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10 Page Campaign Statement for the Shutesbury School Committee Special Election: Dec 6, 2005

Return to the main campaign web page.

My Work on the School Committee

I was elected to the School Committee three years ago. I had never run for any political office before. I have no great interest in being a politician or in spending nights at meetings, however we moved to Shutesbury because of the school system and three years ago I saw our school in crisis. The educational values I held dear were being crushed by State mandates and a superintendent woefully mismatched to our district.

While on the Committee I have served on the search committee that hired the interim superintendents after David Crisafuli, our previous superintendent, resigned. After this I also served on the search committee that hired Linda Driscoll, our current Superintendent. I was the secretary of the Union #28 School Committee as well as the Shutesbury representative to the Union #28 Budget and Personnel Committee. In addition, I have taken vacation days from work to attend workshops and conferences sponsored by the Massachusetts Association of School Committees.

Besides helping to hire Linda Driscoll, the most important work I have done on the School Committee has involved the Ad-Hoc Mission Statement Committee. This committee brought together members from the School Committee, School Council, and SES staff who met with administrators, parents and community members to draft a mission statement. From these meetings we created a set of guiding values for the school. I am very proud of this work.

The most important work the School Committee can do now is to use the Mission Statement to evaluate whether or not the school is meeting the community's core educational values. We can use this statement to help create a strategic plan with goals, objectives, and methods of assessment to institutionalize these values and promote a culture of excellence.

About Myself

I live here with my wife, Dina, and our three daughters, Grace (13), Rebecca (9) and Eliza (6). Like most Shutesbury families, the elementary school plays a big role in our life. I work at Concord Consortium as the Director of Technology and have more than 20 years of experience developing innovative educational technology and curriculum, managing projects, hiring people, and maintaining budgets. The Concord Consortium is a non-profit educational research and development organization with about 50 employees that specializes in developing and adapting technology for K-12 math and science education and teacher-professional development.

Our family moved here from Montague in 1997 because we wanted our kids to have an excellent elementary school experience. I had been hearing from educators across the State for over 10 years about the amazing project-oriented work students at the school had been doing with Ron Berger. This is the kind of education I wanted for my own children.

Educational Philosophy

It is my experience that children learn best when they take an active and engaged ownership in their own learning and use this involvement to construct an understanding of themselves and the world around them. Our school must do the best job possible to prepare our children to lead successful lives of personal and social meaning. I believe this is best achieved with a curriculum that emphasizes thematic and project-based learning along with a rich mixture of assessments. The

learning strategies and essential skills described in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks are learned most effectively when children use these skills in projects they have a personal investment in. This means more than a narrow focus on high-stakes tests and State curriculum frameworks, it means making certain that students are involved with their hearts and their minds in projects that are meaningful to them. It is important for the School Committee to defend this educational philosophy and approach against a general theme in education today which values a broad but shallow mastery of facts.

Assessment

The school now uses many types of assessments in addition to standardized tests including graded homework, parent-teacher conferences, report cards with narratives, portfolio conferences and more. I'd like to see the philosophy, structure, and timing of the school assessment system organized and communicated more effectively to parents and students. The best assessments are those that provide timely feedback to students, teachers, and parents. The results from certain assessments such as the MCAS test are not available for 4-6 months. This is too long a delay for the information to be used efficiently to help individual students. Unfortunately the State is proposing to add even more MCAS tests and increase the time students take for testing from one to two weeks. This is penny-wise and pound-foolish. MCAS tests are not an effective assessment of individual student performance because the results can not be used during the school year to effect changes in the student's learning environment. In effect MCAS results are only used for assessing the performance of the school as a whole. Devoting two weeks each year to MCAS testing would be an educational travesty.

Special Education

Every child has a right to a good, effective, and inclusive education. Some children need special services to achieve progress. I think our principal, Tari Thomas, has been doing a good job organizing the special education services. I support developing a document describing the Shutesbury special education program including staff, assessments used to qualify students for special services, and a description of the specific services available.

