



2019 State of the District Address

January 29, 2019

**JEFFREY HASTIE
President
New Rochelle Board of Education**

Welcome, everyone to the City School District of New Rochelle's State of the District. Thank you all for coming.

Before we get started, I would like to acknowledge some of our dignitaries in the audience. Thank you for your support of our District throughout the past year and for our continued partnership.

I also would like to thank my fellow Board members, Interim Superintendent Dr. Magda Parvey, administrators, teachers, students, parents and community members.

This has been a year of transition as well as a year of progress and hope, and as the Board of Education continues to extend greater communication to our community, we felt that a State of the District address from the Board of Education President would be important to keep you informed and engaged.

Our schools work best when we all pull in the same direction for the betterment of the District. We are all very proud of our District and when we all work together, we help the children and young adults in this city grow and succeed both academically and in life.

The State of the District is strong. Over the past year, we have changed. We have improved in many ways. At the same time, we have kept and continued to improve all the things that have always made New Rochelle such an extraordinary school system.

As you all know, we are searching for a new superintendent. That is probably the most important decision a Board of Education makes, and we want to assure you that we will make this decision with extreme care. This is one of several key positions we will be filling. In the meantime, we are fortunate enough to have maintained and cultivated a wealth of excellent educators and administrators who keep this District moving forward.

In a few moments, I am going to turn this over to our interim superintendent , Dr. Parvey, to discuss our schools and programs. But first, I would like to talk to you about where we are.

It has been a challenging year, no doubt.

The events of the past year impacted everything we have done since, and have helped shape this coming year and we will discuss this further. But, our District – like our community – is not defined by them.

We are a strong District and we are continuing to improve and grow every day. I see so many positive aspects of our District when I walk the halls, visit classrooms and attend meetings with the community and the many extracurricular activities in the District.

You see it when crowds come out for the TheatreWorks production of the Crucible – even selling out the Linda Kelly theater on at least one night – and when alumni return to sing the Halleluiah Chorus with the current choral students in the WinterFest Concerts. You see it when the Huguenots football team goes to the state championship in Syracuse. So many community members made the 275-mile trip that Coach D remarked that it looked like a home game.

This is a unique and amazing District, and we will always do what we can to help it succeed and thrive.

The Board has taken on a critical hands-on role with the District's administration in the past year that was necessary in a time of such transition. As Board members, we have mobilized to become more involved and the District has made great strides in communications, and has operated much more transparently than in the past. The last point is no more evident than in how we handled the allegations of grade changes in our online learning application.

We were all upset to hear last year that there were problems with the grading of our online courses. The integrity of our grading systems is the backbone of our academic reputation, and when we learned that that was in question on these specific courses, we reacted immediately. We hired a firm to conduct a rigorous and thorough investigation to show us where the problem was so that we could make sure it does not happen again. With our continued commitment to transparency, the complete, unredacted report was released to the community and provided to New York State Education Department for further investigation should they deem it appropriate.

Our Town Hall meetings have been a huge success, giving community members a chance to ask questions directly to Board members, administrators and principals about our programs and strategies.

In addition to the standing committees from last year, we have added two more - Finance & Facilities and Culture & Climate committees.

The finance committee is taking a fresh look at the budget line-by-line, focusing on zero-based budgeting, reserve funding and other aspects of our spending. The committee is also looking at budget presentation and the new law on reporting spending by school. This provides another measure to ensure that we are making the best use of our dollars to get the most benefit for our students, and that the budget is presented to the public in a way that is easy to understand. We want you to be able to see clearly what we spend our funds on and where the money comes from.

The culture and climate committee is exploring ways to create a safer, healthier, more nurturing atmosphere in the schools and to build stronger relationships among students, teachers and staff, with strategies such as restorative circles.

Under our guidance, the District has stepped up emails and robocalls to the community. All of our public meetings are streamed live now. If you miss them, they are posted on our website, and included in the weekly e-newsletter we send out. (If you don't receive the e-newsletter, you are missing out on a lot of the great news about this District. You can sign up under "Quick Links" on our website, www.nred.org.)

We have also established our School Buddy program. This program has received a lot of positive feedback from teachers and community members.

Each Board member is assigned to a different school each quarter, and gets to know that school better by attending student performances, parent meetings and innovative classes. We've been doing that all year, and we found what we expected to find – dedicated teachers and administrators who love their students. Still, it has been an eye-opening experience to see just how devoted they all are to our 11,000 students – and how well the students respond.

