the ugly parts of the Internet. We hear about problems such as students bullying others using social media outlets, kids naively releasing too much personal information about themselves online, and immature teens posting photos of themselves they will soon regret.

Whose responsibility is it to warn children about the dangers and pitfalls of the Internet? Is it the responsibility of parents to teach their children how to be safe on the Internet? Are parents today even aware of some of the complex technology and social media that children have access to? Should educators make students aware of the permanent damage that can be caused by hitting submit, send, or post? Who should teach children about right and wrong – about being a good digital citizen? The answer is simple: All of us! To learn to be a contributing member of the community that is the Internet, everyone must help teach our students the appropriate uses of various tools – social media, texting, chat rooms, and more. Students should
be taught and reminded digital right from wrong at home and at school.

As an educational technology leader, I knew I could have a great effect on my students’ knowledge and understanding of digital tools and the Internet. For years I have trained teachers, presented assemblies to students, and worked with parents to discuss digital citizenship. I have learned that there are two levels on how to present this information.

For younger students (K-5 or so), a softer approach with broad topics have been effective. We discuss ideas like “netiquette” and how not to be a “troll” (someone who harangues and harasses people online). We talk about how, even if you do not see someone face-to-face, you should still be nice and respectful. We cover how to protect your privacy and the importance of not talking to strangers or giving them any personal information. We also discuss website validity – not everything on the Internet is true – and strategies how to find out if something is true or not. I try to keep this presentation light and fun with the goal of getting the students to think about and understand the Internet.

I learned that I needed a more serious, harsh message for older students and decided “older” included sixth grade and up. For the older students, I may only have one shot before they make what I call either a “poor life choice” or a “career-ending choice” so I present some heavy topics. I do warn the students in the beginning of my presentation that it won’t be a fun talk but it is an important message that they need to hear.

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I know where your cat lives.com: This is a great site for cat pictures… and a lesson in privacy. Students take pictures with their mobile devices and post them to social media not knowing that pictures today have data attached to them – latitude, longitude, time of picture, model of the device the picture was taken with… scary amounts of personal data.

- **Permanence:** When you post something to the web, it stays on the web for a really long time. I share articles from the court cases concerning Snapchat – not everything disappears! (Snapchat is a photo messaging application that allows users to send photos or videos of themselves to others. Those photos automatically delete after one to 10 seconds – supposedly!)

- **The Fourth Amendment Does Not Apply:** We discuss a court case where the judge ruled that someone’s “legitimate expectation of privacy ends when he disseminates posts to friends because friends are free to use information however they want – including sharing it with the government.”

- **Sexting:** We examine the career-ending choice of Congressman Anthony Weiner who decided to tweet a picture of… well, you can imagine. For students under the age of 18 in New Jersey, sexting could result in a fine, years in jail, and possibly having to register as a sex offender for the rest of their lives.

- **Terroristic Threats:** For our students who are gamers and think nothing of threatening other gamers online, I share the story of now 19-year-old Justin Carter. While playing League of Legends, he threatened to shoot up a kindergarten classroom as a joke… he is now facing up to eight years in jail.

- **The Tyler Clementi Case:** As a wrap-up, I share the bullying story from Rutgers of Tyler Clementi and how this digital bullying ended with his suicide.

Why do I begin this harsh presentation with sixth graders? Isn’t that too young? I have one other story I share with the students from out of Nevada, “Attack a Teacher Day.” A group of six 12-year-olds thought it would be funny to make an event on Facebook to attack teachers they did not like. Although meant as a joke, on the same day they picked for their event, a student in Nebraska shot and killed his assistant principal and then himself. You read that right, 12-year-olds thought this would be funny…

We live in amazing times – our students have great opportunities and will do great things in the future. Our goal should be to make good digital citizens. Let’s talk to students and children every time we have a chance. Every time your students are in the computer lab to do research, every time students share a Google doc, every time students comment on each other’s blogs we should be discussing digital citizenship. What can you do to help?

Matt Shea is chief technology officer for Vernon Township School District. He can be reached at mshea@vtsd.com.
Although it was only about sixteen months ago, it’s easy to forget that the winter of 2013-2014 was brutal. In fact, according to Office of the New Jersey State Climatologist at Rutgers, that winter was the seventh snowiest of the past 120 years. Average snowfall around the state was 54.3 inches, which is 28.4 inches above average. School districts rapidly used up allotted snow days, and were searching their calendars to find make-up days so that they could fulfill the state’s 180-day school year requirement.

But in Pascack Valley Regional High School district, which has about 2,000 students in two schools, a novel solution was pioneered: the “virtual snow day,” with students engaging in a full day of learning and school work via their computers.

Decade-Long Preparation The virtual snow day had its roots in technology innovations that the district had begun a decade earlier. In 2004, the Pascack Valley Regional High School District embarked on a project that has dramatically changed the way education takes place. Since then, our 1:1 Laptop eLearning Initiative provides a district-owned laptop computer for every student and teacher. Coupled with effective and continuous professional development, the district delivers a 21st century education to every student, every day.

For over eleven years, the use of these powerful technology tools, coupled with teacher expertise in delivering education using the tools, has transformed our classrooms, creating a more engaging environment through which students can experience greater involvement in, and responsibility for, their education. The ever-increasing number of web-based resources being used by our teaching staff gives students the opportunity to learn at their own pace, review skills in need of improvement outside of the classroom, and have greater student-to-student, and student-to-teacher collaboration.

In February 2014, with the forecast of a significant weather event occurring in the near future and the district’s three allotted snow days used up, the administrators of the Pascack Valley Regional High School district asked themselves an essential question: Can Pascack Valley create meaningful and continuous instruction for students during adverse weather events, and have it still “count” under state requirements?

These administrators felt that Thursday, Feb. 13, 2014 could be run as a “virtual” school day where campuses would be closed, yet a regular school day for students and faculty would continue using the technology and instructional skills the district already employs. The idea of a virtual day had been discussed for more than a year, since Hurricane Sandy closed school for several days in 2012. Our mission and mantra for the day was to have it run “like any other school day, but only at home.”

