VALUE EDUCATION

Rye Neck Public Schools March 2011

Remembering the Importance of Local Control

By Dr. Peter J. Mustich, Superintendent of Schools

In a time of budget preparation across the nation and in our own state – noted this year for its inflated, derogatory pronouncements about public education, public services, and public employees – it's important to examine the factual issues relevant to Rye Neck Schools.

We believe that local control of the schools *works*. Communities elect individual leaders, and annually, these individuals set school policy and develop a fiscal plan for the schools that is put to the voters for their approval. This vote not only determines the money community members are willing to spend on students, it underscores the community's desire to preserve high property values. In the end, the annual vote for the school budget is the only real control local voters have about spending; the state does not offer its budget up for public vote, nor does the county or the local municipality.

Given the ability to control some of our local costs, we do just that. In fact, compared to many of our peers, Rye Neck spends less per pupil, yet still ranks among the best districts in the state and nation in terms of student achievement.

Unfortunately, all spending is NOT within our control. One of the substantial drivers of increased cost this year is the mandated pension contribution. The state determines the pension contribution rate we are hearing so much about, as well as determining mandated services that come without funding, forcing local communities to assume the responsibility to pay. Our state representatives need to fix these problems to allow for greater local cost control. By one recent study, the average district is spending millions per year on unfunded mandates that local districts would obviously either abandon to save money or find less expensive ways to perform.

In the end, finding a solution to a problem requires engagement of the people who are closest to the issues; again, LOCAL control. In the case of educational reform, we believe strongly in removing the heavy-handedness and costly bureaucratic nonsense of the State, and allowing local school boards – and local communities – to do their jobs. These are the individuals responsible for educating the next generation, our nation's most valuable asset. These are the individuals who are responsible for keeping our community's property values stable. Local control works – it remains one of the most successful models of democracy in the nation today.

"Local control works – it remains one of the most successful models of democracy in the nation today."

This edition of Value Ed speaks to the rich variety of programs and opportunities that our community has supported over the years for our students. Each activity engages or connects our students in meaningful ways, and helps them develop unique talents. This connection is more important than ever in our complex, ever-changing world, and as we look to evolve public education, we each have a responsibility to learn the facts and speak up.

(Continued on page 3)

A Closer Look at the Proposed Tax Cap and Why You Should Be Concerned - A Message from Board President Heidi Sickles

A combination of measures recently proposed by the Governor could have a devastating effect on the quality of public education in this state, and here in Rye Neck. Our efforts to educate and advocate are critical.

On January 29th, the NYS Senate voted to approve legislation (Bill A03982), capping the school property tax levy increase to an annual 2%, or the rate of inflation, whichever is lower, beginning in 2012/13. It is possible that similar legislation will be introduced in the State Assembly later this spring. On January 30th, Governor Cuomo outlined his proposed 2011-2012 budget, which contains an overall 7.3% reduction in state funding for education.

While a tax cap may sound appealing, particularly to all of us here in highly-taxed Westchester County, it is important to understand the two major consequences of it:

1. A tax cap slashes a school district's available funds while doing nothing to reduce its fixed costs. As a result, our students pay the price. The cap offers no ability for districts to address the actual cost drivers that are causing higher taxes; it merely restricts the revenue we can raise. Under a 2% cap, any revenue increase will likely be far less than certain increases, like mandated pension contributions. This will require cuts to curriculum, staff and program in order to come in under the cap. These cuts directly affect students. As a result of increases in fixed costs, a 2% cap for FY 2011-2012 would translate roughly to a cut of $512,695 from the remaining budget. That is the equivalent of seven to nine teachers/positions. And that's just the first year — the district would be facing the same loss the year after that and the year after that, until the rising fixed costs, controlled by the state, are addressed.

2. A tax cap takes away local control. If the state imposes a cap, the state will control both major funding streams for public education: property taxes and state aid. Cuts in state or federal aid, surely a real possibility in the current climate, require an offset increase in local property taxes. Under a tax cap scenario, such cuts mean that even if a district adds not one dollar in new spending it can still be pushed over the cap, leaving no recourse but to dismantle program and lay off personnel. What might that mean? Possible consequences include increasing class size, decreasing the number of AP classes and electives, reducing or cutting kindergarten, and slashing the foreign language, arts, athletics and extra-curricular offerings now made available to the student body.

