

Elements of College and Career Readiness

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When the Hillsborough Township Board of Education defined its vision as “Learning empowers life beyond the Hillsborough School District” and its purpose as “Financial Independence -- Equal Opportunity -- Self-Actualization,” it provided the foundation upon which to build innovative programs and facilities that are forward-thinking and premised upon the limitless possibilities of the future, not the strictures of the past. The Final Report of the New Jersey Department of Education College and Career Readiness Task Force echoes these messages, stating, “Providing all New Jersey students with an education that will lead to meaningful higher education and career opportunities is one of the primary goals of our educational system, and establishing rigorous standards and competent measures is crucial to the faithful attainment of that goal” (2012, p. 4). It is clear from both local and statewide sources that preparing students for the future is of critical importance to our citizens, state, and country. However, having such goals does not necessarily translate to full actualization for reasons both within and outside the control of students, educators, parents, and policymakers.

New Jersey has historically been among the highest performing states in the nation, and Hillsborough Township School District among the highest performing districts within the state. While “New Jersey continues to exemplify leadership in education throughout the United States.... there is a disconnect in policy and performance that leads to inefficiency, poor information, underperformance for investment, and unfulfilled promises for outcomes for school completion, college, and workforce entry. This is extremely costly in terms of loss of human capital and high expense of remediation” (Final Report, 2012, p. 7). This is true in terms of

equity issues and the achievement gap between Asians/Whites and Blacks/Hispanics, loosely grouped based upon HTPS data patterns. This is also true in terms of college readiness, where students graduate from high school successfully but are underprepared for the rigors of college-level work and often need remediation prior to enrolling in credit-earning coursework in institutions of higher learning. The New Jersey Department of Education indicates that only 40% of graduates from New Jersey public schools are college and career ready (One Vision, p. 2) and that 7 of 10 require remedial work (p. 3).

In terms of career readiness, feedback has been gathered from employers about the preparedness of New Jersey graduates for the workplace, and “anecdotal data collected in periodic employer surveys and interviews by the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce suggest that only half of recent high school graduates could pass eighth grade mathematics aptitude tests, which are the gateway to entry level jobs” (Final Report, 2012, p. 9). While there is no way to know the percent of Hillsborough’s students who would find themselves represented in this anecdotal feedback, such a perception does have a bearing on considerations from the Hillsborough Township School District to reduce or eliminate the likelihood of having our students be ill-prepared for the workplace.

The strategic planning process in Hillsborough raised “College and Career Readiness” as one of three main focal points for the coming five years. This very broad heading includes several subheadings that were specific outcomes of the process: academies, vocational opportunities, and facilities improvements for athletics and fine/performing arts. With feedback from the community, educators, Board members, administrators, and students, several thematic ideas were raised, as were many detailed ones. In the October 21, 2015, community meeting,

highlights included state-of-the-art facilities, master schedule options, ample space for every learner, project-based learning, sustainability, performing arts center, STEM programming, learning without boundaries (inclusive of options within school, across subject lines, and connections to outside employers and institutions of higher education), facilities issues such as heating/air conditioning, real life skills, flexibility in how facilities can be used, coding, and global connections, as well as a vocational program making students employable after graduation (Special Meeting, 2015). In a high school faculty meeting held on November 13, 2015, the importance of a “unit” lunch, where all students and staff eat at the same time, was raised and discussed at length. The current inability to do this at the high school was identified as the biggest impediment to sweeping, beneficial changes for our students and program, but the limitations of the facility are insurmountable on this topic. What also came from this faculty meeting was a profoundly strong sense of pride in Hillsborough High School and the district, with emphasis on the connectivity and dedication of a community focused on the success and well-being of students; the district’s focus on emerging technologies and access to tools that support learning; our full-spectrum, quality educational program and services; our commitment to world languages and liberal arts; and our ability to attract and retain high quality staff. What also surfaced was the challenge faced in trying to further develop programming and learning opportunities when the facilities are not conducive to making such beneficial changes.

Hillsborough High School first opened its doors in 1969, with only a small portion of the building’s current footprint in existence. As the township became more populous, HHS added its first addition in 1987, which closed off the 100 and 200 wing, adding thirty-eight (38) additional classrooms. In 1999, it opened the 500/600 wing, with redesigned library, office, auditorium,

and cafeteria space, adding another thirty-six (36) classrooms, including state-of-the-art science labs. Still not large enough for the booming enrollments in the township, another wing, the 700/800s, was added in 2001 with twenty (20) additional classrooms, some of which were science labs. At this point, the high school was “built out,” with no other options for additions to further expand the facility outwards and without the structural support to build upwards. The Commons (cafeteria) has a seating capacity of 800 students, although the room is incredibly tight when 700 seated students occupy it. There are no other large spaces available to set up for a unit lunch, which locks the high school schedule into offering a minimum of four lunch periods. Currently, five lunch periods allows students to have lunch and still take two classes during the middle of the day, while reducing the periods to four would only allow students to take one class, a lunch, and force a study hall. While that may seem enticing on the surface and would allow students time to complete work, Hillsborough High School’s current bell schedule includes only seven instructional periods, and offering four lunch periods would reduce that to six instructional periods. The reality is that the high school schedule would work best with eight instructional periods to meet students’ academic needs, as well as to afford them the time to take electives of interest to them. Without a unit lunch, Hillsborough High School cannot run an eight-period day, even in a block or rotating drop format. In essence, the facility is holding Hillsborough High School back from almost every possible advancement short of adding an occasional new course to the Program of Studies. “Changing the master schedule, while difficult, is a major signal to everyone connected to the school that pedagogy is shifting” (Schwartz, 2016), and Hillsborough Township School District is a leader in innovative, student-centered teaching and learning that embraces pedagogical development. However, the constraints created by the high school facility

limit the growth and innovation possible in the township's only high school, the flagship of the community.

This begs the question... what can be done to keep Hillsborough High School on a forward trajectory and create opportunities instead of roadblocks to college and career readiness for HHS students? The Strategic Planning Committee has several very good ideas.