Early Reading

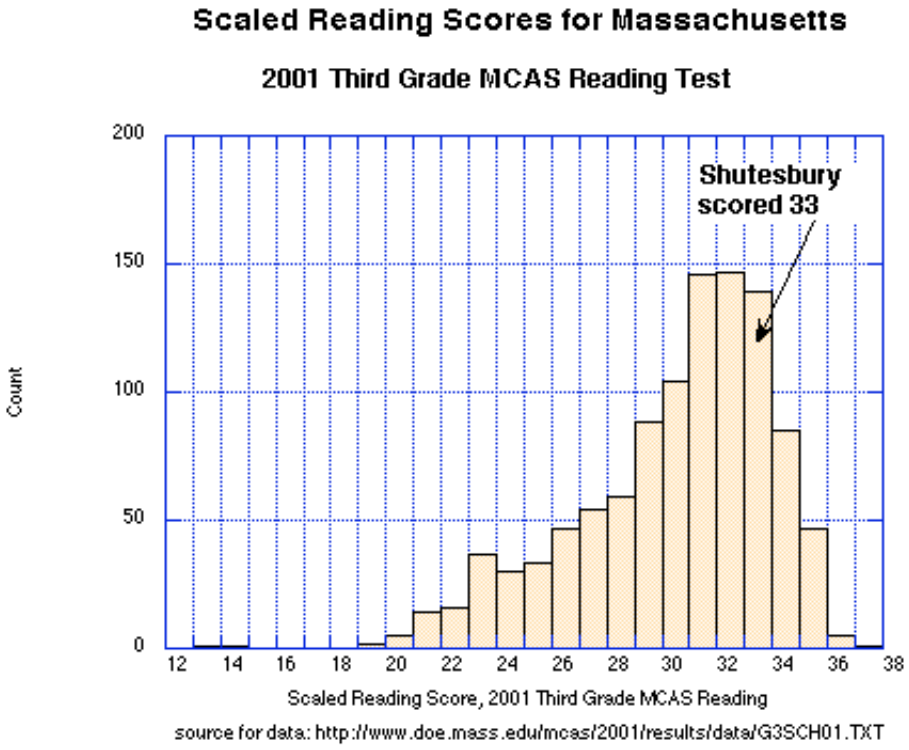
I think that every child should be able to read and write by the end of the second grade. Research shows that approximately 20% of kids in these grades will have a difficult time. Reading is such a critical skill that I believe specialized instruction is appropriate for kids who are in danger of falling behind. By putting more resources into teaching reading early some kids may not need more extensive special education services later.

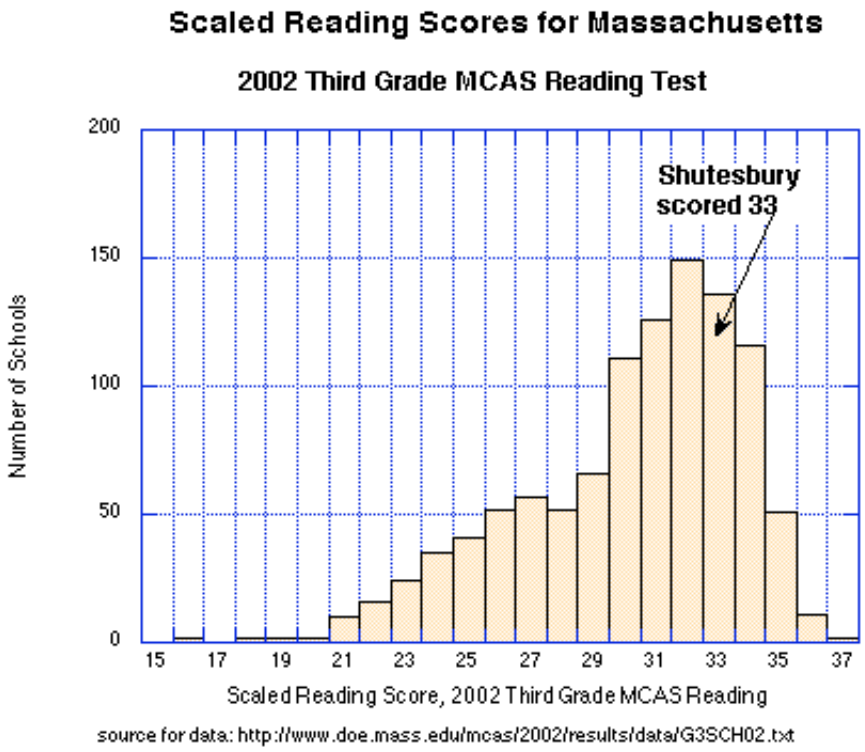
At the January 2003 School Committee meeting we were notified that the school was applying for a Reading First grant from the State and the committee was asked to approve the application. Four of the committee members voted to approve the grant submission however I abstained because I felt I didn't have enough information about the program and what was actually being proposed. The Reading First program was created by the Federal government to help schools who were in crisis because of poor reading performance. The lead authors on this grant application were our principal Tari Thomas and the Union #28 Director of Special Education Deb Geary. Schools whose students were failing could propose a comprehensive intervention and if their proposal was judged high-quality would receive funding to implement new reading curriculum and support services.