A tax cap is not a one-time event like a budget cut. It is a permanent measure that will quickly result in the chronic underfunding of schools. This is antithetical to the Rye Neck community's value of excellence in public education. We have an excellent reputation among schools in Westchester County, some of which are national leaders in student achievement, and this is reflected in our property values. We only need to look to California as an example of the destruction a tax cap can wreak on public schools, where student achievement fell like a rock to the bottom of the nation after the introduction of Proposition 13. Can we really afford this lack of investment in our future?

"A tax cap is not a one-time event like a budget cut. It is a permanent measure that will quickly result in the chronic underfunding of schools."

This argument is not against reining in high taxes. It is against the tax cap proposal, which is a much better sound bite than it is a solution. The bottom line is that the Governor and our legislators need to have the political will to address the tough issue of meaningful mandate reform that only they can deal with — and not strip local school boards and community voters of their right to make the best decisions about ensuring student achievement in the most cost-effective way in their local schools.

The Rye Neck Board of Education has responded to the economic crisis over the past three years by cutting positions, reducing certain costs and negotiating contracts that better help us control our costs. Our total budget compares very well against districts in our region with similar student enrollment. We take our fiscal responsibility very seriously and have sought to do the best possible job under the restrictions imposed by the state to develop a fair and appropriate budget. We thank you for your previous support and look forward to helping you understand our community's challenges as we move ahead.

Kindergartners Connect with Blue Bell, PA.

Just before Valentine's Day, the children in classes KJS and KCL shared a Valentine's classic, ***The Valentine Bears*** by Eve Bunting. The bears in the story forgo hibernation so that they can celebrate Valentine's Day.

The children were then partnered with a classmate and had to brainstorm what they would miss most if they had to go into hibernation. They collaborated on illustrations and writing their thoughts.

What happened next put an interesting spin on classroom sharing. Our children had the opportunity to video-conference with Kindergartners in Blue Bell, PA. to share and discuss their thoughts and work.

We realized through sharing, how much we have in common with our friends in another state. We

all love snow, snowmen, and the holidays. More importantly, we loved verbalizing our ideas with a larger audience, plus using Google Maps to see where our new friends live.

Many thanks to Mrs. Costelloe, Mrs. Schumer and Mrs. Levin for their help in making this project a success. We hope to "meet" with our PA. buddies again soon!

Local Control *(Coninuend from front page)*

Teaching is an art as much as it is a science. The stronger the connection the teacher makes with the student, the greater the success. This has been proven true time and again in every walk of life, and is no more evident than in our own district.

Each year as I speak to graduating seniors, the one constant that I hear is how this connection to adults in the building makes a difference in their lives. This connection is powerful and often continues well into adulthood, as alumni write back or visit and remember the same connection.

So as we listen to overheated rhetoric about the sky that is falling, the systems that are failing, and the corrupt individuals who are wasting your money, remember one thing: here in Rye Neck, we are accountable to each other, and there is, without question, something very significant that we must defend and preserve for our children and ourselves.

Bellows Loves Mamaroneck

Third, fourth and fifth grade Bellows students participated in an essay contest sponsored by the Mamaroneck Elks Lodge #1457. The topic was "Why I Love Mamaroneck". On Friday, March 4th, representatives from the Elks Lodge, Louise Yannuzzi and Joe Minishi, went to Bellows to announce the first, second and third place winners in each grade. Students read their essays at a school wide assembly and were presented with certificates and gift cards from the Elks. All the other participants also received a certificate of participation.

(Continued on page 7)

Middle School Students DC Bound

Rye Neck Middle School's 8th grade class is making its annual trek to our nation's capital on April 7th and 8th. The "DC trip" is a much anticipated highlight of 8th grade and middle school as a whole. For two days and a night, the students get to tour Washington and enjoy some enforced quality time while riding the buses. The tradition of this trip extends back to the early 1990s. That may not sound like a long time, but it's been almost 20 years. With the exception of the two spring seasons directly after 9/11 when we visited local sites for recreational activities, the DC trip has been a cornerstone of the enrichment offered by Rye Neck.

This is a team trip in more ways than one. In addition to being a two-day bonding experience for all who go, the preparation is a great example of team-building. The final cost of the trip is just over $300 per person this year, but that's only because our 8th grade team leader, Ms. Cathy Toolan, was able to orchestrate an effective fundraising effort. Money raised through teacher and student dress-down and spirit days, profits from the school store, and the sale of 8th grade team clothing cut the cost by $18 per student, a big deal considering that over 100 students are going on the trip. Providing further relief, the PTSA helps subsidize families in need as well.