District administration contacted the Bergen County Office of the Executive County Superintendent to discuss this idea and subsequently a conference call was set up between senior district administration and officials from the New Jersey Depart-
Results of the Virtual Snow Day

Throughout the district, students and teachers alike embarked on the virtual school day with enthusiasm and excitement. Though we were in uncharted territory, there was a sense of calm as the district had been unconsciously preparing for this for many years. With years of experience using a multitude of web-based interactive platforms in classrooms, teachers and students confidently and effectively interacted throughout the day using an array of tools such as Twitter, Google Docs, Schoolwires, Edmodo, Wallwisher, My Big Campus, Today’s Meet, YouTube, I-Photo, I-Movie, and Screencast-o-matic, to name a few.

Students were expected to log on at 8 a.m. and check their teachers’ websites to learn their activity and assignment for the day. Students were expected to communicate regularly with teachers, and they had the whole day to finish their assignments.

By day’s end students had engaged in an array of activities that included: flipped classrooms (i.e. science and mathematics), screencasting and discussion-board commenting (i.e. social studies), reading, writing, and blogging (i.e. English), voice and video recording (i.e. music and world languages), Skyping (i.e. a guidance office parent conference), and digital photo sharing (i.e. art).

Administrators were able to keep their finger on the pulse of activity by monitoring a pre-determined Twitter hashtag (#PVRVirtual). They also observed and joined conversations in any number of collaborative platforms including Google Docs and My Big Campus.

With teachers taking virtual attendance based on student participation and electronic submission of assignments, the end result was 96 percent participation by students throughout the district. A post-activity student survey indicated that 82 percent of students participating found the activities to be as engaging or more engaging than a regular school day.

Interestingly, several teachers found that they had greater participation levels from some students online than they typically did when the students were in the classroom.

Technical Specifics and Lessons Learned from the Day

All faculty and students in the PVRHSD are issued a 13-inch MacBook Air laptop at the beginning of the school year, which they bring to and from school each day. Machines are loaded with all of the software they need and have appropriate access to the Internet for instructional resources. Having this tool at their side allows the educational process to happen anytime, anywhere, every day of the year. This fact had us thinking the virtual day would be just like any other day. However, despite the overall success of our virtual day, we did have one technical bump on the road, and one major lesson learned.

Email is one method of communication used during a normal school day, with all Pascack Valley faculty and students having a district-issued email account on our server. At any point in time during a normal school day, we will see an average of 30 to 40 percent of people logged into email, and only 50 percent of those logged-in actively using email, all of which our infrastructure had handled without issue. When the virtual day started, nearly 95 percent of people were logged into and actively using email all at the same time, something our WebMail server was not capable of handling. To address this issue in the short term, our network engineer quickly spun up three additional WebMail servers through our virtual server environment. We posted links to these additional servers on our school website, and through various communication channels, word spread and the overload subsided. To address this issue in the long term, we purchased an application load balancer, which acts something as a “traffic cop” to assure no one server ever is overloaded again.

After the day was done, we surveyed students to learn about their experiences of the day, both from the instructional and technical perspectives. Heading into the process, the expectation was students would complain about email, but much to our surprise, that was barely mentioned. The student’s number one issue was our lack of a unified Learning Management System (LMS). They found trying to manage seven different classes, with seven different teachers possibly using seven different platforms to deliver their content quite overwhelming. One student put it best, “My brother goes to college and everything for him is in one place. My dad goes to work and everything for him is in one place. If school is preparing me for college and work, why don’t we have the same experience?”

As a district we realized the students...
were 100 percent correct. We immediately put on a full court press to select one LMS that the entire district would use. We included administration, faculty, students and technology in the process to evaluate and pilot products. In December 2014, our district selected an LMS that we feel effectively responds to the needs of everyone, most importantly our students. We have rolled out the product and are currently in the professional development phase of the project, with full district adoption to take place September 2015.

State Denial of the Pascack Virtual Day  On the last week of school for the 2013-2014 school year, after multiple presentations and submissions of the evidence of the rigor and depth of PVRHSD’s “Virtual Day” day over a four-month period, the New Jersey Department of Education denied our request to have the Virtual Day count as one of our 180 required days. To protect ourselves, the district had already made up the day during spring break where, ironically, only 73 percent of the students attended.

This said, let’s examine the NJDOE’s rule requiring public schools to be in session for at least 180 days per year to maintain state aid eligibility. This time period seems reasonable in that it allows for significant classroom time, several “breaks,” and a traditional summer vacation. The devil is in the details, however. The problem with the rule is inflexibility. Sure, a 180-day schedule is fine – until districts are confronted with extreme weather, natural disasters, and other situations that force alterations to school calendars. Our schools need amended NJDOE regulations granting flexibility.

While problematic for almost everyone, scheduling inflexibility is also completely unnecessary because alternatives –with an emphasis on virtual school sessions, plus extending certain days to make up for lost instructional hours – have rendered the 180-day calendar obsolete. Most districts build “snow” and professional development days into their annual calendars. But when storms and other situations arise, extra days can quickly be used up and, because of the rule’s inflexibility, what happens next is chaotic. Districts must scramble to extend the school year, trim planned vacation days, or even schedule weekend sessions. This creates a disadvantageous educational environment. Does anyone believe students forced to attend school on Saturday will be in the proper frame of mind for learning?

The current rigidity creates scheduling hardships for students, their families, and district personnel, without offering an educational advantage. Responding to the rejection of credit for the virtual day, New Jersey Sen. Gerald Cardinale and Sen. James Beach submitted a bill – S-2476 – to permit use of virtual instruction in meeting the “180-day school year requirement under certain circumstances,” pending approval by the state education commissioner. The bill was referred to the Senate Education Committee, but no action has been taken.