Unfortunately the definition of what was acceptable reading instruction was in effect limited to scripted, "teacher-proof" instruction from textbooks sold by large companies. A federal group called the National Reading Panel produced a report claiming that a "scientific" analysis of research into reading proved that only instruction using these methods were valid strategies for teaching reading. For example Reading Recovery, an excellent approach to intervention for early readers in trouble, was determined to be ineligible at that time.

Our grant application referred to "inconsistent and often weak scores on Grade 3" MCAS reading results and this

information was disseminated to the school community by the principal. However, when I dug deeper I found out that our MCAS scores for 2001 and 2002 were actually quite good. In 2002, 746 schools scored lower than Shutesbury and only180 scored higher.





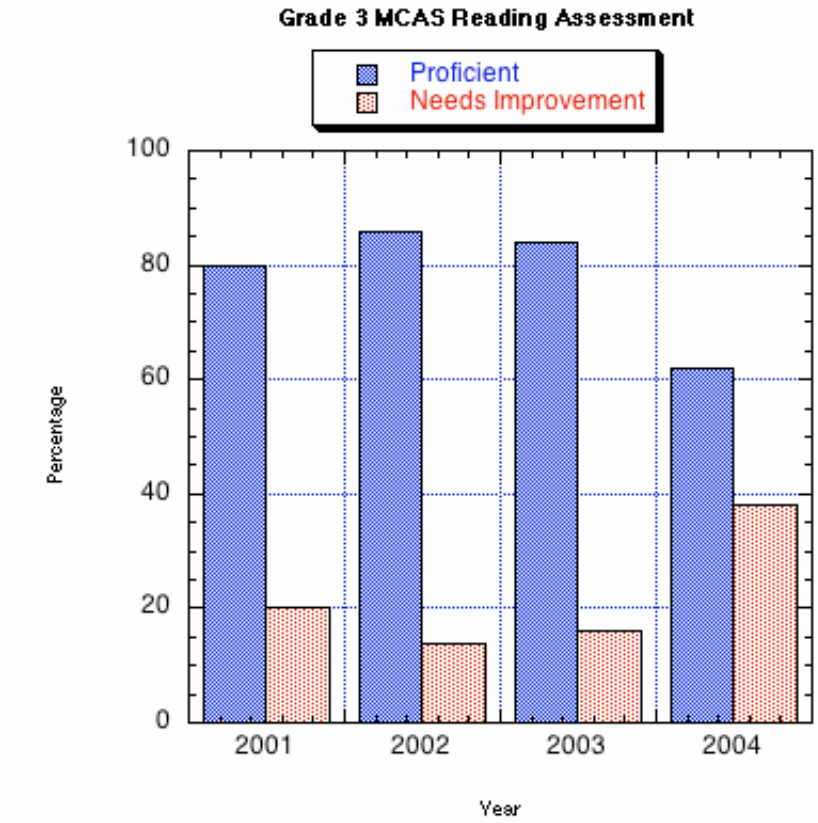
After finding out about the weak data that underlies the Reading First program I was concerned about the damage that could be done to our students if we implemented this program. However, after discovering our actual MCAS performance

was strong I thought there was no chance we would receive a Reading First grant.

