

Old School, New School



Students in the Ardsley Union Free School district take a digital citizenship class.

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The six areas in which public schools and education have changed the most in the last 20 years.

By Marisa Iallorardo

In 2001, I was a high-school senior in Westchester. Like many a budding writer before me, I was a yearbook editor — and in that year's edition, we included "A Costly Year: 2000-2001 Shopping List," which was an entire page dedicated to what things cost then. Here's a snippet: Gas was \$1.76 per gallon; a

cellphone bill — which included 200 minutes and free nights and weekends! — was \$39; and a CD was \$17.99. Tuition at a SUNY was recorded as \$3,400.

In retrospect, the list also provides a pretty good snapshot of what life itself was like for a high-schooler 20 years ago. But beyond the cost of a prom dress (\$150-\$300... this was Westchester, after all), there was more that defined the time period: We had a computer lab stocked with desktops; I'm pretty sure not typing one's papers was still acceptable then, and though Columbine had occurred two years prior, there were no lockdown drills yet.

If today's cohort of students were to create a similar list, their choices might vary — maybe the cost of Netflix or new AirPods — but you can be sure the rest of their experience looks much different, too. The desktops have been replaced by Chromebooks and iPads; students can message their teachers directly; lockdown drills are just another part of school life.

"There have been so many changes," says Dr. Lisa Brady, superintendent of the Dobbs Ferry School District, of how schools and education have changed over the last two decades. She also points to technology as the most seminal change.

So, let's take a closer look. Here, we explore six of the biggest changes in public schools and education since the start of the 21st century, in districts across Westchester.



Learning Spaces

With these new opportunities come different school and classroom setups, too. Mamaroneck superintendent Dr. Robert Shaps explains that there has been a move away from a traditional "cells and bells" approach — in which one teacher has a certain number of students in one space, for instance — to a move toward building learning communities where students can have a more fluid and personalized experience.

That change is evident in the way classrooms and communal areas themselves look — and *can* look. For example, in Mamaroneck, they swapped out the rectangular tables in the elementary-school cafeterias for circular tables to provide more social engagement. In Tarrytown, you may see classrooms with tables (sans legs!) on the floor or bookshelves repurposed into reading

nooks. Christopher Borsari, superintendent of the Public Schools of the Tarrytowns, points to a teacher who painted his classroom tables with whiteboard paint, so they could be used that way.

There are also new and revamped spaces, like engineering labs and podcasting studios, the latter of which, for instance, opened in Mamaroneck in 2018. In Ardsley, the high school library was renovated to become a library media center, which opened this year. The two-level space has five "breakout collaboration rooms," with large screens and wall-length whiteboards, colorful armchairs for reading or studying, and plenty of spots to plug in your devices. Plus, the center is open until 3:45 p.m., after the school day ends.

"The traffic in there has been unbelievable in the past year," says the superintendent.

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Clockwise from left: The newly renovated Library Media Center at Ardsley High School opened this year; in Mamaroneck High School's podcasting studio, students learn the new medium and produce their own podcasts; the learning spaces at Chappaqua's Horace Greeley High School have seen major changes in recent years.



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— Dr. Ron Hattar
Superintendent,
Yorktown Central School District

dent of the Ardsley Union Free School District, Dr. Ryan Schoenfeld.

At the ESTEM labs in the Yorktown schools, for example, you’ll find flexible furniture — which is “easily reconfigurable,” says Superintendent Dr. Ron Hattar — plus tables

and walls that can be written on, and more.

“Configuring learning spaces to meet the instructional demands is imperative. The space should match the thinking demands that we’re asking of our students,” Hattar explains.

In the Chappaqua Central School District, the last few years have seen a number of new and upgraded spaces. The libraries at all three elementary schools were converted to Global Learning Centers, i.e., multimedia centers that include makers’ spaces. At the two middle schools, STEAM centers were created where students can do “interdisciplinary projects with really high-tech machinery,” says Chappaqua schools superintendent Dr. Christine Ackerman.

There’s also a Global Learning Center at Chappaqua’s high school, Horace Greeley, as well as a “redesigned learning environment” in one of the buildings, where 10 classrooms

were reconfigured (including the removal of walls) to create a fluid space for teachers and students that includes glass walls, working pods, and technology such as mobile devices and multimedia equipment.

Ackerman says the thinking behind the space these days is “to build learning communities for kids where there is fluidity between classes and interdisciplinary work in an environment that is more reflective of how the working world has evolved over time.”

Also on tap for Greeley: a new STEAM building — to open in the fall — plus another new redesigned classroom learning space. They are in the development process for a Plant Sciences and Bioclimatic Research Center that would include, among other things, different climate-controlled spaces to enable students to study plant sciences and sustainability.



