

Nanuet Union Free School District

*The Problem: Meeting Nanuet students of today and tomorrow with financial supports of the past.*

1. Financial Instability:

- Until about 10 years ago, Nanuet had the lowest tax rate in Rockland County. During the past ten years, the Wyeth Company, District's source of 40% of its tax base, was acquired by Pfizer. Due to overlap with other divisions, as well as lower costs offshore, Pfizer closed down 80% of its capacity of the three million square foot facility in Nanuet. Its assessment was 386 million dollars (with a market value approaching one billion) ten years ago but has been reduced to \$62,500,000 (with a market value less than 150 million dollars) due to the reduction in usage. In addition, Pfizer has brought an action demanding the assessment be lowered to a quarter of the reduced assessment and the return of more than 12 million dollars in tax payments.

*\*\* (In 2000 Pfizer paid \$20 million of a \$50 million budget versus today's \$7 million.)*

- The other major portion of the District's tax base was retail shopping centers including the Nanuet Mall, which closed six years ago after 40 years of operation. A much smaller retail establishment with less than half the assessment was opened in its place. Because of the reduction in value of retail due to the increased use of internet sales, the District has approximately 20 million dollars of additional potential liability due to smaller tax certiorari proceedings.

2. Nanuet Students of Today:

Nanuet is a wonderfully diverse community that continues to attract families from the greater New York City boroughs as well as regions from all over the world. We are proud of our diversity and hold the multicultural characteristics of our school community atop the long list of things we offer our students. With this said, research has shown that schools must make significant adjustments in order to meet the needs of Economically Disadvantaged Students, English Language Learner Students, and Students with Disabilities. Over the past ten years Nanuet has experienced an increase in all three groups of learners.

- 53% increase in Economically Disadvantaged Students
- 34% increase in English Language Learner Students
- 15% increase in Students with Disabilities

3. Doing More with Less:

With increasing tax rates due to a shrinking tax base, Nanuet has tightened its belt in regard to spending. While it once had the largest per student cost in the County, it now has a smaller per student cost than similar schools as defined by New York State. We are proud to say we utilized innovation and creativity to fill the gaps where funding was not an option.

## What have we done?

- **Nanuet was selected as First Place Winner in the 2018 Magna Award program through the National School Boards Association.** This award recognizes and honors school districts across the country for innovative program development and implementation. In 2018, the award was granted to Districts that are dedicated to educational equity and to implementing innovative programs that remove barriers to achievement for underserved students.
  - We were recognized for our use of our Outdoor Education Center, a 37 acre District owned property that over the past several years has been transformed from a large empty lot into an innovative, outdoor classroom for students. Students have access to a large greenhouse, a robust organic garden, beehives, a research pond, wind turbines, solar panels, horse barns for therapeutic riding for students with special needs, a student assisted farm to cafeteria program, sensory integration nature paths, exercise equipment, and athletic fields. Most recently, the District added a commercial grade kitchen to our learning center at the OEC so that students can engage in a variety of experiential learning opportunities that are connected to the community. While all students have access to the OEC, over the past five years the District has committed to using the OEC to enhance the learning of at-risk students including ENL students and students with disabilities. The programs at the OEC run year round for students, including the summer months, to prevent regression of skills and to enhance access to peers. Our goal is to offer more opportunities for students who otherwise wouldn't be able to attend costly camps or travel for learning experiences. The program targets language acquisition and vocabulary development skills unique to ESL students.
  - While the OEC is partially funded by grant funding that the District must continually seek, most of the funding for the programming comes from the budget (i.e. taxpayers in the community). With the increase in ENL students, the District needed to find innovative ways to meet the myriad needs of our ENL students.
- **Over the past several years, the District has also added a variety of special education programs to meet the needs of our diverse population. We have expanded our Life Skills program to include a newly redesigned school store which is run by our developmentally disabled student population.** This school store is a model store and we have hosted many visitors from other Districts who are interested in starting their own school/work experience. We have also built a model apartment that provides our Life Skills students the opportunity to practice daily living skills in an authentic learning environment. This is unique to Nanuet and it is also a "classroom" that many educators from around the region have visited.
- **Nanuet High School is a Blue Ribbon School and a highly ranked BEST High School on the US News Top Schools Ranking--recognized primarily for its creative programming and data informed practices.** We pay for all students to take the PSAT's in 10<sup>th</sup> grade so students of all socioeconomic means have the opportunity to assess their future college plans. Our

high school utilizes the results of the PSAT to create an "opportunity index" which helps design a plan for ALL STUDENTS to take at least one college level course before graduation (AP or Dual Enrollment). This practice has led to extremely high levels of advance course participation for students in all subgroups. This practice has been acknowledged on a national scale.