Everyone seems committed to preparing students to use technology in addressing next-generation challenges, but our state declines to permit virtual sessions which would, of course, allow students to use technology in a next-generation environment. It’s a perplexing response because continual upgrading of communications capabilities has made virtual instruction more accessible and effective with each passing year.

Other States Permit Cyber Days  The rule is even more exasperating because multiple states enjoy more flexibility within their school calendars. For example, Pennsylvania has implemented a Flexible Instructional Days pilot program in all its public school districts that provides as many as five “cyber days” per year for whenever circumstances prevent students from reaching classrooms. Wisconsin’s governor recently signed a bill permitting schools to make up lost time by extending school days, rather than removing vacation time or adding days to the end of the year. And Kentucky now allows districts impacted by severe weather to open for a minimum 170 days – rather than the standard 180 – as long as they extend school days to meet the state’s minimum number of instructional hours.

In addition, both New Hampshire and Ohio have “Blizzard Bag Days” that enable a district to operate in virtual fashion, as long as it has secured advance state approval for a plan to do so, and has a specified percentage of students complete assigned work.

If weather and other factors would cooperate, our public school districts would never struggle to complete a 180-day schedule. But in the real world, conditions arise that demand school calendar flexibility. It’s time for New Jersey to acknowledge that an arbitrary number of school days or pupil contact hours is a flawed policy – it must join those states already utilizing virtual school days.

Can learning occur beyond the classroom, at any time of day? If we believe so, we now have an opportunity to put our belief into practice. Until such a time when legislative remedies are in place, the Pascack Valley Regional High School District will continue to innovate and explore new ways to educate our students for, and in, the 21st century.
I will never forget the exact moment that I became complacent.

It was October of 2010, my tenth year in education. I walked in on a Monday, sat down at my desk, opened the folder of my laptop that contained all of my PowerPoints, opened the one pertaining to the unit I was starting that day, and suddenly felt like I was punched in the gut. You see, I hadn’t spent a single minute over the weekend preparing lesson plans or even thinking about what I was going to be teaching that day. My instructional routines had become so automatic and my grasp of the content so precise that I didn’t even have to engage my brain to produce a lesson for the day. My classroom was generally running on autopilot. I knew at that moment that something needed to change and it needed to happen fast.

It just so happened that about two weeks later, I was skimming a publication from the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) and stumbled across an article about two chemistry teachers (Jon Bergmann and Aaron Sams) in Colorado who were using videos they had posted online to teach content to their students. About two years prior, I had begun recording example problems on an interactive whiteboard using a video camera and posting them to my website, but they were only there to supplement what I was already doing. I never considered recording my entire lesson for my students to watch. My students commented how helpful it was to see those problems a second time when they were at home so why wouldn’t seeing an entire lesson help them? So began my flipped classroom story.

Flipped Classrooms: 101 A “traditional” flipped classroom centers on the idea that lectures normally given in class are recorded and posted in some form for the students to watch for homework. The videos might be posted to YouTube, a teacher website, copied to a flashdrive, or burned to a DVD. A typical 45-minute lecture could be boiled down to about 10 or 15 minutes. Students would take notes, just like they would normally do in class, then come to class ready to engage in something to reinforce the material they learned the night before.

This is exactly how I began my first flipped unit. I chose a fairly easy unit (since I teach chemistry, I chose writing and balancing reactions), something with which my students had always found success. They would go home, watch the videos I recorded using Camtasia Studio from TechSmith and posted on my YouTube Channel (http://bit.ly/seigelchemistry), come to class, and do the homework they normally would have done at home. It was fantastic! Every time a student began to struggle, I was right there to answer his or her questions. The students wouldn’t go more than a few minutes being confused and would immediately get right back to getting their work done. I still gave the same checking-for-understanding quizzes I had always given, the same labs, the same tests. The only thing that changed was where the homework assignment and the lecture happened.

The best part about this method, for me, was students could move at their own pace. Some students would watch all of the videos in one weekend, show up on Monday and just plow through all of the graded assignments. Some students would have the laptops open on their desk (at the time we had Dell mini-laptops, but I now have a cart of Chromebooks) and watch the video as they completed the homework. Some failed the homework assignment even though they took good notes, went back to the videos in class, and had the opportunity to fix the mistakes they made. None of this would have been possible in a traditional model with me controlling every aspect of the daily routine.

This system worked really well. But
then I soon realized things were starting to unravel. Since everyone was completing the same homework assignment, and different students were moving at different speeds, slower students figured out that if they just wait for the faster students to complete the assignments, they could just copy their work when it was returned. Also, students who were not good at managing their time in class properly, fell far behind (sometimes weeks behind) and were turning in an entire marking period’s worth of assignments on the last day before grades were due. This last situation caused a tremendous amount of work for me and meant that the students were not getting the timely feedback they needed to be successful.

Once again, things needed to change, and fast.

Stop Focusing On Classrooms and Start Focusing on Learning Those educators who have been successful with a flipped classroom have begun to move to a flipped learning approach. Both are centered on the essential question: What is the best use of my face-to-face time with my students? However, it is the mindset that is different. Flipped classrooms allow students to watch lectures at home and engage in homework in school. Teachers guide students through a series of worksheets or more traditional activities that help them reach objectives and gain the knowledge necessary to pass assessments.

Flipped learning allows educators to use a variety of teaching methodologies to help students reach a learning objective (www.flippedlearning.org). Rather than focusing on the content they need to learn, students are engaged in activities that teach both content and skills that are necessary for success. The classroom is a dynamic and collaborative environment where all levels of learners are supported.

So, what does this dynamic, collaborative learning environment look like? Well, that’s the beauty of flipped learning. Every educator customizes it to fit his or her school, students, and personal abilities. Some teachers use pre-made videos on the Internet; some make their own. Some are the only teachers in their building/district flipping; some are part of an entire flipped school. Some teachers use only their traditional assignments; some allow the students to design their own work. This is not a pre-packaged curriculum – something you just order from a company and everything you need is already inside. Let me tell you what a typical unit looks like in my flipped environment.

