Schools in the Twenty-First Century

"The current and future health of America's 21st Century Economy depends directly on how broadly and deeply Americans reach a new level of literacy—'21st Century Literacy'—that includes strong academic skills, thinking, reasoning, teamwork skills, and proficiency in using technology."

-21st Century Workforce Commission
National Alliance of Business

Our society's complexity, coupled with the rapid rate of expansion into a global and digital economy, requires educational and business leaders to rethink how we educate students. Major corporations joined forces to sponsor the study on Schools in the Twenty First Century, garnering insights into the future needs of the workforce as cited in the summary above. Given our current work at Carlisle Public Schools, we are progressing with these recommendations, building upon the excellence that has always been our hallmark. Perhaps the most surprising element of the report for non-educators was the recommendation made by the commission to develop teamwork skills.

Teamwork is defined as, "The concept of people working together cooperatively. Aside from any required technical proficiency, a wide variety of social skills are desirable for successful teamwork, including: listening, questioning, persuading, respecting, helping and sharing." My premise is that the most important component of teamwork is respect where we help students and adults develop an appreciation of differences: racial, religious, socio-economic, or sexual orientation. For students, this list may expand to speed of learning, how students dress, athletic ability, special interests outside the norm, and more. Appreciating and celebrating differences has been the foundation of American culture, and this needs to be the foundation of every school. Freud said that it is important for humans to love and work; teamwork can only occur when students feel respected and safe. Learning can only occur in safe environments free from bullying and discrimination of any kind.

In Carlisle, our Student Leadership Team is fostering teamwork as promoted in the 21st Century Workforce Commission. First, we are confronting bullying and developing student leaders who have voices. Mrs. Clapp's students created powerful videos on bullying that were shown at our middle school assembly. Mr. Thompson's Improvisational Acting Club members also performed skits on anti-bullying for their peers. A seventh grader reported that he had not been bullied since the assembly; this was the first time in his school experience that this had occurred. Ongoing programs such as Open Circle and Second Step have been expanded and dialogs about programs such as conflict resolution are occurring. These programs teach students to communicate more effectively, helping student leaders find their voices to say that bullying is not appropriate. Many staff have read and discussed the book, Schools Where Everyone Belongs, helping us examine our practices and reduce bullying incidents in our school.

The Student Leadership Team has established clear expectations for student behavior along with consequences for students.

As a society, we need to recognize and deal with the issues of bullying and exclusion. From Columbine to Virginia Tech, the attackers have been bullied and excluded. We once saw a trend where bullied students committed suicide; today we see an emerging trend where students feeling ostracized now act out. Our work is focusing on developing student leaders who not only demonstrate respect, but also have a voice when they see someone bullied or ostracized. Our diversity training includes helping adults and students reach deeper than civility, developing an appreciation and respect for people who have an accent, learn quickly or slowly, come from different socio-economic worlds, or who differ in religion, race or sexual orientation. When we can appreciate and celebrate differences, then our children can say "no" when they see others bullied. They can be open to ideas and ready to take a lead in making this world a better place.

In the meantime, we remain highly vigilant about student safety. We respond to students who carry weapons, make threats, or intimidate others - with firm and appropriate consequences and interventions. In the meantime, we must continue to be proactive by providing a respectful, inclusive community where teamwork is highly valued.

Finally, there are shining examples of student leadership in our school. In eighth grade, under Dr. Marsh's tutelage, student leaders helped organize Carlisle's participation in Step It Up Day on the town common. In our second grade, a touching partnership with a school in Kenya grows due to the leadership of Mr. Darasz. Teamwork helps the learning process and makes this world a better place. This student leadership and inclusiveness is commendable.

Freud was correct; it is important for humans to both love and work, and that starts with helping all students in Carlisle Public Schools feel respected as well as succeed academically.