While many teens balk at the idea of getting out of bed early in the morning, they don't seem to have trouble getting up on the Thursday of departure—and the bus *leaves* Rye Neck at 5:00 a.m.! By thattime, luggage that was brought to school the day before has been searched and stowed and the biggest decision they have to make is what movies to watch on the way down. Two days of museums, monuments, memorials, and an IMAX movie are sandwiched around a pizza party and the hotel. The group begins the journey back on Friday afternoon and arrives in an exhausted state at the whim of traffic, but usually around 9:30 p.m.

The memories are priceless and we are happy that our Rye Neck Middle School students will be able to carry this experience into their future.

Sixteen High School Students Attend National Symposium on the Advancement of Women in Science

On February 4th, 16 young women from Rye Neck High School with a passion for science, departed for Harvard University to attend the 6th biennial National Symposium on the Advancement of Women in Science (NSAWS). The students were accompanied by Kelly Cappa, Rye Neck High School's Advanced Placement Chemistry teacher, and Amanda Mahncke, high school guidance counselor. This is the second time Ms. Cappa and Ms. Mahncke organized this opportunity for Rye Neck.

(Continued on next page)

Women in Science *(continued from previous page)*

The conference gave the students an extraordinary opportunity to hear accomplished women in science discuss their work and life. For example, Danielle Fienberg, the Director of Lighting at Pixar Animations Studio, gave a riveting talk about how physics plays an integral part in creating believable environments in which the audience can stay immersed in the story. Students were also able to network with prominent professors, science policy makers, professional and industrial scientists from across the nation. In addition, the Rye Neck students experienced college life first hand, as they were hosted by Harvard undergraduates in their dorms.

Overall, this conference deeply inspired the young female scientists of Rye Neck. Before they went on the trip the students had a limited understanding of science and the career options it offered. They now realize that there are a diverse array of careers and fields that rely upon science. The conference also showed students that science is less about finding one correct answer, and more about exploring the unknown and making connections. One student said, "I realized that you can try and fail, and yet not fail in that you learned something important." We look forward to our third trip to the conference in 2013.

WeRNtune Performs in Competition

WeRNtune, the a cappella group founded this year at Rye Neck High School, competed against several other groups in the International Championship of High School A Cappella Mid-Atlantic Semifinals on Saturday, February 12th, 2011, at the Haddon Heights Baptist Regional School in this charming suburb of Philadelphia.

As a new group, **WeRNtune** was anxious to see the talent of the other groups at the competition. The members wanted to learn as much as possible about the approaches to singing and dancing—and creating a cohesive, entertaining performance—using only the human body.

Unfortunately, the venue was too intimate to seat all the competing groups during the actual competition. Rye Neck students, however, were not going to let their two and a half hour bus ride go to waste. Before the competition began, the group went to the warm-up rooms of other groups, singing their songs and hearing the songs of the others. More and more groups joined in, and it became a truly magical experience of musical spontaneity. The fact that Rye Neck students initiated this interchange speaks volumes about our community's drive to learn and share.

Although the newborn group came home without any gold, they came back from Haddon Heights with a new found drive to hone their art. They have started an online forum to discuss what they saw and where they see the group going—both in the short term and for next year.

The group consists of seniors: Renée Bascoe, Hayley Biegel, Taylor Biegel, Nicole Maggio and Chris Takara; juniors Stefan Liljestrand, Lane Kirschner, Allie Sullivan; sophomores Rita Orazi, Alyssa Vinzons and Danny Young; and freshmen Ashley Abbatantono, Taylor Jung, Elena Ruigomez, Mallory Shaner, and Zack Unkenholz and is led by HS English teacher, Patrick Addinger.

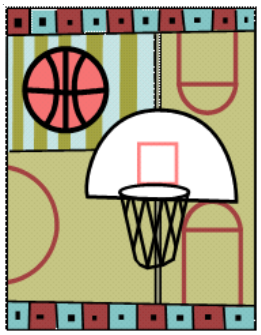
SADD Treasurer Goes to Washington to Support STANDUP Act

On March 8, Megan Daugherty, Treasurer of the High School SADD Chapter, traveled to Washington, DC and participated in a day-long event sponsored by **Safe Roads 4 Teens** and members of Congress to support national standards for phasing in driving privileges for teens and the proposed Safe Teen and Novice Driver Uniform Protection, or STANDUP, Act.