One unit my students learn about is solutions. On the first day, the students will participate in a guided-inquiry activity called Introduction to Solution Making (http://bit.ly/seigelsolutionmaking) in which they will learn about calculating concentration of solutions by making two cups of fruit punch. There are no procedures other than for them to make two cups of fruit punch the way they like to drink it. After they make the drinks, they read farther down and it tells them to use the mass of powdered drink they measured and the

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Busy Work or

One district’s journey to remake home work for the 21st century

BY DR. ROSS KASUN
Home Learning?

Homework is an educational tool that has always been a part of schools. It affects every member of a school community: students, parents, teachers, administrators and board of education members.

For the most part, as a practice, it is completely outdated and largely misused as a means of impacting student learning and achievement. Research generally does not support the benefits of homework, yet homework is assigned at almost every level, it is rarely questioned and some people think our students should get more of it. Although never proven by research, parents assume an automatic relationship between homework and future success.

Homework was a topic that was never “covered” while I was working toward my teaching degree. As a classroom teacher, I received no training or professional development on the topic. Homework was rarely discussed on a professional level among colleagues or by my administrators; rather it was something that I believed I was required to give, and for the most part, I assigned many ineffective assignments, as I was simply assigning typical assignments that I experienced while going through school (i.e. doing what was done to me).

Once I became a principal, my approach to homework was not much different because it truly was an afterthought being rarely discussed, except when parents complained. When I noticed in a teacher’s lesson plan the absence of homework for a period of time, I would simply suggest that the teacher assign some. The issue regarding the quality of homework was hardly ever addressed, as I too considered that if homework was assigned, learning must be occurring. I share the above because I believe my experiences are not unique, but universal in our profession.

Once I became a central office administrator with a district perspective, my views about homework began to change. I quickly saw how dangerous it was having teachers do their “own thing.” Some teachers gave a lot of homework, some gave none, some graded homework and those grades counted heavily towards the students’ final grade, while others did not grade homework or gave little or no weight to homework grades.

Some teachers were giving some effective assignments that encouraged thinking and others were assigning busy work that promoted very little learning.

Some homework assignments were large projects that required materials to be purchased, and parental support – some so much, that it was evident that the work was actually parent work – but resulted in a positive grade for the student. Therefore, the homework further perpetuated the achievement gap between those who have support at home and those who do not.

Finally, I began to ponder the purpose of some homework assignments such as a word search, diorama, mobile or writing spelling words multiple times. How do they promote learning and what evidence of learning do they show?

As a new superintendent for the Freehold Township School District, I was immediately called to examine how teachers were using homework as part of the learning process.

It began as a very quiet Thursday in July, and I was settling into my new role, being quite proud of the transition plan that I was finalizing. My first three days were eerily quiet, as we sometimes find in the summer before schedules and class lists are released, but on this day the phone began ringing with zeal. There were eight parents who requested a return call from me, so I knew there was a pressing issue at hand. Most of the calls were similar in nature, “Dr. Kasun, I am confused why my son/
daughter is being recommended for Basic Skills, as he/she had straight As on his/her report card.”

My response was, “Let me look into it further and I will get back to you.” After conducting some research, I found that, in fact, the parents were correct, that their child had received As on the report card. However, these students scored Partially Proficient on the New Jersey ASK in math or language arts; thus, they were recommended for our Basic Skills Program. Further, after digging deeper, I found that most of these students did not score well on our district-wide assessments or classroom tests; yet, they received As in their classes because they completed all the assigned homework, and it was weighted so much that it altered the student’s grade. Equally as alarming, I found that we had several students who scored perfect 300s on the NJASK and did very well on district assessments and classroom tests, but had Cs and Ds on their report card, as they were penalized severely for not completing homework.

As the topic of homework can be as polarizing as religion and politics, and can evoke such emotion connected to one’s own personal experience with homework (if we polled parents, half believe that there is not enough and the other half think there is way too much), I knew as a new superintendent, I needed to tread very lightly on making any policy or practice change. Our district had already embarked on the implementation of differentiated instruction, so I decided to focus the year on assessment and grading in the differentiated classroom based on Rick Wormeli’s work in his book, “Fair Isn’t Always Equal: Assessing and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom.” Trying to solidify our understanding of how to best institute differentiated instruction, we tackled such issues as the difference and importance between summative and formative assessments. As a staff, we were able to agree homework performance is not an accurate portrayal of final proficiency or mastery. It’s the path to learning, so it is a formative assessment. We grade students against standards, not the routes by which they achieve them. Homework is practice and not a determination of mastery and grades are saved for declarations of mastery. Thus, we began to question how much homework should count toward a student’s grade.

We also examined the practice of zeros and how detrimental it can be to a students’ grade. Douglas Reeves, founder of the Center for Performance Assessment in Boston, pointed out in 2004 that a zero on a 100 point scale is mathematically inaccurate, and does not fix the problem of students not completing homework. When students fail to complete homework, we tend to approach the problem more like a discipline problem than a learning issue.

We began to change our ideas and focused a conversation based on the fact that homework should not be about compliance, but rather a tool to support learning. We are faced with the irony that a policy that may be grounded in the belief of holding students accountable (giving zeros) actually allows some students to escape the accountability for learning.

Changing the Homework Policies The following summer with support from our board of education, we changed some policies and practices regarding homework and grading. Thus, we made immediate and universal changes for the 2012-2013 school year. Although we know that top-down mandates usually fail, we knew that it was critical to change, as we had no way to address a challenge from a student or parent. Homework and grading policies were not consistent across district classrooms, and our grades were sometimes not an accurate measure of a student’s mastery because they were influenced (either inflated or deflated) based upon whether a student (or his/her parents) completed the homework. The most significant policy/practice changes were:

- Homework shall only be weighted as 5 percent of a student’s final grade.
- Grades have to be a measure of what students know, compared to a standard. They are not about compliance. We chose 5 percent because, although it has some weight, it is small enough that if a student does no homework, but aces all tests, that student still gets an A. Grades are not necessary for learning.
to take place; in fact research indicates that grades tend to interfere with learning.