Left: There are gardens at all of the schools in the Yorktown Central School District; **(below)** healthy choices for school lunches are common these days, including salad bars, like this one at the Dobbs Ferry Union Free School District.



with the goal of upping it to once a week.

Beyond the cafeteria, there's also been a switch in food-centered celebrations. You'll see healthier picks replacing the usual cupcakes or cookies for elementary-schoolers' birthdays, whether it's cheese sticks, apples, carrots and hummus — or other ideas completely. At Dobbs Ferry's Springhurst Elementary School, the birthday child takes a photo with the principal, which is then broadcast on screens throughout the school.

Gardens now dot school grounds, too. In fact, there are gardens at all seven schools of the Scarsdale Union Free School District, says Dr. Drew Patrick, assistant superintendent for human resources and leadership development, with "vibrant curricular and extracurricular experiences using the gardens."

In Yorktown, where each school also has gardens, students at Crompond Elementary School have a weekly gardening period. What's key, Tolosi says, is that, "We were able to integrate not just the food piece, but math ('How many spaces apart do we plant the seeds?'), language, and culture. That all can come from the gardens, so it's integrated really well in our schools."

For many of us, composting wasn't even on the radar 20 years ago, yet now it's common practice. "This program represents the very best of a school-community partnership, as it began out in the Scarsdale community, and community members brought it into our schools," says Patrick of the district-wide composting program, which he calls a "huge success."

The Croton-Harmon Union Free School District, which started its food-service program this year, partnered with the Greenburgh Nature Center to help focus their environmental sustainability efforts, including composting. "We're teaching students and staff how to throw their waste away so that eventually we'll be able to compost some of the waste," says Dr. Deborah O'Connell, superintendent.

Food and Nutrition

You already know the stereotypical image of the school cafeteria: Kids lined up with their trays, waiting to be served that infamous "mystery meat." And while that picture was already fairly different by the late '90s, the last couple of decades have brought lots of changes on the food-and-nutrition front.

Changing state and federal regulations during that period set new criteria that schools had to meet in order to receive funding for their food programs. It included menu changes, like adding more fruits and veggies, an uptick in whole grains, and cuts to sodium and sugar. In 2006, for example, school districts were required to create a wellness poli-

cy, says Laura Tolosi, director of wellness for the Yorktown Central School District. And in 2010, the USDA revamped its requirements — something it hadn't done since the mid-'90s — to make standards healthier.

What that translates to is a much different look for school-served meals. One standout shift: the sheer amount of choices. You'll find salad bars and sandwich stations — Dobbs Ferry has those, as well as its own pizza ovens, with picks like whole-wheat crust and veggies, says Brady. Cafeterias now offer gluten-free, vegan, and other diet-specific alternatives. In Yorktown, there's local, grass-fed beef on the menu at least once a month,

Security

One of the biggest changes — and likely the one most discussed in the public sphere — has been the surge in security measures in schools across the country, including those in Westchester. While there were some standard practices in the late 20th century, like fire drills (and you can go even further back, to the mid-century atomic-bomb drills), schools these days are tasked with much more.

Administrators usually point to the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 or the 9/11 attacks in 2001 as the tipping point. Today, some of the safety regulations, like lockdown drills, are state-mandated.

“I think the challenge for schools is we want to remain welcoming and open to not just our students but also to our community and our families,” says Borsari. “So how do [we] maintain an open and accessible feeling while maintaining a high-level of security and safety for our students, employees, and visitors?”

Districts are working to create that balance. That work includes things like putting district safety teams and safety plans in place, as well as the more visible-to-the-public updates, like designated single points of entry into school buildings (with the rest of the doors locked), security cameras, hiring security directors, and programs where you have to scan your ID and be given a badge to enter a school.

In some cases, the buildings themselves

have been updated to limit entry, which was recently done in Tarrytown and is underway in Rye. “We will be upgrading our entrances at each of our schools to have secure vestibule entrances, so there will be double-layer entry doors that will prevent people from going any farther into the building,” says Rye City School District superintendent Dr. Eric Byrne, who estimates they’ll be in place by the 2021 school year.

Being prepared is also an integral part of the equation. In 2019, for example, the White Plains school district and White Plains Hospital worked together through the national “Stop the Bleed” campaign, in which hospital trainers taught school staff and teachers what to do during a bleeding emergency, including proper tourniquet placement and wound packing.

“In a bleeding emergency, time is critical,” says Farrukh Jafri, MD, MS-HPed, assistant director of Education and Simulation, Emergency Department, White Plains Hospital. “Training our community to provide immediate, frontline aid to an injured



Many schools, including White Plains High School, have security guards.

