



**Peekskill City School District**  
*A System Focused on Every Student; Every Day*

*The Mission of the Peekskill City School District is to educate students in a caring, inspiring environment characterized by a spirit of excellence and high expectations; prepare graduates to meet or exceed standards; graduate students who respect and appreciate cultural diversity; and prepare students to pursue adult lives as contributing citizens of our local and global community.*

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## **Superintendent's E-Corner, May, 2016**

*"It always seems impossible until it's done." Nelson Mandela*

There is no other way to begin this month's E-Corner other than saying, "Wow!" This weekend our HS put on an amazing production called, Hairspray. If you saw it, you know what I mean; if not, make sure you ask around and/or talk with some of the actors. I have been to many HS plays, personally and professionally and will say, everything from the hair to the singing to the way our community and actors handled the "firedrill" pre-show on Saturday night, was inspiring and amazing. Thank you to our cast, crew, and director, producers, tech. team, and all staff involved in making this year's Spring Musical, amazing!

This weekend also brought our first-ever senior citizen's breakfast for about 25 senior citizens from Peekskill. Thank you to our PTO, Ms. Kellam, and our student volunteers. It was a great event and so much fun. Our students served them breakfast as well as played a game about "60's trivia." A perfect "primer" before the seniors went to the matinee show. Fifty-yards down the hallway, SEPTO hosted our first-ever basketball clinic, filled with volunteers, coaches, and staff. Great job to our SEPTO team!

**Testing, 3-8:** Well done, and it is done. Thank you to our teams, grade-levels, and leaders for preparing our students and creating optimal environments without sacrificing our work as instructors. Next up, Regents and SAT's for some. Good luck

**Career:** Nice work to our MS who hosted a fantastic day filled with new learning's with respect to various careers and opportunities. As always, great job to Dr. June Campolongo and her team for their coordination, collaboration, and community outreach. I tried to recruit some of our youngsters into the great business of education. The seed has been planted, we will see!

**Music and Art:** Our first-ever district-wide concert was a joyful event filled with models of excellence, coherence, alignment, and pride. We were all "tweeting" away as our youngsters performed for each other and our community. In addition, our district-wide art programs continue to expand within our schools and in our city. The high school started a "docent training program" whereas our students learned how to present art at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art. I went on the tour and witnessed five of our students walk around the studio talking, walking, and sharing facts about different pieces of art to our community. It was truly priceless and a "game-changer" for these kids and their lives!

**Educational Plan and Budget:** Thank you for your support and advocacy as we work towards equity for our schools and community. We were able to replace our retirees as well as hire folks aligned with our educational planning. As I noted in February, we deserve everything; but realize it will take time as we build every opportunity possible. The key is to remain aligned, logical, smart, and consistent. Thank you all for being part of the solution in a growth minded manner.

**Teacher Appreciation Day:** Thank you to our PTO for hosting lunches at our buildings for teacher appreciation day, Tuesday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>. Our PTO has done some amazing things this year; aligning themselves,

prek-12 and focusing on every student; every day throughout our system. I am proud of the work and excited for the continued growth and focus on excellence. Our last meeting focused on mental health and was hosted by some of our clinical team. They were wonderful as they shared the needs of our students; coupled with the support and collaborative partnerships we have built with others for our students and their families. These monthly PD opportunities for our community (hosted by the PTO) will be a model for others to follow in years to come!

**Congratulations:** Our Spring sports are underway and already we have seen positive progress with various teams including but not limited to Softball and Lacrosse. It takes a village and I am proud of the hard work our coaches and their staff have put in over the years to build their programs, great work! Also, we have five students from Peekskill being recognized as Students of Distinction for May 2016, through PN/W BOCES. They are Patrice Kemp, Logan Hendricks, Carmen Arpi-Matute, Angel Lopez and Eddie Jones. Congratulations! Lastly, this fall we will be presenting at the NYS School Boards Association conference with respect to our Summit Academy program. Discussion to fruition and improvements; one day at a time; Doug and Margie are working on a video to accompany our presentation. Those that matter truly do notice. Congratulations to all individuals for being part of the solution and making a discussion and dream for year come to life.

## **The Limitations of Teaching ‘Grit’ in the Classroom**

“We are asking students to change a belief system without changing the situation around them.”

<http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/12/when-grit-isnt-enough/418269/>

The first time I heard a preschooler explaining a classmate’s disruptive behavior, I was surprised at how adult her 4-year-old voice sounded.

Her classmate “doesn’t know how to sit still and listen,” she said to me, while I sat at the snack table with them. He couldn’t learn because he couldn’t follow directions, she explained, as if she had recently completed a behavioral assessment on him.

Months before either of these children would start kindergarten, they had formed judgements about who was smart and capable of learning and who was not. They had absorbed ideas on why some students wrote their names neatly, and others broke crayons. This precocious little girl talked about her classmate matter-of-factly and without any malice in a classroom where the teachers were well trained and supportive of a diverse student body that was racially and economically mixed.

What the little girl didn’t know about her classmate was that his family life was chaotic, without consistent routines or caregivers. He had suffered some traumas at home, which showed in his behavior at school. This young boy’s ability to learn wasn’t going to be transformed by a change in his mindset. He needed significant changes in his home life. I was reminded of this conversation during a recent presentation by Tyrone C. Howard on how student culture affects learning. Howard, the associate dean for equity and inclusion at UCLA provided a reality check to the heavy investment in skills such as grit that might help more students succeed.

“We are asking students to change a belief system without changing the situation around them,” he said. It can be irresponsible and unfair to talk about grit without talking about structural challenges, he said, referring to the recent interest in interventions tied to the concepts of grit and perseverance. So, what are those challenges? If a hypothetical classroom of 30 children were based on current demographics in the United States, this is how the students in that classroom would live: Seven would live in poverty, 11 would be non-white, six wouldn’t speak English as a first language, six wouldn’t be reared by their biological parents, one would be homeless, and six would be victims of abuse.

Howard said that exposure to trauma has a profound impact on cognitive development and academic outcomes, and schools and teachers are woefully unprepared to contend with these realities. Children dealing with traumatic situations should not be seen as pathological, he argued. Instead, educators need to recognize the resilience they are showing already. The instruments and surveys that have been used to measure social-emotional skills such as persistence and grit have not taken into account these factors, Howard said.

He questioned the tools used to collect data that suggest poor students and students of color do not have as high a degree of grit as middle-class and white peers.

The transformative potential in growth mindsets and social-emotional skills such as grit may be more applicable to students whose basic needs are already met. When asking the question of why some children succeed in school and others don’t, he said the educators and administrators tend to overestimate the power of the person and underestimate the power of the situation.

Howard also provided two ways of considering the distractions that may affect a student’s success in school. Prompts typically used to gauge a student’s persistence or grit include: “New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones,” “I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one,” and “Setbacks don’t discourage me.” Students are often asked to respond to using a four-point scale. But what about the prompts that are more concerned with daily struggles a student may face? “I always have bus fare to get to school.” “Whenever I get sick, I am able to go to a doctor.” “I have at least one teacher who cares about me.” Howard argues for an academic climate that is as mindful of the prompts in the second category as much as those in the first.

School’s can do a better job of talking about the extent to which student trauma exists, teaching children coping mechanisms, and providing mental-health services. The conversation about growth mindsets has to happen in a social and cultural context, he said, because cultural, institutional, and historical forces have an effect on individuals.

I’ve wondered if the young boy whose preschool classmate dismissed him as unable to learn will encounter elementary school teachers who will be able to convince him otherwise.