- Once the threat of grades is taken away from homework, homework becomes a safe place to try out new skills without penalty, just as athletes and musicians try out their skills in practice or in rehearsals.

No zeros. The lowest grade is a 50.

- Traditional practices of giving zeros and not accepting late assignments allow students to escape the accountability for learning. Learning is not about compliance, and we do not teach responsibility with a stick and carrot. It is not “learn or I will hurt you” (if one wanted to really hurt, one could give a “minus” grade, like “-200” for not completing an assignment). It is not about control; it is about learning.

- We need to assign work that is relevant and connected to the classroom, so that students see a reason to complete it, and not solely do it because they fear getting a bad grade. The homework assigned should be so meaningful that students need to complete it.

We established maximum time limits of 10 minutes per grade level, per night.

- Examples: third grade would be 30 minutes, fifth would be 50 minutes, eighth would be 80 minutes, and twelfth would be 120 minutes.

- It is very dangerous for a district to have some teachers not assigning homework and other teachers, sometimes at the same grade level, giving hours of work.

- The time limits shall not be based on the three smartest or quickest students in class. Teachers for each subject should tell students how much time an assignment should take and tell students to stop (draw a line) at this point.

- The quality of the task is as important as the amount of time required.

As with any change, we faced some resistance and pushback from some staff and a few parents. The first challenge was that some believed if we do not put a grade or significant weight on homework (now only counting of 5 percent of a student’s final grade), students simply will not complete it. This is absolutely a false premise, and learning can occur without grades. In fact, those students who tend to do all homework will and those who do not complete usually will not regardless of the presence or absence of any grade. The second challenge was that some teachers posed the notion that we teach responsibility and time management by giving homework. This is also an incorrect idea, as home-

Students are not going to get ahead by completing hours of meaningless worksheets or packets.

work does not reinforce time management if adults have to coerce children into doing it; if children are coerced, they are not in charge of making decisions about the use of time. The third major opposition was that some argued that giving students 50 for doing nothing is not fair. To address this point, we went back to the mathematical inaccuracy of giving a zero on a 100 point scale. We pointed out that even in our teacher’s observation model, Danielson, which uses a four point scale, a score of one is the lowest score (no zeros), as zeros when averaged in are usually not recoverable.

Professional Development on Homework

Equally important, at the same time as changing the above policies and practices, we began providing professional development regarding homework, and made it a topic for our new teacher academy. With the “new” mandated evaluation models and all the professional development that we were providing to our teachers, our classrooms had dramatically changed to be more student-centered, technology-infused learning environments. However, our homework assignments, for the most part, did not follow this shift. In our classrooms we realized and accounted for the fact that students differ in readiness and developmental levels, and all the children don’t learn in the same way, but most homework assignments were a one-size fits all.

We asked teachers to use the same understanding about how children learn and factors that influence learning (research about the brain, motivation, persistence and learner difference) that was clearly visible in our classrooms and transfer this knowledge to homework assignments. As Dr. Bill Daggett suggested during his presentation at a 2015 NJSBA
conference, we made a point of stressing during our professional development sessions with staff that relevancy makes rigor possible. We reminded our staff that rigor does not mean more work; students are not going to get ahead by completing hours of meaningless worksheets or packets. Key points in our professional development were:

**The purpose of homework is to foster learning.**

- Just as we do in our classrooms, we need to let the students know the objective of the assignment. The ultimate goal of the assignment- pre-learning, checking for understanding, practice or processing- should be clearly communicated to the student.

- Quality tasks are related to classroom learning. If it is not tied to classroom learning and there is not a clear objective, it is probably not an assignment worth assigning.

- As we want to foster learning so that it is stored into long-term memory, a very simple, yet highly effective, homework assignment is to ask students to summarize in writing what they learned, include one question they still have, and rate themselves as far as their understanding on a scale of 1 to 5. By requiring students to reflect on what they learned, it helps move information into long-term memory, and it quickly lets teachers know what students understand. Just as in our classrooms, students must have opportunities to self-evaluate, to reflect on their learning and to set their own goals.

- We cannot give points to students for bringing things in (paper towels, tissues, etc.), getting parents to sign logs, tests, etc. We cannot penalize or reward a student for what his parents sign or what his parents can buy, as this has nothing to do with learning.

**Flipped Learning is an extremely effective approach for home learning**

- Short instructional videos created by the teacher provide information to the students that is clear, correct and concise.

- Students can view the instruction multiple times and revisit it to gain understanding. It can also be viewed by parents adding them as partners in learning.

- Flipping learning frees up class time, so that teachers can work with students as a coach and mentor and provide individualized learning.

**Teachers need to assign homework that students can complete on their own**

- We should never assign something, such as a new math concept that students have to figure out on their own. To undo learning that occurred incorrectly is practically impossible.

- Students should never have to start a homework assignment by asking parents- how do I do that?

**Collaboration and personalized learning are paramount**

- Tools like Google Docs, classroom blogs, etc. that we use to foster collaboration in the classroom are just as effective for home learning. Best learning practices should not end at the end of the school day. Students use these tools as part of their daily life, so it is often how they learn best.

- The same intuitive software that we use in our classrooms can be assigned at home to create personalized learning that meets each student where he or she is.

As a district we are still on our journey to improve our homework practices. The policy changes supported by the board have ensured that grades have become an accurate measure of what students know and understand and not inflated or deflated due to work done at home, which has diminished parental concerns and grading challenges. Our teachers’ lesson plans show more effective and meaningful homework assignments, which include learning objectives. Discussions and notes from our team meetings demonstrate that teachers are planning, sharing and discussing home “learning” assignments, which improve learning rather than merely assigning busy work. Feedback from staff, students and parents demonstrate that home learning assignments are more meaningful, consistent and relevant. A change in our homework practices have provided more opportunities for students to engage in flipped and blended learning assignments that are tailored to their personalized learning needs.