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— Dr. Joseph Ricca
Superintendent,
White Plains Public Schools

person until first responders are able to take over can save lives.” (According to reports, this training and equipment helped save a teenager’s life last year, following the shooting at Saugus High School in California.)

“I think the most important piece is the training and the work that you do with the staff and the kids so that in the event of an emergency situation, they react immediately,” explains Byrne, whether that’s calling 911 or evacuating because of a fire — with training also including anti-bullying and

spotting mental health issues.

White Plains Public Schools’ superintendent, Dr. Joseph Ricca, says: “I think that the biggest, probably most advantageous strength in the school district has been that there is a much more common awareness that we’re all responsible for each other and each other’s safety and security.” And that’s not just in emergencies, but in daily situations, whether that’s water on the floor or making sure doors aren’t being kept open, he says.



Technology

When Yonkers Public Schools superintendent Dr. Edwin M. Quezada and I talk about changes over the last 20 years and the subject of technology comes up, he ticks off a list of platforms founded in the aughts: Facebook in 2004, Twitter in 2006, Instagram in 2010. Added to that can be the deluge of smartphones — no one had an iPhone until 2007, if your born-that-same-year middle-schooler can believe it — and the apps

and new communications (hello, podcasting) that came along, as well.

“Prior to the year 2000, technology was no way close to being in place the way it is now,” says Quezada. “The speed at which knowledge comes to our students was not present prior to 2000, either.”

And Gerald Crisci, the director of instructional technology and innovation in Scarsdale, echoes that sentiment: “Twenty years ago, technology was considered ‘optional’ for some students and teachers, and it’s not that way any longer. In most school districts, including Scarsdale, technology touches everything and everyone.”

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of local administrators point to technology as one of the biggest changes in recent years. And its impact is evident in many ways — from how students interact with teachers (Google Classroom allows them to send in assignments and receive feedback) to interactive learning opportunities (in Ardsley, students live-chatted with NASA engineers and technicians working on the Mars 2020 Rover) to how students take tests (in Yonkers, standardized tests are done on com-

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Technology continued

puter) to the way assistive technology can help provide extra support for students with special needs.

“It’s reflective of the larger change in education in general, which is where the emphasis has moved away from being about absorbing content and delivering information and memorizing facts to being about students getting an opportunity to create and to apply the things they’re learning,” says Doug Berry, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in Dobbs Ferry. And technology “allows kids that opportunity to do that,” he says.

One of the biggest shifts, as Crisci notes, is “the proliferation of one-to-one student mobile devices.” Districts from White Plains and Dobbs Ferry to Scarsdale

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and Croton-Harmon all have a 1:1 program in which students receive their own device — usually a Chromebook or an iPad — sometimes beginning in 3rd or 4th grade. (Though that varies.)

In Dobbs Ferry, where they began the program in the 2012-2013 school year, students keep their Chromebooks at school in the fourth and fifth grades and then start taking them home in sixth grade. “We consider that to be like a textbook,” says Superintendent Brady. And to be sure, even in those districts that don’t have a 1:1 program, there is plenty of technology making the rounds and available to students.

But along with that, schools have also taken up the mantle of teaching kids responsible digital practices. In Ardsley, for example, there is a digital-citizenship class in the middle school.

Plus, the changes have impacted parents, too — from PTA Facebook pages with daily posts to apps like Remind, with texts about school closings and events. “Communication to parents has changed tremendously in the past 15 years,” says Rachel Moseley, Scarsdale’s director of information technology and the chief information officer. At Scarsdale, for example, there’s an online home for all those flyers, as well as parent portals to find report cards and communications digitally.



Testing and Learning

As can be expected, there have been changes in day-to-day learning and what’s offered to students. But let’s start with a shift that happened specifically during the last 20 years: the introduction of standardized tests in math and English language arts (ELA) for grades 3 through 8 and the New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards. Both are required at the state level, with the ELA and math tests first administered in 2006 and the Common Core standards starting in 2012.

There has been plenty of criticism of the standardized tests, accompanied by a movement in which parents opt their children out of taking them. Largely, local administrators see them as something they’re required to do, but to them it’s just one point in their overall evaluation of students.

“It’s part of our world, but we don’t make it our world,” says Croton-Harmon superintendent O’Connell.

Dr. Steven Garcia, the assistant superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Personnel in the Pelham Union Free School District, explains: “It’s useful information to a certain extent, but it’s just one data set, and we use multiple measures to assess student learning — and not all of it should be a high-stakes paper-and-pencil exam.”