New York falls short of the proposed national standard for "graduated" driver's licenses, which would require states to enact three levels of driving privileges for teenagers. At a news conference at the Capitol, Megan supported the bill – expressing her feelings on the law. "When a high school classmate is killed or suffers a lifelong injury from an auto crash, it gets our attention," she said. "But teens are fearless and we never think it's going to happen to us or a friend. Strong teen driving laws with restrictions on passengers, night time driving and cell phone use help us deal with peer pressure and we know will make us safer drivers. It is no surprise that three-quarters of teens support the lifesaving provisions required in the STANDUP Act."

As a volunteer with the Mamaroneck EMS, Megan also commented that "teens shouldn't be back-boarding teens." As part of the group, which included another teenager from South Dakota, she visited five different congressmen's offices encouraging them to co-sponsor the bill which is being introduced to the Senate and House. "It was an amazing experience to see how lobbying for a law works. To be able to speak and be heard on this issue was great."

Go Panthers! – Winter Season Highlights



The winter sports season has come to a close and along with it, the end of the 1st semester. Some athletic highlights that came out of the winter season include:

- Coach Cathy Toolan and the girl's varsity basketball team qualified for the Class B Sectional Tournament for the first time.
- Second year Coach John Aguilar and the boy's varsity basketball team qualified for the Class B Sectional Tournament for the second consecutive season.
- Indoor Track Senior, Kieran Pande, was crowned League Champion of the 1500 Meter Racewalk.

- 101 student-athletes from grades 7-12 made the Athletic Director's Honor Roll.

This honor is for those student-athletes who maintained High Honor Roll or Honor Roll status for the entire semester while participating on at least one interscholastic Rye Neck team. Students received a congratulatory letter and certificate for their impressive accomplishment.

Thank you for your support of our winter student athletes. Spring is upon us and coaches and students alike are preparing for their seasons. We look forward to your continued support for our Rye Neck teams this spring!

(Continued on next page)

Go Panters! *(Continued from previous page)*

Already thinking about summer vacation plans? Here are the fall sports start dates for next school year. Please pay particular attention to these dates if your child would like to try-out for one of Rye Neck's Varsity or JV fall teams.

Fall 2011 Start Dates

August 19th – Football

August 22nd – All other Varsity and JV Sports

September 6th – Modified Sports

Where are You? Looking for Alumni

The Rye Neck School District is conducting a survey to gather information about our alumni.

Our hope is to inspire our current students by celebrating alumni accomplishments as well as gaining valuable feedback on their high school experiences.

If you are a Rye Neck alumna or alumnus please complete the survey by accessing the link below.

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/RyeNeckHighSchool

We would like to get as many responses as possible so please forward this link to any other alumni with whom you are in contact. Thank you for your help and support with this project.

Important Upcoming Dates

April 6	**Second Budget Hearing** 7:30 p.m.MS/HS Library Community Room
April 27	**Third Budget Hearing** and **Adoption of Budget** 7:30 p.m. MS/ HSLibrary Community Room
May 4	**Final Budget Hearing** 7:30 p.m. MS/HS Library Community Room
May 11	**Voter Registration** – 7:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m. Administration Office
May 17	**Budget Vote** Polls Open 7:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m. MS/HS Library Community Room

Bellows Loves Mamaorneck *(continued from page 3)*

Some of the reasons for loving Mamaroneck that were cited in the essays include the variety of restaurants and stores on Mamaroneck Avenue, Harbor Island, the annual street fair and car show, the Firemen's Parade and July Fourth fireworks, the excellent Rye Neck Schools. Every essay spoke about the friendliness of the community and that small town feeling one gets while walking around town.

RyeNeckSchools
LEARN • ACHIEVE • LEAD

Administration Building
310 Hornidge Road
Mamaroneck, NY 10543

Non-Profit Organization
U.S. Postage Paid
Permit No. 4374
White Plains, NY 10601

Board of Education
Heidi Sickles, President
Cathy O'Keefe, Vice President
Nancy Tucci
Guy Pipolo
Al Hodys
Bonni Gottlieb

Administration 777-5200
Peter J. Mustich, Ed. D.
Superintendent of Schools
Kimberly Bucci, Ed. D.
Assistant Superintendent for Business

And the Winner is Oreo!

Daniel Warren students and teachers celebrated the birth of their new Bamboo Shark on Monday, January 24, 2011. Students waited anxiously to see when the shark pod would hatch their baby shark. An all school popular vote, then a primary run off resulted in a very appropriate name for our eight inch addition……welcome to Daniel Warren Oreo!