Strong Community Collaboration Sets a New Course for the Winchendon Public Schools

On December 4, 5 and 6th 2019, something new and different happened here in Winchendon. Twenty five diverse members of our community - students, teachers, the Town Manager and Superintendent of Schools, parents, school administrators, a member of the Board of Selectmen, a trustee from the Murdock and Robinson-Broadhurst Trusts, a retiree - extracted themselves from two-plus feet of fresh snow to gather at Town Hall. They were there to launch a strategic planning process for the Winchendon Public Schools. Long-time Winchendon residents and WPS staff remarked that in their memory, there has never been a cross-community conversation of this kind about the future of the schools and town.

While the term “strategic planning” may sound pretty mundane, this process is not. Guided by Dr. Lindsey Gunn, an experienced and skilled facilitator from The Cambrian Group, the people who came together last week found themselves deeply engaged.
Tina Santos, a middle school parent, wrote that “I have enjoyed working with all the staff and community members in these sessions and am very excited to see the end results being implemented.” Shirley Houdin, a retiree, appreciated the “incredible variety of new knowledge” and the “refreshing agenda.” One effusive WPS teacher said that “collaborating with the larger community of Winchendon has been invigorating and has infused me with new hope for the future of our district!”

A teacher new to the high school had similar feelings: “I’m so hopeful for the future of this district. This is one of the most dedicated groups of people I have ever worked with.” One of our paraprofessionals expressed thankfulness for having been invited. “I enjoyed myself … I felt pride to be able to work with administrators, teachers and community members.”

On the first day, the group wrestled with fundamental beliefs and values, and grounded in that discussion, began a discussion about the mission of our public school system which continued
right through the third day. On the second day, participants talked - often passionately - about the strengths and weaknesses of the Winchendon community and schools, and then considered those ideas in the broader context of social, economic and technological forces impacting the town and the schools. As one parent remarked, “by getting to the root of our challenges, we were able to find a way forwards - and that was very powerful.”

We talked about critical threats to the schools and, conversely, about inspiring possibilities for the future. Riley Kimball, a junior at Murdock High reflected that “being able to experience this strategic planning has really shown me a lot about what we as a town need to do to change the path we have - and will continue to go on - unless we change something together!” By the end of Day Two, the group began articulating strategic objectives, which Gunn describes as “bold resolutions dedicating the organization’s resources and energies…” to achieving “results that exceed our present capabilities.” Day Three began what will be ongoing discussion and debate about how the schools and community can realize the visionary objectives - naming strategies, and ‘parameters’ for the work ahead.

The leaders of our teachers’ and paraprofessionals’ unions are among those listening closely to the reflections of high school student Hannah Demanche

Setting a strategic direction for the schools is a community-wide undertaking, with vital implications for the future of our town’s young people, families, economy, civic and cultural spirit. Participants in last week’s process hope you will take a few minutes to read through the elements of the Strategic Plan draft that were completed by the close of Day 3, here. Jessica
Vezina, Middle School Principal reflects that “I feel encouraged by this process and confident in the direction we are moving.” We hope you agree, and also hope what you read will inspire you to get involved in the next phase of the planning process! “I want to thank the Winchendon community members who participated so reflectively as we launched our strategic planning work,” exclaims Superintendent Landers. “Broader community participation will be essential in the coming months, as the district convenes working groups to create plans to carry out our bold strategies and reach for our ambitious objectives.”