

Swampscott School Committee Building Walk-Throughs
April 2016

Over the past two weeks, the School Committee spent hours walking through each of the five schools in Swampscott. This sounds like an obvious task but it is actually something that hasn't happened in recent memory.

If you have a student in the school system, feel free to skim what we have to say – you're in the buildings, you're familiar with the challenges we face and you know how well your child is educated.

If you don't have a student in the Swampscott Public Schools, I implore you to please read on...

As a school committee, we know a lot about the school budget and overarching goals and policies, we know demographics and statistics, we know about new initiatives, and we know about needs and wants. What these tours allowed us to experience was the operational side of educating students in Swampscott -- actual education in action. We were able to see the programming, staff and equipment we fund, see the buildings we maintain, and most importantly, see the quality of education we deliver to each and every student in Swampscott.

Wow! Was it enlightening!

We learned about the diversity of learners, programs and facilities that comprise the Swampscott Public Schools.

We were awed by the size of our District's English Language Learners program, specifically the number and diversity of the current 80 students, representing 18 languages, and the challenges of educating these students to succeed in the classroom at the same time they are learning English.

We visited a classroom at each elementary school that houses a different, specifically designed program to educate students with a range of learning and behavioral challenges. In the past these students would have had to be placed out of our district and out of their community for an appropriate education.

We were welcomed into many classrooms to observe math, science, social studies, reading and writing lessons. We were witness to the comprehensiveness and continuity of the Balanced Literacy Program in action across all elementary classes and through the middle school. It wasn't unusual for our group to walk into a classroom and not be noticed by the students who were completely engaged in an interactive group lesson or engrossed independently reading, or busy sharing work with a partner. During lessons we witnessed staff collecting data on student performance and growth; students working independently and in small groups; teachers conferencing with students; students getting pulled out for extra help or pushed-in with extra support - simply put, we saw a lot of wonderful teaching and learning.

One constant throughout each building, in addition to enthusiastic and engaging lessons, was the sight of teachers adapting and making the best of unsatisfactory facility issues - sharing a classroom with another class, at the same time; coming in early, after a rain storm, to vacuum up water in order to teach kindergarten; delivering reading instruction in a converted guidance space; conducting speech therapy in a large closet; teaching art in a former locker room, complete with a kiln in the shower stall; raising salmon *and* growing lettuce in a greenhouse; teaching Tech Ed in a former science lab. Only in the High School did we consistently see spaces designed for their intended use. But even in this newer building staff and students we're adapting to less than optimal conditions, including drainage back up in bathrooms and garbage cans collecting rain water dripping from ceilings, and technology that is already out of date. As we toured the elementary schools and the Middle School we alternated between sweating and freezing depending on where we were in each building. We saw enormous amounts of space in these buildings dedicated to ancient, gigantic boilers and maintenance rooms rather than spaces for education.

These building walk-throughs were eye opening and our unanimous impression is that we have tremendous teachers who are so much more important to delivering a quality education than are our outdated buildings. However, they are crammed in classrooms which are too small, educating groups of students in hallways, writing on blackboards, doubling up classes in a single room, dodging rain-catching buckets in hallways, and 'making-do'.

Why are we satisfied with 'making-do'?

Our operating budget may seem large, but it is bare-boned, there is no extra money to even fix a leaky ceiling. Please be assured that your tax dollars are being spent prudently; however, the combination of poor past decisions and the demands of a 21st century education have created a situation in Swampscott that should not be acceptable to any of us.

Your school committee is committed to changing this.

The majority of the district's operating budget is dedicated to salaries, educational programming for our broad range of students, and energy costs. Over the years, the rising costs in these three areas has necessitated decreasing the funds allotted for building upkeep, repair and renovations. We know this trend will continue and we know we must get a handle on short and long-term planning for our aging facilities. To this end, the School Committee and Town have worked collaboratively to hire a joint facilities manager to establish and oversee a coordinated and comprehensive town-wide facility maintenance program. This will include several distinct programs, including deferred, preventive, repair/upkeep, and emergency maintenance plans for the entire inventory of Town owned buildings. We intend to gain control over current and new facility issues.

We urge all of you to support our work toward a solution which creates school facilities in Swampscott that are as great a source of pride as the education we know is being delivered to our children.