To honor our students, and fulfill our mission, we knew we had to create a healthier climate at New Rochelle High School and other schools in the District. In our Strategic Roadmap, we are working together to provide "a high quality and challenging education for every child, in a safe, nurturing environment that embraces our rich diversity and drives our success."

To do that, students need to know that they are coming to a safe place where they can explore every academic field and take advantage of the incredible range of opportunities we offer to learn.

In responding to the tragedies of last year, we formed the Task Force on Reducing Violence in the Lives of Children and Youth that included more than 40 members of our community and recommended several strategies for creating a safer school community.

For a more formal safety and security assessment, we hired a global firm, Guidepost Solutions, which had experience with school safety.

These initiatives gave us many ideas that we are considering now.

Realizing we did not have the capacity to implement the recommendations in a speedy manner, we hired Altaris Consulting Group in December. In addition to implementing the suggested security improvements, they will provide staff development and training in safety and security, because everyone in our buildings -- not just the guards, but the principal, teachers, maintenance staff and everyone else -- plays a part in seeing to it that our schools are safe, secure spaces.

Part of our work is to periodically review the services we receive from various professionals, including the District's counsel. Just this month, the Board decided to retain new District counsel, Ingerman Smith, a well-regarded firm located in Harrison and Hauppauge, New York. Ingerman Smith has a history of providing legal services to New York school districts, for over fifty years. A law firm may not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think of what makes a school district successful, but school attorneys play an important role in any thriving district. They ensure that the business of education is conducted properly and that we are effectively protecting our interests. We considered several highly qualified firms, but decided that Ingerman Smith will provide the best fit for the needs of the District today. I do wish to express the gratitude of the Board for the many years of legal representation that Bond, Schoeneck & King provided to our School District.

Now, I would like to turn this over to Dr. Parvey.

Dr. MAGDA PARVEY
Superintendent of Schools
City School District of New Rochelle

Thank you Mr. Hastie. I would also like to thank all of you for coming out tonight – esteemed officials, Board members, administrators, and members of the New Rochelle community.

I want to build on what Board President Hastie says. Yes, the state of the District is strong, and we are moving forward all the time. Our strategic objective is to provide every child with an education that promotes their intellectual, creative, social, emotional and physical development. We have an incredible foundation to build on. You see it all around our District.

When you see Principal Michael Hilderbrand greeting his students at Trinity with that enthusiastic “Buenos Dias, muchachos!” and when you see Davis Principal Anthony Bambrola dressing up as the Davis Dolphin to march with his students in the city's annual Thanksgiving parade, you have no doubt that our administrators and faculty members would do anything for their students.

Our teachers are recognized experts. Science coordinator Elizabeth Barret-Zahn at Columbus is

the editor of *Science and Children*, a national, award-winning journal. Ask her about the trip she took to Vietnam the summer before last to run a STEM academy for elementary school students. Amazing work!

When the national organization Stomp Out Bullying named John Barnes Principal of the Year at Albert Leonard Middle School, they were not simply passing an annual title on to him. They created the award specifically for John, because he had done such a fantastic job cultivating a safe, inviting atmosphere at his school.

That's the caliber of educator we have here in our District.

Ask anyone about Debbie Minchin at New Rochelle High School, who just returned from a trip to Washington D.C. with her AP Government class to introduce them to the halls of power they are learning about. Or Coach Andy Cappellan – known as Coach Cap to just about everyone – who was inducted last year into the New York State Public High School Athletic Association Hall of Fame. The student-athletes on the girls track team know Cap as the mentor who will push them to do their best -- not just on the field, but in all aspects of their lives.

Many of our educators and coaches guide our students to become not only academic success stories and young athletes but also well-rounded, responsible and compassionate members of their community. Take Coach Jarohan Garcia, the head coach for boys soccer, and his fellow coaches. They are not only great at athletics, they insist on their athletes serving their community off the field. They require the soccer players to perform 25 hours of community service in the off season for organizations such as Swim Across America before they can return to the team. And since they're asking them to do it, they put in the volunteer hours themselves.

That's just one example. Other teams follow similar practices.

Consider the counselors at Isaac Young Middle School. They take their eighth-graders on visits to colleges from NYU to Mercy College to Ivy-League Yale. Of course, it's typical for high school students to visit colleges. But the forward-looking Isaac Young counselors want their students to start thinking from an earlier age about what it takes to get to college and how they can achieve it.

I can't talk about our faculty without mentioning Dr. Joseph Williams, our Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources. Dr. Williams makes every effort to establish richly diverse pools of skilled candidates from which teachers and administrators are hired. Our policy states that "for students to respect and value diversity, they must experience adult workers who reflect the varied cultures and backgrounds that make up our community and our nation." We know that students are more successful in school if they see people who share their backgrounds at the heads of classrooms and in leadership positions. Thanks to Dr. Williams' efforts, we educate our students with a staff that is increasing in diversity.