In April 2003 the State notified us that we were to receive our Reading First grant. This news was a great surprise to me considering our reading scores. With a bit more research I discovered that the State had implemented qualifying criteria for the federal Reading First program incorrectly. In the State program a poor reading score was just one of five different attributes which could qualify a school to apply. It turned out that Shutesbury was eligible because of our poverty rate as determined by the 2000 census.

After superintendents in some of the large districts in our State (who have huge numbers of students who can't read well) complained and the Federal government told the State that poor reading scores was indeed a required criteria for grant eligibility, the grant to Shutebury (and six other non-qualifying schools around the State) was rescinded. In a political response the State ended up partially funding our proposal through its own resources.

Since that time our reading scores have dropped.



Under the State Educational Reform Act of 1993 School Committees no longer have control over curriculum, this is left to the Superintendent and Principal. However the School Committee can provide some leadership in this area by requiring an honest examination of what our current reading strategy consists of and a response to the precipitous drop in reading performance.

High Expectations

Every child also has a right to be challenged. Whether a child is getting special services or not, they deserve challenging assignments, our high expectations, and serious appreciation of their work.

Transition to the Middle School

The transition from our 170 student Elementary school to the 900 student Amherst Middle school can be difficult both educationally and socially. Academic expectations and social stresses increase dramatically. Shutesbury kids seem to be doing well, however the principal of the Middle School has stated that she would like to see stronger English language skills from all her incoming students. We need to prepare our kids well for this transition and to keep track of their progress.

For three years now I have been asking the Amherst Regional central office to provide the Shutesbury community with disaggregated data separating the performance of the Shutesbury students as a group so we can get a better handle on how well the elementary school is preparing our kids. Unfortunately each request has been effectively stonewalled. I am hoping the new superintendent in Amherst will be more helpful. I plan to keep asking for this data.

Teacher Professional Development

Parent-teacher conferences and portfolio assessments require more teacher effort than creating report cards. Making sure that we cover the critical skills in the State Frameworks while organizing the schools year-round projects and themes is more work than teaching with a textbook. We are lucky to have teachers experienced at and committed to doing this extra work. I'd like to see a semester schedule and description for every class that includes major projects and themes, academic and social learning goals, and skills and content children are expected to master.

In order to keep improving the school our teachers need more professional development opportunities to strengthen these assessment and teaching strategies. I also support improving coordination from one grade to the next.

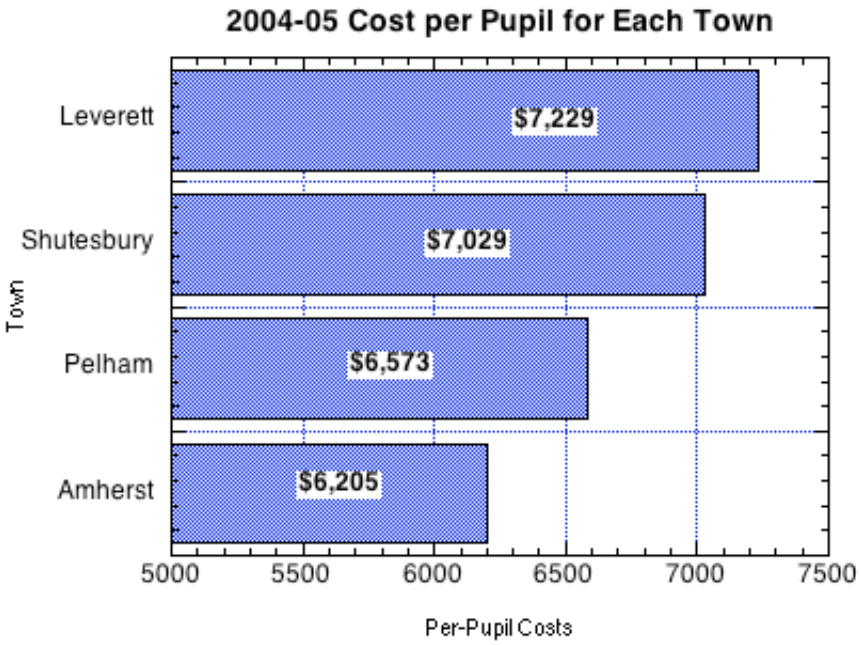
State Aid and School Budgets

With the state in financial trouble I expect at least several years of reduced state aid to towns for education. I will encourage reduction of school and Union 28 administrative expenses where practical so that resources are spent on services to students. I will work to avoid any increases in class size.