Boards of education and administrators have an obligation to challenge and change practices that are outdated, even if they carry the weight of tradition. Some homework practices fall into this category.

We often find it easier to address policies when students’ health and safety comes into view. All
districts have concussion policies, smoking and substance abuse policies, and districts are quick to adopt policies and practices to protect the children in their care. We must be equally as vigilant and have the courage to address practices that can be harmful to the learning process like ineffective homework. Boards of education and administrators should proactively challenge all existing practices to understand their core intent, and to determine if they are actually fostering the learning process or not. In some cases, long-standing, ineffective routines have persisted out of tradition, and are superficially justifiable or suitably innocuous enough to escape scrutiny. These processes may be creating impediments to learning as well as wasting time and discouraging students, and the source of the negative impact may be difficult to discover. The rote assignment of questionably valuable or effective homework is a widespread example of this, and should be one of the first areas that educational leaders address.

Resources and Further Reading


Dr. Ross Kasun is currently serving in his fourth year as the superintendent for the Freehold Township School District. Previously, he served as the superintendent for the Colts Neck School District and the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction for the Summit Public Schools. He earned his doctoral degree at Seton Hall University and his dissertation focused on leadership. Dr. Kasun is an adjunct professor for Montclair State University and St. Peter’s University. He can be reached at rkasun@freeholdtwp.k12.nj.us.

IS YOUR OLD TELEPHONE SYSTEM MAKING IT HARD FOR YOUR STAFF TO COMMUNICATE?

- Is communicating key to successful relations with the public and your staff?
- Are your telephone systems unreliable?
- Do you need more powerful communication tools than your current telephone system can provide?

If you can answer “YES” to any of these questions, then it is time to contact the state leader in K to 12 telecommunication systems.

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The Best Day of the Year

Every year, in most school districts, there is a day that is given over to celebrating learning and academic achievement with an age-old rite of passage.

Students in caps and gowns process down an aisle surrounded by family and friends. In many districts, faculty and staff join in the parade of academic gowns. Cameras are clicking. The orchestra is playing “Pomp and Circumstance,” and the parents wonder how 18 years could have passed so quickly. The school standouts and strugglers alike have a moment when they move the tassel on their mortarboard from right to left, or toss their caps in the air to celebrate their newly-acquired diplomas.

Most board members would say that attending their district’s graduation is the ultimate reward for the long hours of volunteer service, the evenings they spend in meetings, the wrangling over the school budget, and the criticism they sometimes have to endure as a board member.

In an informal survey done a few years ago by School Board Notes, 89 percent of respondents noted that school board members play a formal role in their district’s graduation ceremony. With this issue, School Leader celebrates that role.

The magazine reached out to school board presidents, the NJSBA board of directors and to the county association leaders asking them to share photos and memories of board member participation in graduation ceremonies. (The idea was to keep responses to a manageable number.) We were rewarded with the thoughtful comments and the photographs that you see featured in these pages.

In many districts, the board president is called upon to give a short speech. Most understand that their remarks should be brief. Nobody – not students, family members or even faculty and staff – comes to graduation with the primary purpose of hearing a school board president speak. So the best speeches feature heart-felt congratulations, salute the hard work of students, and acknowledge the part that teachers and parents played in getting students to this day. Few board presidents can resist sending off the students with one last message. Nor should they. Commencement is one final “teachable moment,” and students can profit from the encouragement and advice of someone older and wiser. But at the same time, graduation speakers would do well to remember Franklin Roosevelt’s advice to his son about public speaking: “Be sincere. Be brief. Be seated.”

A few board presidents shared copies of prepared remarks they have delivered at past graduations with School Leader. These eloquent remarks – all of which fit Roosevelt’s parameters – are excerpted here.

So whether you’re sending high school graduates off to their futures, or middle school students on to high school, enjoy your district’s commencement ceremony this year. And remember that your hard work as a board member has helped make the day possible.
Your education here at Washington Township has prepared you to meet the vast challenges that lie ahead.

Thirty-one years ago, I sat in this very stadium, excited and a bit nervous about being the first in my family to go to college. Expectations were high and the message was consistent. “Work harder and be better than everyone else.”

…But my message to you is different, whether you are entering the military, starting a career or heading off to college, work hard to be the best you that you can be...

Always remember, your eventual job is what you will do, and not who you are.”

2014 speech to graduates, Ginny Murphy, board president, Washington Township Schools (Gloucester County)
Continue to work hard and I am confident that you will be successful at whatever you choose to do in life. As the great statesman Sir Winston Churchill said, “Success is never final. Failure is never fatal. It is the courage to keep going that counts.” Don Webster Jr., Manchester Township High School (Ocean County), and NJSBA president

I encourage you to continue to work hard in your studies in order to achieve your goals. You are about to enter the most important time of your life. You will be making important decisions that will affect your future. Choose carefully, and remember to “work hard.” I also encourage you to be involved and to take advantage of all of the opportunities our high school offers, be it student government, sports, the arts, or our clubs. You’ll find that your high school experience will be much more rewarding if you participate in these activities. 2014 speech to Manchester Township Middle School graduates, Don Webster Jr., NJSBA president

What Do Board Members Like Best About Graduation?
An informal School Board Notes survey asked readers what they like best about graduation. Selected comments include:

- The marching in of the fully-robed staff - being led by the Teacher of the Year. Our chorus and band participation in providing the music and our Air Force Junior ROTC’s work with the flag presentation.
- The superintendent’s address on the accomplishments of graduating students
- All of it - it’s wonderful. The superintendent speaks for one minute, the board of education president for one minute and the rest of the speakers are all students.
- I like being able to give each student a diploma and being able to congratulate them individually.
- I like hearing the students speak. At both high school and the middle school, we have the class president, the salutatorian, and the valedictorian all speak. Additionally, at the middle school, we have the high school principal speak and welcome the class to the high school.
- The students’ happiness, and the musical interludes.
“The best part of my job as board president is that I get to officially congratulate the graduating class of 2014. Recently, I sent a private message to one mom who is here today, and I commented that she must be so proud. She replied, “It has been an honor and privilege to be a part of the school system for the past eight years. But I truly believe “it takes a village.”...and you’ve been part of that village.”