While these changes have added another dimension, there’s more happening outside of that, including a push toward STEAM — science, technology, engineering, art, and math — education. Engineering is a regular part of the curriculum in schools, some starting as early as Kindergarten. (There are new state science standards, too.)

The Yorktown schools began their pioneering ESTEAM program in 2017. “ESTEAM is an empathy-based approach to STEAM instruction,” explains Superintendent Hattar of Yorktown. “What that really translates to is an empathy-based



Left: Students in a STEAM class at Robert E. Bell Middle School in Chappaqua; (above) students get interactive as part of the Yorktown Central School District's ESTEAM approach.

approach and a problem-solving approach to creativity and innovation."

He offers this example: Kindergarteners are taught the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme, with a post-reading discussion centered around kindness and empathy. How did Humpty feel, and how would a good friend help? From there, the kids, with the help of high school AP calculus students, designed protective casings for Humpty, which they tested by dropping from a 17-foot-high bucket truck. It was a great learning opportunity, says Hattar, with the younger students empathizing with Humpty and the older students getting to act as mentors.

"The concept of ESTEAM, in my estimation, makes perfect sense in that we want to teach our children to be the problem-solvers of the future. We want to teach them to be critical and analytical thinkers. But we want them to do so with a purpose and for a purpose. And the 'E' in 'ESTEAM' provides that purpose," he explains.

Learning opportunities are also more expansive. In Mamaroneck, there's a four-year Original Civic Research in Action course at the high school, where students develop and implement community-based civic-action projects. Journalism and AP government students will go to New Hampshire during primary season, to work with presidential candidates and report stories (the third election cycle the district has done it) — and during the most recent midterms, journalism students produced a podcast based on their political reporting from rural West Virginia.

In the Greenburgh Central School District, the Mandarin language program begins in preschool, and the district is one of about 10 nationwide that has a K-12 International Baccalaureate (IB) continuum. And across the county, you'll find kids engaged in all sorts of study — from app development to coding to classes, like "the economics of sports" and "forensic science," both of which were offered at White Plains High School this year.

Wellness and Emotional Well-Being

Wellness isn't just for the gym anymore. From helping kids manage an influx of stress and anxiety to the incorporation of meditation and yoga, the landscape in schools looks much different.

Superintendents across the county emphasize the importance of social-emotional learning, commonly referred to as SEL. Some districts are implementing the RULER approach through the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. "RULER teaches the skills of emotional intelligence — those associated with recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotion. Decades of research show that these skills are essential to effective teaching and learning, sound decision-making, physical and mental health, and success in school and beyond," according to the center's website.

Coupled with this is a focus on things like mindfulness and meditation. "We are doing a lot — and have been doing a lot — with mindfulness and yoga," says Brady in Dobbs Ferry. Kids at every grade are exposed to meditation and many of the elementary teachers are trained yoga instructors, she says. "It would not be unusual for you to be in our middle school or high school and see kids leading meditation either right before class starts or at the end of class," she says.

In Greenburgh, all the special-education teachers are trained in daily yoga instruction, says Superintendent Dr. Tahira DuPree Chase — and they offer Wellness Wednesday activities for staff and administrators.

At many schools, you'll now also find dedicated mindfulness spaces, where kids can do everything from simply take a beat to talk with counselors, like in the spaces in Yorktown. The high school mindfulness space in Tarrytown, for instance, includes aromatherapy, stress balls, and more. And at the elementary level, kids can walk a Sensory Path, with activities like hopping on one foot or doing wall push-ups to help them "get centered again,"

says Superintendent Borsari.


"We all recognize — as we get older especially — we all recognize that stress is part of life. We can't necessarily minimize it, we can't necessarily eliminate it, but we can try to figure out ways to manage it. And that's really the message we try to send to our kids," says Borsari. There are skills and strategies to teach them — as well as model for them, he says. The aim is to provide "pro-social and positive ways" to deal with stress — whether that's listening to music, doing a breathing exercise or a physical activity like running — so that they're not turning to behaviors like drinking or self-medicating, he says.

Plus: Districts are aiming to deal with mental health issues head-on — from anti-bullying campaigns to hir-

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ing additional social workers and counselors to partnering with nonprofits like Andrus, something White Plains did, to offer mental health clinics at school.

Says Superintendent Dr. Chase: "I think now, with more education, now, with more awareness, we're willing to have conversations — courageous conversations — around mental health. We're willing to have more courageous conversations around wellness — and be okay with it. Also, to offer resources to support those who might be in need." 

Marisa Iallorardo lives in White Plains with her husband and two young kids, including a newly minted kindergartener. She writes regularly about lifestyle, parenting, and more.