A continuing issue arises with the budget for the regional school system. The biggest issue is that aproximately half the funding for the regional school comes from Chapter 70 aid from the State and this aid has been level-funded for the past several years. That means that if the regioanl budget were to increase 5% the towns would have a 10% increase in their assessment because the State hasn't picked up it's share.

Another issue that has been coming up for the last several years has been the unequal sharing of costs to the different towns. The actual agreement between the four towns that make up the regional district is to split the per-pupil costs on an equal amount averaged over the previous five years. However since 1993 the State DOE has mandated a different formula that takes into account at least 34 factors including property values and income to create a different per-pupil assessments for different towns. Presumably this is based on ability to pay however it seems that the State may count college students in Amherst when calculating income. In any case this DOE formula wasn't an issue when the State was providing enough school aid however in the last several years with the aid level-funded the regional committee has had to modify the formula in order to get the four towns to pass the budget. Using the DOE forumula unmodified would have meant increases for the smaller towns of up to 50% in their assessment.

Here's a graph that shows the current disproportionate burden on Leverett and Shutesbury of the per-pupil assessment.



The regional school committee and towns need to come up with a new agreement that we can all live with to replace the DOE formula.

Contacting Me

If you would like to share your ideas and concerns about Shutesbury Elementary School, I invite you to call, write or email me You can reach me after 8:30p.m. at 259-9125 or by email at stephen@deanbrook.org.

I encourage you to continue the conversation with me in person or at http://blog.deanbrook.org. I have created an open forum on this web site in which you can create and comment on topics of interest to Shutesbury residents. I plan to post more of my thinking about these issues there.

More on my Educational Philosophy, the State Frameworks, and teaching to the MCAS test.

It is my experience that children learn best when they take an active and engaged ownership in their own learning and use this involvement to construct an understanding of themselves and the world around them. Our school must do the best job possible to prepare our children to lead successful lives of personal and social meaning. This means more than a narrow focus on high-stakes tests and State curriculum frameworks, it means making certain that students are involved with their hearts and their minds in projects that are meaningful to them.

In conversations I've had I find many people confused about what the State Educational Frameworks are. I think the Frameworks are quite useful but they only cover one part of what an excellent education entails.

The State Frameworks cover themes such as English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science and Technology/Engineering, History and Social Science, as well as Arts, Foreign Languages, Comprehensive Health and English Language Proficiency. Public schools in the state are required to "align" the curriculum they teach to these frameworks. However the Frameworks are not a curriculum! They are, instead. a conceptual structure to use in creating or evaluating specific learning standards embodied in a curriculum.

A Framework defines thematic strands and then defines overall objectives and learning standards for different grade

ranges.

For example the Math Framework defines five different strands:

1. Number Sense and Operations
2. Patterns, Relations, and Algebra
3. Geometry
4. Measurement
5. Data Analysis, Statistics, and Probability

The Framework then defines Learning Standards for seven different grade groupings ranging from PreK-K to Grade 11-12. For example the overall objectives for Patterns, Relations, and Algebra for Grades 3-4 include:

- Understand patterns, relations, and functions
- Represent and analyze mathematical situations and structures using algebraic symbols
- Use mathematical models to represent and understand quantitative relationships
- Analyze change in various contexts

The Learning Standards for this strand are defined as follows: students engage in problem solving, communicating, reasoning, connecting, and representing as they:

1. Create, describe, extend, and explain symbolic (geometric) and numeric patterns, including multiplication patterns like 3, 30, 300, 3000, ….
2. Use symbol and letter variables (e.g., Δ, x) to represent unknowns or quantities that vary in expressions and in equations or inequalities (mathematical sentences that use =, < , >).
3. Determine values of variables in simple equations, e.g., 4106 - ∇ = 37, 5 = X + 3, and X - Y = 3.
4. Use pictures, models, tables, charts, graphs, words, number sentences, and mathematical notations to interpret mathematical relationships.
5. Solve problems involving proportional relationships, including unit pricing (e.g., four apples cost 80¢, so one apple costs 20¢) and map interpretation (e.g., one inch represents five miles, so two inches represent ten miles).
6. Determine how change in one variable relates to a change in a second variable, e.g., input-output tables.

