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Preparing our students for all options

Stacy Scott, superintendent of schools in Dracut, will be writing an occasional column for The Valley Dispatch. College-bound or not?

There is a lot of talk these days about raising standards and preparing students for college. The security of finding a job and making a living the way our parents did is, in many ways, a thing of the past. It is widely accepted that students today may change careers as often as adults now change jobs. The economy changes swiftly and the goal of education today has to be to prepare students to be adapting and flexible.

The redesign of the Dracut Public Schools is well underway with our efforts to improve the curriculum and the overall quality of the educational experience. Our goal is to prepare students for college and career readiness. Not all students want to go to college. It is just our job to make sure they can go if they wish and that they know the benefits of a college education.

How important is it for students from Dracut Public Schools to graduate college and be career ready? To judge its importance, we first have to define readiness. Having the skills necessary to enter the workforce with focused intention to pursue an enjoyable career, that is career readiness. Having successfully passed the courses needed for college and having guidance to prepare to attend if a student so chooses, that is college readiness. Our challenge is to raise the sights of our students so they see all the possibilities open to them and help them make their dreams come true.

Does preparation for college and career readiness imply that everyone will or must go to college? College is not for everyone but school systems get into trouble when they try to predict, especially based upon past performance, who should and who should not go to college. Some students are late bloomers and some can see their future early on. If on the eve of graduation a student realizes that she or he wants to go to college, what is important is that we have prepared them to be able to attend without needing remediation and with a plan.

Do the schools in Dracut prepare students for competition at all levels? Is the school system working to increase the number of students who will be college and career ready?

Dracut produces champions in a number of areas from the arts to the playing fields. We can point to many graduates who have excelled in academics as well. We want more academic champions in Dracut. We want all of our students to go to college if they so desire. We want to prepare them for college even if it is not their final goal. They may change their minds.

To this end, we are increasing the opportunities and the level of challenge for our students. We have increased the number of Advanced Placement offerings and are building online and virtual high-school options. We are building and enhancing career-oriented courses to expose students to new areas such as science, technology and the arts. Students today are fascinated with marine biology, robotics, nano-technology, digital music technology, and so much more. We want to create a program that captures their imagination.

What is your role in helping us to make this possible?

As students, you can respond to increased opportunities for rigorous courses by signing up for them. I love it when students write me letters or come to me and advocate for effective courses and teachers. Keep informing us about what works for you and what you need.

As parents, you can support change through your school's PTO or other activities that are designed to promote growth and change. We hope to improve the accessibility of data and information that you can use to get updates on the performance of your children. We are improving the system we use for college advising through Naviance, a college and career-guidance program. We hope these will be helpful to you. As teachers, your efforts to push students to their highest possibilities are a hallmark of our system. Together we can continue to raise the bar for all our students. Each one needs to be challenged to see how much he or she can do.

As community members, you have frequently shared your thoughts with my staff and with me when we cross paths. We need your consistent input.

As business leaders, like our parents, you are an important judge of our final product: highly prepared students. Our dialogue with the business community must grow with time to where students have more intern and enrichment opportunities to work and practice trades while still in school.

College is an important direction students may take in preparing for life, an important possibility for students enabled through high standards and support. Schools must be challenging and engaging for all students -- those who want to go and those who may not go to college -- so their lives may be filled with great potential and possibilities once they graduate.

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