In a District this large, we have endless opportunities for our students. We have 31 advanced

placement courses and other college credit programs. We have classes in architecture and forensic science. We are committed to ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to avail themselves of all of these programs.

If you visit our schools, you'll see how eagerly our teachers adopt STEM and STEAM values and goals, teaching our students with inquiry-based learning that results in meaningful lessons with real-world applications. As just one example, Webster school third-graders have been bolstering their science lessons by visiting the county's recycling plant in Yonkers and welcoming a meteorologist -- NBC's Erika Grow -- to their school to give them a lesson about the science of weather.

There is so much more. And we never stop striving to improve. We were not satisfied when we learned that our graduation rate for the last school year, 80.8 percent, was about one percentage point lower than the year before, but Mr. Starvaggi immediately outlined a program to improve the rate, with more intensive monitoring of students who require it, weekly assessments of ninth-graders' progress and other steps.

Amy Goodman, our interim Assistant Superintendent for Student Services is exploring the root causes of chronic absenteeism, which is at 16 percent in New Rochelle, slightly higher than the national average of 14 percent.

We will address these challenges with all the diligence and energy they require. But we will also turn our sights on and celebrate our students' achievements.

And what students we have! You know they say it takes a village -- or a city of 80,000 -- to raise a child. Well, when you see the incredible things our students do every day, you understand that the children and young adults in our schools lift up this city.

It was no accident last year that our students were accepted by all eight Ivy League schools. Ninety-five percent of the graduates of the class of 2018 went to post-secondary school education. The rest went into the military, took a gap year or joined the workforce.

This year, members of the Class of 2019 have already been accepted by Harvard, Georgetown, Fordham, NYU, Dartmouth, DePaul and many more -- even the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

As Mr. Hastie mentioned, the Huguenots football team made it to the state championship game in Syracuse. Running back Jordan Forrest was named player of the year in his class for the entire state of New York.

The girls' varsity swim team won their league championship meet after finishing the regular season undefeated, with an 8 – 0 record. Next month, the New Rochelle High School varsity and junior varsity cheerleading squads are both headed to Orlando for the national championships. In academics, four of our high school seniors have been named National Merit Semifinalists.

Just recently, one of our high school juniors was accepted into a competitive pre-college program at the Cooper Union.

Beyond the achievements, what may be the best aspect of our District is in the way we support each other. We come from all over the world – our students’ families speak 58 languages – and we gain an incredible richness from coming together as one.

When we put students from Isaac Young and Albert Leonard middle schools together for an appearance on the Today show, you would never know they came from different schools. Complete strangers chatted like lifelong friends. They were literally dancing together in the hallways.

Come to our sporting events and see the way the community comes out to support them. Want a truly uplifting experience? Come and see how the community comes out to support our Special Olympics team.

More than that, I invite you to come out and take advantage of all our students and teachers have to offer. I hope to see you all on February 9 at the Black History Month Celebration. Come see the school musical in March. This year, it’s “See Rock City and Other Destinations.”

If you’ve never seen one of the monthly shows in our high school planetarium – yes, we have a planetarium – come check one out. Bruce Zeller has been giving the shows for years; you’re sure to learn something fascinating. And look for the student art shows at the Museum of Arts and Culture in the high school. It’s open to the public, and it is the only museum of its kind in the state, operated by the New Rochelle Fund for Educational Excellence, one of our incredible collaborative partners.

You’ll also see student art work at the New Rochelle Public Library from time to time, and in the city’s annual ArtsFest weekend.

Finally, we are in the third year of a multi-phase construction plan that is restoring and sprucing up sections of our buildings that were showing their age. Some of these historic buildings are beautiful, and the high school is a real jewel in the city’s crown. They are looking better. Our elementary school students play on up-to-date playground equipment. Our high school track is newly resurfaced. And have you seen the new north football field out front?

If you come to our events and see what we’re all about, you will understand what an amazing District we have. And our vow to you is that we always devote everything we have in us to preserve and build on what makes us great and to continue to improve in every way. We will always provide the best for our students, support them when they need help, guide them, celebrate their endless achievements and applaud them as they graduate into the wider world and make their marks in every field of endeavor.

Meanwhile, stay involved with your School District. Come to our board meetings and town hall

meetings. Sign up for our newsletters. If you have children in the schools, get to know your principals and teachers. Reach out to us with any suggestions, and let us know when you see something great happening in our schools.

Thank you.

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