While her modesty understates her own contributions, her expressed gratitude is probably among the qualities that make her such a fabulous parent. It made me feel good to think that I could have made, even the smallest difference… It is my humbling pleasure to be part of her village… of this village.”

2014 speech to graduates, Lisa Wolff, board president, Hopewell Valley Regional School District

• When we are able to hold it outside it is relatively informal and parents have the chance to take lots of pictures.
• Hearing from the students when they give their speeches.
• The certified staff attend and wear gowns and form a tunnel for the students to walk through to their seating area.
• A small video of the graduating class is shown.
• It is a celebration of community; not just the graduates - although by definition, it is their night.
• The graduates marching in their caps and gowns filling up the field looks really wonderful.
• We offer “Project Graduation” following the ceremony.
• The use of a bagpipe band for the entrance parade.
• The principal recognizes those seniors who have earned special awards, and the National Honor Society members.
What Do Board Members Like Best About Graduation?

- The ceremony is short: one hour total.
- The students are asked to applaud the retiring high school staff and to thank their parents.
- We all give out the diplomas and sometimes request a certain student. It becomes a very personal ceremony.
- I love the small town feel of it on the varsity football field with the bleachers packed with parents, friends, and alumni in attendance cheering on the graduates. I also love that the high school band and chorus perform at the ceremony.
- The listed achievements of the students, and a list of the schools they will be attending in their post-secondary efforts.
- Watching the students and parents as their son or daughter receives a diploma.
- The student speaker is selected by the graduating seniors themselves.

Today is one of the proudest days of my life and one that I will certainly remember forever. I not only have the honor of serving as the president of the Glassboro Board of Education, but today, I have the privilege of handing out a diploma to each graduate of the class of 2010 – a class that consists of young adults that I watched grow up, know personally, and shared in a lot of their life experiences. They are your children and mine.

2010 speech to graduates, Peter Calvo, president, Glassboro Board of Education

As a board of education member, I am often approached by critics of public education who bluntly ask me what a teacher makes. Really! Well, I’m going to tell you what they make. Teachers make students wonder, question, evaluate, create, and solve. Teachers make students work harder than they ever thought they could. Teachers make a difference – that’s what teachers make.

2014 speech to graduates, Peter Calvo, president, Glassboro Board of Education
• At the end the board members, administrators and faculty form two lines and the graduates walk through them as we all clap.

• The students have a voice in creating the ceremony. This year one student played a violin solo, blending music of their years together. Another student was chosen to recite a poem she had written in honor of their graduation.

• I like the moment where students receive their diploma, and the fact that the board plays a role in the program.

• The decorum, the air-conditioned comfort of the arena, the jumbo screen, and the three-minute speeches

• That they graduate on the high school’s front lawn and that it is about the students, who elect speakers from their class to address integrity, the future, and their ambitions.

• When the students each come up for the diploma, to see the look on their faces, they are so happy, excited and relieved, all at the same time, even though I am sure they are nervous about what the future holds.
volume of water they used to calculate the concentration. This is when they realized they didn’t measure anything and have to start again. Note: While learning how to calculate concentration is the main learning objective, students learn more through their mistakes of solution making. At the end of the activity, the students are free to drink their solutions while they watch the instructional video about calculating concentration (which is linked in the Google Doc of the lab).

The video on concentration is embedded in a Google Form. Below the video are three self-check questions for the students to complete at the conclusion of the video. These questions are modified questions from the unit test and align to the district quarterly assessment. When they answer the questions and hit “submit,” a tool called Flubaroo provides both the student and the teacher feedback on the student’s understanding of the material, and he or she can ask the teacher questions about any errors or misconceptions and get the immediate assistance they need.

Students now move through a series of both required and optional assignments for the unit, which have been detailed on an assignment chart distributed on Google Classroom and on the first day of the unit. (bit.ly/seigelsolutions) While some assignments are labeled as required, I have given the students the freedom to either supplement or replace these with assignments they have designed. This gives all students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding in ways that better suit their needs.

**The Future of Flipped Learning Is Now**

The flipped model does not only apply to teachers and students. Administrators can flip faculty meetings or professional development by giving teachers something to read or research in advance and then engaging them in discussion and activities when the group comes together. Advisors can flip club meetings. The culture of learning has changed for students and schools. When the accumulated knowledge of the human race is sitting in your pocket, teachers no longer need to be the sole source of content knowledge, but rather, need to direct students toward ways to find their own understandings of how to use that content appropriately.

Marc Siegel is a chemistry teacher at Middletown South High School. He can be reached at marcsiegel@gmail.com.

**Capitol Watch continued from page 14**

The federal government is prohibited from determining or approving state standards. The bill maintains the federally required two tests in reading and math per child per year in grades three through eight and once in high school, as well as science tests given three times between grades three and 12. These measures of student achievement ensure that parents know how their children are performing and help teachers support students who are struggling to meet state standards. A pilot program will allow states additional flexibility to experiment with innovative assessment systems. The bill also maintains annual reporting of disaggregated data of groups of children, which provides valuable information about whether all students are achieving, including low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners.

The bill ends the federal test-based accountability system of No Child Left Behind, restoring to states the responsibility for determining how to use federally required tests. States must include these tests in their accountability systems, but will be able to determine the weight of those tests in their systems. States will also be required to include graduation rates, a measure of postsecondary and workforce readiness, and English proficiency for English learners. States will also be permitted to include other measures of student and school performance in their accountability systems.