- To provide more hands-on, experiential learning experiences for our diverse student population, the District also utilizes innovative scheduling across all grades K-12. The elementary schools provide STEM classes to all grade levels as part of their "special area" weekly rotation of courses (i.e. library, PE, art, music). STEM electives continue into middle school, where students are also provided longer blocks for learning (55 minute periods). Nanuet High School recently switched to longer blocks of time with an innovative "rotating block" schedule which gives students 55 minute learning blocks. The new schedule accommodates our diverse population of students because it allows students more opportunities to engage in authentic learning tasks, group work with their peers, and the opportunity to participate in extracurricular clubs during the day. In the old model, students had to stay after school to participate in clubs. As our demographic changed, we needed to stay responsive to our students who have after school job requirements or need to assist with other family responsibilities. Students can now participate in clubs during their lunch.
- The Nanuet School District also has a strong partnership with the Family Resource Center, which is housed in our K-2 building but connects with families across the District. The FRC provides supports for families in need in a variety of ways including providing reduced tuition for after school care and after school clubs, providing summer camps for Nanuet students, assistance with tutoring for students who have academic needs, providing clothing or personal items for families in need, etc. The FRC also oversees our 1/2 day Universal Preschool Program and our full day preschool classes. They have recently expanded to three full classrooms so that all pre-k students in Nanuet who need a preschool placement in their home district have access to such an opportunity. This pre-k program has expanded over the years in response to our changing needs. The FRC also runs a program for students whose families cannot afford a preschool program and did not receive the lottery for UPK funding. Staff volunteers go to the homes of 4 year old students to read to them and provide books for their homes several times a week. Without the FRC, the District would be at a tremendous loss.
- Several years ago, the District employed an "ENL Director" to assist with the provision of services for current and former ENL students. This is not a state required position, but with the mandates required, the District felt it was important to hire a person with expertise in curriculum/instruction as well as required services for our students. This comes from our Budget.
  - We have doubled our ENL staffing over the past five years.
  - We also now employ ENL Teaching Assistants (not a state requirement) to support our students across the content areas as we know they require more support than the state mandates to be successful.
- Last year, the District contracted with Today's Students Tomorrow's Teachers to provide hands-on career training for our minority students who have an interest in becoming

educators in the future. Students spend several years in the program and during their time, they are given a teacher mentor (paid by the District) who assists them with internships, college visits, job shadowing, etc. When TSTT students leave Nanuet, they are offered a 50% tuition reduction at a large number of colleges in the metropolitan area. We view this program as a wonderful opportunity for our minority students who may also be learning English as a new language and/or may come from low socio-economic backgrounds. The cost of TSTT is thousands of dollars each year that comes from our operating budget.

#### 4. The Tipping Point:

While we have been doing more with less, there is a tipping point where decreased spending will hurt student achievement.

One trouble with Foundation Aid as implemented is that Nanuet is still considered to have all of the benefits of a healthy tax base that it has lost. While it may have been justifiable ten years ago for the formula to recognize the advantages of a large commercial tax base, it is unfair to ignore the loss of these properties now. Nanuet has always been a middle class hamlet with a very large pharmaceutical campus. Now it is a middle class hamlet without that company and with an emerging immigrant and refugee population.

#### 5. We need increased funding from the State:

- With increased funding, the District would love the opportunity to become a community school with all of the components that would assist our families who come from impoverished backgrounds or who need assistance with services in the community. We have attended numerous workshops sponsored by the state education department, however, we are unable to afford a full time administrator who can supervise a full community school program.
- The Nanuet UFSD is in need of additional aid to continue to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education in the Least Restrictive Environment for Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners as well as high quality supports and interventions for students at risk. The district has recently created new, smaller therapeutic support programs which have, in accordance with LRE, brought multiple Nanuet students back from out of district placements. These programs require a higher teacher to student ratio, more support staff, supportive physical environments as well as additional therapeutic and clinical supports.
- The Nanuet district is also currently in the process of rolling out several research based programs, as well as other home grown initiatives, to support the rapidly increasing mental health and social emotional needs of our students. Additional funding would also allow us to increase our ability to provide research based multi-sensory reading instruction to students who are struggling. These goals require extensive professional development as well as supplies and materials. We are also in need of aid to support staffing needs

(teachers, TAs, clinicians, related service providers, behaviorists) as well as assistive technology (augmentative communication devices, hearing equipment, iPads, text to speech etc.) to help level the playing field for our increasing number of vulnerable learner subgroups. We also continue to expand upon our offerings in terms of work based learning, vocational opportunities and activities of daily living skills (i.e. the simulated apartment at our Outdoor Education Center) in order to provide the transition services and supports our students who need to be successful after graduation.

- **Lastly, to continue the level of innovation, creativity, and variety our proud school community has grown to expect.** As we continue to refocus resources on our growing vulnerable subgroups we have an equal obligation to enrich all of the students that enter our K-12 school continuum. Additional funding is essential for us to navigate our future here in the proud working class hamlet of Nanuet, NY.