A Framework is not a plan on how to accomplish these learning goals or an assessment of how well these goals are achieved. The plan and the assessments are the curriculum. Elements of a curriculum can be written down and can be presented as a Curriculum Guide or textbooks, however a curriculum encompasses more than just what is written down, it covers all of the themes, activities, and formative assessments a teacher uses to accomplish their learning goals. A formative assessment is the process of a teacher evaluating an element of student work to both give feedback to the student and to inform the teacher's classroom process. These can take the form of writings, drawings, experiments, homework, projects, tests, presentations, etc. Well designed activities have many places where formative assessments can be made.

MCAS tests on English, Math, and Science are summative assessments and are created based on the material in the Frameworks. A summative assessment is one performed after the student has completed a course of study. MCAS tests are scheduled in the Spring to assess individual and school performance. The results of MCAS testing do not help a student learn the material or affect a teacher's process with that student or class. They are reflected on by the school when the results are released several months later and used by the school to identify areas of concern.

Unfortunately the most public measure of a school's success is its MCAS scores. I believe this over-reliance on high-stakes testing is provoking many school systems to teach to the test and this is leading to a systemic deterioration in the quality of public education.

Teaching to a test is a profoundly bad approach to education if the goal is authentic student understanding and mastery of

the subject. When students cram for a test they are often only working to memorize a set of facts. Memorization without actual use of the facts and skills in projects that matter to the students is shallow and quickly forgotten.

Years ago I worked on a project with Professor Ron Thornton of Tufts University that affected my understanding of these issues greatly. Ron and I had developed a distance-measuring probe that connected to a computer and displayed real-time graphs of distance and velocity of over time. The probe was used for studies of the motion of objects. This subject and these kinds of graphs are often taught in middle school and at a more advanced level in first-year college physics. Ron's research study examined student understanding of the subject matter at both middle-school and college with cohorts of students that either used the probes or didn't use the probes. The testing was done in the Fall. In general the middle school students that used the probes to supplement the traditional method of teaching understood the subject material much better than students who didn't, however at the college level there was no significant difference. Ron followed up with an additional test in the Spring again measuring student understanding of the subject. Not unexpectedly the middle-school students who used the distance-probe did better than those who hadn't. The results from the college testing were more surprising. The college professors were convinced that their students understood the material quite well and predicted the Spring test would confirm this belief, however the students that had used the distance-probe in the Fall did much better than the students who didn't, even though both cohorts had scored equally in the original test.

It turned out that even though the college professors were quite skilled at teaching to the test and the students were able to learn the material and perform well when it was taught, the students who took a more active part in actually constructing their own knowledge by using the distance-probe remembered the material better.

This result was a disturbing shock to the college professors. Their physics students were good and they knew their teaching methods were valid because the students did well on the tests. Of course the real reason for teaching the subject was not to have students do well on the tests but to help the students develop understandings and competencies that they could build on to actually do science. Traditional methods of teaching can prepare students to perform well on a test, however these same teaching methods often leave students woefully unprepared to accomplish work in the real world.

Unfortunately this same blindness to authentic learning can be found in the people in charge of creating the Frameworks at the State Department of Education. The DOE has proposed that the Science MCAS tests be made a requirement of graduation. The test is based in the Science Framework. Jeffrey Nellhaus, deputy commissioner of education said recently that this test will not require students to have lab experiences but they can, "be prepared through lectures, discussion, and textbooks." This statement shows a complete lack of understanding about what science is. The core of science is curious and skeptical observation and inquiry, and these attributes of science are critical public competencies for our society. They are much more important than any specific short-term mastery of a body of knowledge.

