



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.

Dr. David Fine,
Superintendent of Schools

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Superintendent's E-Corner, Summer 2016

"You Gain Strength, Courage, and Confidence by Every Experience in Which You Really Stop to Look Fear in the Face." Eleanor Roosevelt

June in Peekskill! This past month was filled with 24/7- excitement, ranging from carnivals and parades to the many events/ceremonies and celebrations focused on our learners. There were so many proud moments whereas our staff, students, and community "shined." Great work as we headed down the stretch this past school year; our exam schedules were clean and student-centered; our awards ceremonies were positive and polished; our graduations and moving-up celebrations were rich, energized, and wonderful. These moments occur because of the adult forethought, planning, thinking, growth mindset, and focus on excellence for every student; every day. Thank you from the students and the families of Peekskill, well done!

Community: "Building a strong sense of community in schools is both important and doable," says Eric Schaps. And as Thomas Sergiovanni writes in *Building Community in Schools*, we become connected for reasons of commitment rather than compliance" (p.58). Sergiovanni believes the connectedness is motivated by our essential human need "for a sense of belonging, of being connected to others." Physiologically speaking, our students ask themselves each day; Will I make friends today? Will I be popular?" Or, "Will my teachers like me? Will they care about me?" Or, "Will I be able to do the work here? Will I be smart enough?" Or, in all too many cases, "Will I be safe here? Will I be teased, shunned, humiliated?" or even "Will I be ripped off or beaten up?" These questions reveal our basic psychological needs—for emotional and physical safety; for close, supportive relationships—a sense of "connectedness" (Resnick et al., 1997) or "belongingness" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); for autonomy, or a say in what happens to us; and for a sense of competence—a belief that we are capable people and able to learn. These fundamental needs shape human motivation and have major implications for learning and development. We are willing to work very hard to preserve our sense of safety, belonging, autonomy, and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). We also bond with the people and institutions that help us satisfy our needs (Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997), which makes the creation of caring, inclusive, participatory communities for our students especially important. When a school meets students' basic psychological needs, students become increasingly committed to the school's norms, values, and goals. And by enlisting students in maintaining that sense of community, the school provides opportunities for students to learn skills and develop habits that will benefit them throughout their lives. A growing body of research confirms the benefits of building a sense of community in school (Ross, 2015).

Summer: Summer means FUN; but it also means, "collaborative improvements focused on every student; every day in an explicit, transparent, and attainable manner." It's true, look it up. ☺ In addition, it means figuring out how to juggle building-use schedules, cleaning, updates, camps, community events, CIA improvements, staffing, grant writing, summer school, school leadership collaboration, PD work, and more. And lastly, it does provide our system time to exhale, re-set at times, and reflect upon the work done, build upon successes, and improve where needed. Our administrative retreat is scheduled for July 11th – July 21st. We will be working on a variety of topics

ranging from team building, mindset, language, collaboration, planning, expectations/deliverables, systemic protocols/processes, CIA focus, building alignment, data analyses, and more. We also will welcome three new members of the team, Mr. Rodney Arthur, PHS Principal; Ms. Ellen Hackett, Director of Special Services, and Ms. Carmen Vargas, Director of Early Childhood. We also congratulate, Mrs. Naima Smith-Moore on being appointed as the new assistant principal of PHS. Each educator listed above has, "hit the ground running" with respect to programming, transitioning, learning, and being part of the solution.

District Comprehensive Improvement Plan (DCIP): Last week (June 27th and June 28th); central office transformed into a learning/collaborative laboratory, which consisted of over 30 individuals focused on our work, success, and educational system. We met for about 10-hours in total ("we" is defined as teachers, community/district leaders, administrators, parents, BOE members, volunteers, staff/faculty). We worked as a whole group and also small groups designed to be "critical friends" and focused on our goals in an explicit, attainable, real, and targeted manner. Our conversations revolved around six tenets, which will guide our discussions throughout the school year, 16-17 (see below):

1. *District Leadership and Capacity*
2. *School Leader Practices and Decisions*
3. *Curriculum Development and Support*
4. *Teacher Practices and Decisions*
5. *Student Social/Emotional Developmental Health*
6. *Family and Community Engagement*

The time flew, we stayed on schedule, everything was planned/explicit/purposeful; and it was a wonderfully rich, focused, transparent, and engaging 10-hours (I thought). We learned, taught, broke into groups, ate, smiled, spoke our minds, and remained focused on, "why we are here"-- student/staff/systemic success throughout. Excellent job everyone as we continue with our aligned, explicit, and attainable work, moving forward. It is all about progress and targeted/focused work in a systemic and attainable manner. The district plan as well as all the building plans will be shared to all by the end of the month. If you have any thoughts/questions feel free to contact any building leader and/or CO staff. Good luck to all of our School Leadership Teams as you embark on this aligned, explicit, and transparent work this summer.

Principles/Expectations/Mantra: We work to align our curriculum and articulate it in an organized manner; We individualize our instructional approaches to our students needs, learning styles, and district expectations; We measure/assess and adjust; We have a growth mindset relative to our thinking; We remain transparent and respectful with communication and programming, when needed we reflect, adjust, and discuss whenever possible (we are human); We assess in a coherent and sequential manner, which drives our instructional practice; We continue to find ways to, "yes" and work together to compromise and find solutions, which focus on children and our system.

