

School board adds three years to superintendent's contract

By Kris DiLorenzo

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Superintendent Ryan Schoenfeld

Ryan Schoenfeld has been reappointed as superintendent of the Ardsley School District. His second three-year term starts July 1.

Slightly more than halfway into his first term, in March 2020 Schoenfeld faced the unforeseeable challenge of keeping a school system functioning through a pandemic. Though the district's three schools partially reopened last month, with antivirus measures and remote learning options in place, Covid-19 hasn't vanished, and Schoenfeld continues to parry the virus — with no playbook to follow.

Asked if he could write one, Schoenfeld, 53, said, "While a universal manual wouldn't work, I certainly could share a few success factors. The most important is the administration, teachers, staff, and parents working together was the key to getting through this unprecedented time and supporting our students. Open communication and transparency were key."

Schools won't return to full-time, in-person classes until September, and Schoenfeld continues to supply the district website with weekly video updates and issues regular phone and email bulletins that report (anonymously) Covid cases among students, staff, or visitors.

As the pandemic forced teachers and students to pivot to new teaching and learning models, Schoenfeld grew to see advantages in the increased use of technology. "I commend the creativity of our teachers and the way they embraced many new tools," he commented. "We will continue to use these tools to enhance learning in the classroom."

Another takeaway for the superintendent is seeing the importance of engagement between students and teachers, and with one another, that helps children thrive. "Connections took on new forms, but they were front and center to our success," Schoenfeld said.

“Prior to Covid we had a traditional mindset about things we had done before,” he acknowledged. One Covid-induced adaptation was the hybrid learning model, in which teachers in classrooms simultaneously taught students participating from home and students sitting in front of them.

While the district was virtually reinventing its educational methods, students were raising awareness of the need for diversity, inclusion, and equity, initiating actions through school clubs and collaborating with outside organizations. In April, the state Department of Education’s Board of Regents issued its Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework (CR-S framework), requiring that all districts develop policies advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion.

“Despite a pandemic, Ardsley engaged in this work because it was important and could not wait,” Schoenfeld explained.

“We’ve done aspects of this work; it’s not brand new to us. It’s ongoing work.”

Discussions on creating a more inclusive curriculum, for example, were already in progress at all three schools.

He explained that the district’s 2021-2022 budget includes a stipend for an “Equity Leader” (a teacher, or teachers if it is a shared role), who will help direct projects and coordinate school efforts with the community; a steering committee will be chosen this summer to help guide the equity work.

At the school board’s May 4 meeting, Schoenfeld presented the “Ardsley Equity Vision,” an outline of how the district can embrace diversity, developing students who are socio-culturally conscious and responsive, and preparing them for life in a multicultural society.

The Equity Vision and CR-S framework address root issues, e.g., having students examine historical and contemporary power structures, engage in critical conversations, and learn to respect varying perspectives and experiences. Both sources offer guidance for students on acting as change agents, building alliances, and engaging in current issues.

Schoenfeld clarified that the Equity Vision is not a “strategic plan,” just the beginning of what the district intends; the committee will need to gain insight from all stakeholders before a detailed plan evolves.

The Equity Leader and steering committee will develop a 12-month plan setting priorities and integrating the “equity mindset” into the next Strategic Plan, which includes policies, procedures, hiring practices, and resource allocation.

Manifesting the aphorism “It takes a village,” the district intends to be involved in grassroots community actions, and to seek input from Ardsley R.A.C.E. (Racial Advocacy Committee for Equity), the Village’s Multicultural, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee, Mayor Nancy Kaboolian, ACT (the Ardsley Congress of Teachers), AHS Faculty Study Group, student groups (Response to Bias, Building Bridges, Asian Student Union, Students of Color, Genders and Sexualities Alliance, No Place for Hate), parents, and at-large community members.

While Covid turned lives upside-down, the district remained committed to SEL (social and emotional learning), a concept tested since schools closed down. Schoenfeld said students have been forthcoming with their feelings about the disruption in their lives, and the district sought feedback from students and parents to evaluate its efforts and make changes.

“I must say, I am so very proud of our students. They demonstrated resilience, tenacity, adaptability, and compassion for each other throughout the year. They have been amazing.”

Though students are back to in-person classes, the stress isn’t over, and for some, hybrid learning and isolation led to depression. Schoenfeld asserted that the district is finding ways to transition students back into school, reuniting them with teachers and friends by providing safe opportunities to interact and bring back some sense of normalcy.

“We are evaluating what additional supports might be necessary to help any student who was more challenged through the past year,” he affirmed. “This is ongoing work. We will continue to monitor and adjust our SEL efforts.”

As for lessons learned from steering through a pandemic, Schoenfeld has the district reflecting with a consulting group, hearing from teachers what seemed to work well, and what they might continue. “Post-Covid we will be better for it,” Schoenfeld asserted. “There will be silver linings... education as a whole will advance years based on Covid impacting us.”

He recalled one teacher’s comment that reaffirmed his optimism: “I’m truly a 21st-century teacher now, and I’m not going back.”

When Schoenfeld was first appointed superintendent in Ardsley, he told the board that he viewed the district as a gem. On the verge of his reappointment, he said, “Throughout Covid it was important to hold onto the gem and care for it. We are now positioned to organize lessons learned from Covid, refocus on strategic efforts, and polish the gem.”