

Madison's New School Superintendent On Going To The Next Level And Why Less Is Sometimes More

Thomas Scarice says he's an advocate of great teaching, high standards, and giving children time and room to breath.

Posted by [Pem McNerney](#) (Editor) , March 13, 2012 at 03:12 AM



Did you ever have a teacher that changed the course of your life?

Thomas Scarice, Madison's new superintendent of schools, did his junior year at North Haven High School.

Her name was Mrs. Lenore Michlin.

"Twenty five years ago, she made me a writer," he said. "I was not a writer prior to my junior year. By the time I was a senior I was a writer."

Preparing for today's lessons and tomorrow's challenges

Scarice says the ability to have that kind of profound impact on students is something he cherishes, and is one reason why he became a school administrator, so that he could work with teachers to prepare students for today's lessons and tomorrow's challenges.

"I love being in a leadership position in a school system, because I love being able to facilitate and collaborate with others. I love being involved with all facets of the organization, from the community to the individual classrooms. But I particularly love visiting classrooms. I left the building level [of teaching and administration] earlier than I anticipated in my career and am finding myself gravitating to classrooms a lot," he said.

Scarice says that he has a tremendous amount of respect for what is currently going on in Madison's classrooms. "I have admired the Madison Public School System for some time," he said.

Going to the next level

He added that, during the hiring process, he developed an excellent rapport with the Board of Education, along with admiration for the dedication they bring to the job. He says the opportunity to work with the community to build on the successes of past school administrations is what lured him from his current job as assistant superintendent in the Weston Public School System, where he was otherwise content.

"There has been administration after administration of the highest quality in Madison," he said. "To stand on those shoulders and go to the next level is something I just couldn't pass up."

Scarice says Madison is ideally situated to go to the next level when it comes to its public schools.

"It was a fit"

"It's clear that Madison is a community that really values its schools," he said. "We have that in Weston as well. You have the opportunity to create powerful programs when everyone is pointed in the same direction. After I began the interview process it was abundantly clear that the schools have community support and that you have a high-functioning school board as well. It was clear to me shortly after I met them, that it was a fit."

Scarice said Madison already is a high-performing district, often ranked among the top in the states for school systems of its size.

"So, the question becomes, is it more of the same? Or, what does the next level look like?" he said. "Any district that is thinking about its future has to consider how different the world is right now from how it was in the past, for our students. What

promises do we need to make and keep by June of their senior year to equip them for this very complex world?"

"Students need to be flexible and creative thinkers"

Scarice says it was sufficient for students, in the past, to accumulate knowledge and facts.

"That alone is completely insufficient right now," he said. "Students need to be flexible and creative thinkers. They need to work well and communicate in a dense social media world. They need to apply their learning, as opposed to just accumulating knowledge. Madison and other districts are working on this and this is where we need to go."

Scarice said it's possible to take an already outstanding curriculum, and naturally integrate a deeper level of thinking, analysis, and application. Part of that could involve questioning the benchmarks that schools currently use, he said.

Doing it in a child-centered way

"Some of them are insufficient and we need to move beyond them," he said. "Our kids are moving on to a global world and we need to prepare them for that."

Still ... and here Scarice pauses for a moment.

"We need to do this in a child-centered way," he said. "Increasing high stakes pressure is really not the best way to prepare kids. It's really about understanding where they are developmentally."

Two illuminating examples

He gave two examples, one involving the recent decision to go to full-day kindergarten in Weston, and another to introduce a new pilot program involving math in Weston. He noted that he is not suggesting that either the math program or full-day kindergarten are, or are not, suitable for Madison. He said, however, that the reasons why Weston decided to make these decisions are illuminating.

In Weston, the Board of Education just this past February decided to adopt full-day kindergarten for the upcoming school year. In Weston, there was little or no budget impact from this decision, because the school system already had the requisite staff in place.

"It was not a financial question, because we actually saved money on the mid-day bus runs," he said. Children, under the old system, would basically have two full days a week, and three half days.