The proposed legislation maintains important fiscal protections of federal
dollars, including maintenance of effort requirements, which help ensure that federal dollars supplement state and local education dollars, with additional flexibility for school districts in meeting those requirements.

The bill includes federal grants to states and school districts to help improve low-performing schools that are identified by the state accountability systems. School districts will be responsible for designing evidence-based interventions for low-performing schools, with technical assistance from the states, and the federal government is prohibited from mandating, prescribing, or defining the specific steps school districts and states must take to improve those schools.

The Every Child Achieves Act provides resources to states and school districts to implement activities to support educators; the bill allows, but does not require, states to develop and implement teacher evaluation systems.

The Act reaffirms the states’ role in determining education standards. The federal government may not mandate or incentivize states to adopt or maintain any particular set of standards, including Common Core.

The unanimous vote evidences a strong bipartisan effort and portends positive signs going forward. “This has been a piece of legislation that has been seven years in the making,” noted Sen. Alexander, the chairman of the committee, in his closing remarks. “This time it is different and I would like to thank Senator Murray for her help getting us to this conclusion.”

Alexander also detailed the exhaustive work during the “mark-up” of the bill, or the period when possible changes are debated. According to the chairman, 57 amendments were considered, 29 were adopted, eight were defeated, and 20 were discussed and withdrawn. Of the amendments adopted: five were Republican amendments, while 24 were Democratic amendments.”

The only voucher amendment offered was by Sen. Tim Scott (Republican, South Carolina) which he withdrew in anticipation of resubmitting on the Senate floor.

Many of the approved amendments would have implications for school districts. Sen. Tammy Baldwin’s (Democrat, Wisconsin) amendment to provide grants to states to improve the quality and reliability of their assessments was adopted. The amendment was also sponsored by Rep. Suzanne Bonamici (Democrat, Oregon) and was incorporated in H.R. 5.

Another approved amendment from Senator Michael Bennet (Democrat, Colorado) would require states to assess their data collection systems to reduce burdens on school districts.

The National School Boards Association has been working closely with targeted state associations and lobbying key members of Congress and their staff on both sides of the Capitol, in both political parties as well as the executive branch.

NSBA communicated a number of its priorities to committee members that will allow school boards throughout the country to have the flexibility they need to successfully address the unique needs of their students and communities. These priorities include local governance, maintenance of effort, and stronger federal investments in Title I, as well as the exclusion of Title I portability provisions. NSBA also wrote to the education committee, urging members “to oppose any proposals supporting vouchers or tuition tax credits to non-public schools” throughout the legislative process.

Next Steps The Senate Committee will turn its attention toward moving ECAA to the Senate floor for an up or down vote, which may be imminent. The House version of legislation to modernize ESEA, the Student Success Act, H.R. 5, has already been voted out of committee and debated on the House floor. However, no votes have been taken on the floor, nor have votes been scheduled on H.R. 5

Sharon Seyler is an NJSBA legislative advocate. She can be reached at sseyler@njsba.org.
ACES for Savings

Over the last two years alone, ACES has delivered approximately $50 million savings to over 400 New Jersey school districts.

**BY CAROL FRIEDMAN**

What’s ACES? Is your school district a member? If not, why not?

The Alliance for Competitive Energy Services (ACES) has worked for more than 15 years to purchase electricity and natural gas at discounted prices for New Jersey’s schools.

This type of service was made possible in 1999 when New Jersey deregulated its energy sector with the Electric Discount and Energy Competition Act. The law restructured the electric and natural gas industries, and allowed consumers the freedom to choose their supplier. The New Jersey School Boards Association, along with its partners, the New Jersey Association of School Administrators and the New Jersey Association of School Business Officials created ACES. Basically, ACES buys in bulk, and passes on the savings to New Jersey’s school districts, and, by extension, the state’s taxpayers.

Today ACES is the largest energy aggregation program in the state, with unmatched experience and unrivalled buying power and service. Every year, the energy market gets more complicated, yet more and more transparent. The ACES team is constantly working to look ahead and find ways to improve the program, help its members and save New Jersey taxpayers more money. ACES has become a model program for other states looking to replicate its success.

ACES has kept ahead of an ever-changing market place. Introduced last year as a free benefit to ACES members, ACESPlus offers the next generation of energy savings. Under ACESPlus, solutions such as renewable energy sources, energy security and resiliency, and resource efficiency are now within reach for ACES members.

ACESPlus is a fully customized approach that helps schools navigate complex financial, technical and procurement issues to implement comprehensive upgrades.

ACESPlus is a response to the obstacles that our ACES members have encountered over the years. With well over 100 ACES members completing free energy audits under the Local Government Energy Audit program, many of our members have shared with us the difficulties they encounter when they want to implement upgrades to address the issues the audits have uncovered. ACESPlus will help members navigate through New Jersey’s complex procurement laws and address the real world resource limitations that districts face due to funding limitations.

A recent example of one of the new offerings under ACESPlus is an enhanced renewable electricity option made available to all ACES members.

First the first time, school districts choosing an energy contract will have the opportunity to select an electricity product for their district that includes renewable energy and still saves money. Approximately 20 percent of the power in the product comes from renewable energy sources located within the regional electric grid that serves New Jersey. By selecting a product containing 20 percent renewable energy, districts can purchase power today that meets the mandatory statewide goal set for 2020.

Additionally, the “Voluntary Enhanced Renewable Energy Product” is designed to assist districts with their goals for the Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification program. Districts that select the enhanced green product will be eligible to receive 10 points toward their Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification.

This type of product and the savings it delivers are made possible through the market power of ACES, coupled with the organization’s experience and reputation in the energy marketplace.

To find out more about the savings and services available from ACES and ACES Plus, please contact Carol Friedman at (732) 296-0770 or via email at carol.friedman@gabelassociates.com.

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**ACES Savings Per District – 2013 – 2014**

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savings = 5 times average annual dues

$66,763

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Carol Friedman is ACES coordinator for Gabel Associates. She can be reached at the email above.
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