Discussions: We (PFA/District) were able to meet the last week of school, which resulted in a positive conversation with respect to moving forward in a collaborative fashion. We are working hard to find a common time for all parties involved this summer so as we can continue the discussion and meet again shortly.

Appreciation: During the senior awards, I saw a few students, "pointing to the sky" as the staff called their names regarding "scholarship monies," approximately \$280k in total for the entire grade, awesome. It brought tears to my eyes knowing the self-less thinking going on in many of our children's minds and their respective houses. These days, college is a life-long financial commitment, which is not taken for granted. Every one of our graduates has a right to that future and it is our job to provide them with the will, focus, and tools to get there. Everything we say, do, create, and design during their journey is part of the rest of their life. Thank you to our scholarship supporters and the hundreds of thousands of dollars that will assist in our youngster's future.

Start-Up Classroom Culture: Jen Williams, Edutopia

Many educators that seek to incorporate design thinking and collaborative processes into teaching and learning are looking to the unique culture exemplified by startup companies. Both nimble and energized, today's startups are redefining how "work" looks by championing disruption in innovation and enterprise. Fueled by passion and charged with a desire to make a positive impact in our world, startups creatively incorporate voice and choice, flexibility, personality, and fun into learning and working environments.

By embracing these business models for learning, teachers are taking on this entrepreneurial, DIY spirit and transforming the process of making meaning and searching for knowledge. Schools and educators who choose a startup culture can essentially place a renewed focus on the role of the learner by empowering students to find authentic and meaningful problems and to search for solutions through design activities and iteration. Much like engineers that optimize their designs through building, testing, and then redesigning and building again, students in classrooms that follow a startup culture can freely explore, wonder, and evaluate over multiple iterations until they have reached success or mastery.

Looking to leverage the power of the startup culture in your classroom? Check out these three distinguishing features found in the startup ecosystem, and get ready to propel ideas forward and scale learning!

Use of Space

Startup cultures in a classroom use space to tell a story. The narrative of the class is visible throughout all areas of the room, and students feel ownership and a sense of belonging. The learning environment is motivating and playful, incorporating different spaces for varying functions:

- Lounge seating for reading and thinking
- Active spaces to ignite ideas
- Collaborative spaces for group work

As this kind of environment encourages physical movement, along with communication and "social networking" within the school, students within a startup culture move between learning environments over the course of a school day to spark discovery and new perspectives. Workplace and seating flexibility are available to all students, including furniture and items such as standing desks, clipboards, and work rugs. Prepared environments are equipped with materials that allow for transparency of thought within visible thinking routines. Students are encouraged to interact with multiple modes of communication and document ideas with items such as flip charts, post-it notes, drawings, sketches, and recordings of active and interactive dialogue. Digital tools such as [Slack](#), Google Docs, social media platforms, and [Nearpod](#) are further used to support collaborations and partnerships both within the classroom and with global friends.

Intentional Designs

Classrooms that follow startup cultures are strategically designed to support learning and growth. Environments and curricula are intentionally structured to incorporate brain-based practices that recognize the importance of time for rest, food and drink, movement, and play. Startup-culture learning cultivates student agency through voice and choice. Purposeful pedagogical decisions aim to create paths for connection to past experience as well as address meaningful problems facing the community. Flexible schedules within a classroom startup culture are agile, responsive, and based on immediate needs of learning activities and work types -- individual work, face-to-face

group work, and virtual collaborations. With reflection viewed as an integral stage of learning and growth, built-in "white space" enables students the freedom and time for deep thought. Schedules in this environment can be adapted to learning opportunities at any given moment, which encourages co-teaching and cross-curricular work between different content areas.

Divergent and convergent thinking, experimentation, and opportunity for adventurous thinking are encouraged through stimulating activities such as:

- Class design challenges
- Long-term focused individual projects
- TED talks
- Genius Hour
- Real-world scenarios

Building Identity

Classrooms following the entrepreneurial mindset of a startup company exist in a constant state of beta -- always testing and retesting through the process of iteration, innovation, and improvement. Though focused on growth, the culture remains dedicated to staying mission-focused. Clearly defined goals and a synthesized message allow for a scaled impact across all areas of learning. The class mission represents every member of the classroom community, and each member is able to effectively articulate that mission.

Teachers in a startup culture can work together to build the classroom "brand" through activities such as proudly displaying the mission in the students' learning spaces, sharing messages of success on class websites and blogs, or designing a class logo and fun swag like t-shirts, water bottles, stickers, and pens. Students can also get involved by creating commercials, composing jingles made with digital programs such as [Garageband](#) or [Soundtrap](#), or developing a class elevator speech (a concise message designed to convey a thought in the time that it typically takes to ride an elevator from the bottom to the top of a building). An ongoing goal for members of the class in a startup culture is to feel a sense of ownership and pride as they work to protect the integrity of their class identity - because it's also *their* identity.

As part of a community of young creators, engineers, problem solvers, designers, collaborators, and dreamers, students can work as a classroom learning team, find inspiration in unanswered questions, and ultimately push ideas forward into a reality to make a positive impact on our world.

Have a safe, peaceful, happy, thoughtful, and positive summer! Enjoy, David