Looking at full-day kindergarten solely from a programming standpoint

"So, from a budgeting perspective, we had a full time staff," he said. "So we were able to look at this question solely from a programming standpoint," he said.

"What we figured out was that, with our modified part-time kindergarten program, we were able to do some wonderful things with the kids academically. But we felt like we were compromising on the social and emotional programs involving structured play, unstructured play."

Scarice said school administrators, teachers, and the community came to feel like the school system was academically rushing five-year-old children.

"Letting them breath and process and not make them feel like they were on a treadmill at five years old"

"We wanted to be able to spread it out and let them breath and process and not make them feel like they were on a treadmill at five years old," he said.

Scarice said students, whether they are in kindergarten or high school, learn better when they have time to process and reflect.

"You have to create time to process and think and reflect," he said. "Sometimes less is more when it comes to actual content. Look at the way math standards are changing. Math experts have adopted that approach. They are teaching students so that they can process and problem solve. Just trying to cram as much in as possible didn't work."

The "less is more" approach

Weston is piloting a program called Math in Focus, Scarice said, based on the internationally renowned [Singapore Math Program](#) that moved Singapore to the top worldwide when it came to students' math prowess.

"We've already been through a few workshops," Scarice said of Weston. "Our biggest takeaway is the 'less is more' approach. The program goes to a level of depth so students understand they are not just plugging in numbers. Students need time to do that. We need to allow students to do that."

When Scarice talks about educators who have influenced him, he includes not only Mrs. Michlin, but also Jerry Belair, the former superintendent in Weston and the current superintendent in Waterford; Dr. Marty Brooks, the president of the Tri-State Consortium; Alfie Kohn, an author and educator; and Diane Ravitch, an author and educator.

Too much homework? Too many tests?

[Kohn](#) is the author of *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing* and *The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools*, among other titles.

[Ravitch](#), who was featured a year ago on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, is the author of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* and *Forgotten Heroes of American Education: The Great Tradition of Teaching Teachers*, among other titles.

Scarice said his goal is to take good ideas from the best thinkers in education and put them into action in a way that is appropriate for the community and its schools.

Developing interventions, fostering inclusive environments, and honoring the practice of teaching

He said he's proud of the work he's already done in his career at the Two Rivers Magnet Middle School in East Hartford and in the Weston School District. At the Two Rivers Magnet Middle School, Scarice said he worked with a team that did outstanding work developing interventions for at-risk children, and developing an inclusive environment.

In Weston, where he was the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, Scarice said he was particularly proud of the work he and his team did developing a partnership with Teachers College Columbia University, and of a recently developed, brand-new, teacher evaluation plan. The latter was a two-year project involving a 16-member committee.

"It really honors the professional practice of teaching," Scarice said. "Teachers are professionals and they have a professional practice. I just live by that mindset."

Going to the next level in an era of declining enrollment, difficult economic times

Scarice says he is cognizant of the fact that he will be working with the community to take the schools to the next level at a time of declining enrollment, a trend that is affecting not only Madison, but many other school districts as well.

"This is a problem in the entire state of Connecticut, for the most part," he said.

"That's why all of these decisions have to be made through a community process. The question is, how do we best use our resources and best use our facilities most efficiently to achieve our goals?"

He said there are different ways to approach challenges created by declining enrollments and that it sometimes can involve the creative use of facilities and human resources.

"Maximizing resources, being as efficient as we can be"

"But, at its core, we have to make sure that it's about education. We have to go through these exercises to make sure we are maximizing our resources and being as efficient as we can be. We are stewards of the resources the town gives us. We have to be accountable to the community, particularly in these difficult economic times."

Scarice said he is looking forward to starting in Madison, which he says is a manageable commute from his home on the Wallingford side of Cheshire where he and his family, which includes a second-grader and a kindergarten student, live near his children's grandparents.

Scarice will be officially appointed at a Board of Education meeting Tuesday night at 5 p.m. at A community reception will follow at 5:30 p.m. The public is invited to attend and meet the new superintendent.