The requirement for MCAS testing was created by the Educational Reform Act of 1993. In return for greater accountability the State promised increased funding for local school systems. The 1993 Act envisioned MCAS testing as just one of many different types of school assessment including portfolios and performance-based assessments. In the early 1990's the Shutesbury Elementary school was used by the DOE as an example of excellence in our use of balanced assessment techniques.

Since then the focus on school assessment has shifted so that MCAS scores are practically the only measure that the media present and the public notices.

Last year an ad-hoc school mission subcommittee I served on developed a new mission statement for the Shutesbury schools. The mission committee included parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. We had a series of meetings to gather everybody's ideas about what was most important to them. I believe the Mission implicitly assumes a set of learning standards such as those expresses in the Frameworks, however the Mission goes well beyond.

Mission Statement Guiding Values:

- We value the development of thinking skills, because we want our children to be wise decision-makers and capable problem-solvers.
- We value quality work and achievement, because we want our children to experience the powerful sense of accomplishment that comes when they care deeply and work hard.
- We value a sense of community, because we want our children to develop into caring, respectful, and ethical citizens.
- We value a safe environment, physically and emotionally, because we want our children to gain confidence as they take on new challenges and responsibilities.
- We value respectful dialog that acknowledges difference and tension, because we want our children to appreciate multiple perspectives and mediate conflict.
- We value child-centered teaching practices, because we want our children engaged in work that is significant to them and at which they can succeed.
- We value meaningful and varied assessments, because when our children demonstrate an understanding of their work and reflect on their progress, they become more effective learners.
- We value communication between home and school, because we want our children to know that their teachers and parents are working together to help them grow.
- We value curricula that connect our children to the broader community and the natural environment, because we want our children to be grounded in the place they live and to practice stewardship.
- We value the integration of the arts with our core curricula, because we want our children to use their imaginations actively in aesthetic exploration to understand their place in the world around them.
- We value the integration of technology with our core curricula, because we want our children to use the technical tools our society has created for organization, exploration, and communication effectively.
- We value physical play and expression, because we want our children to feel confident and connected to their bodies.
- We value an educational community that respects and celebrates diversity, because we want our children to treat each other with acceptance, understanding, and compassion.

I think the most important work the school committee can do is to take these values and create a strategic plan to turn these values into goals, objectives, and ways to assess the results we are looking for. Without leadership by the School Committee, School Council, and School administration these values will wither in our actual practice because of the natural administrative focus on State and Federal mandates. Both the State and National governments back up their partially-unfunded mandates with the threat of punitive measures and the most important measure they use to threaten schools are the results of MCAS tests. These State and Federal policies are designed to provoke an administrative response and they get one. Unfortunately the response by many school systems is to teach to the test or worse. Some school systems even encourage poorly performing students to invisibly drop out so that their performance won't lower the school averages.

I think our Mission is an amazingly deep and well-crafted document. For example consider the first guiding value from the Mission: "We value the development of thinking skills, because we want our children to be wise decision-makers and capable problem-solvers."

The Frameworks cover many important thinking skills but they say nothing about developing wisdom or problem-solving skills. If we take this value seriously we need a curriculum that puts students in situations where they have the ability to make decisions that matter to them and include them as partners in our work to solve problems. This kind of curriculum does not come from a textbook, it can only come from school leadership and teachers that both share this value and plan accordingly.

Here's another example: "We value child-centered teaching practices, because we want our children engaged in work that is significant to them and at which they can succeed."

Again, there is nothing in this value that contradicts goals set in the Frameworks but this value should guide our approach.

What underlies this value is our belief that children learn more doing work that is significant to them.

From the mission on assessment: “We value meaningful and varied assessments, because when our children demonstrate an understanding of their work and reflect on their progress, they become more effective learners.”

Not only does this state that we believe in using many types of assessments but it puts the kids right in the loop and defines the best assessments as ones they can use to reflect on their progress.

It is the school community’s and the School Committee’s job to create policies and expectations for our school leadership to create a school environment where these values flourish.

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