

Creating Pathways to Success

An Interview with Jill Gierasch, Superintendent,
Cold Spring Harbor Central School District



EDITORS' NOTE *Jill Gierasch is superintendent of the Cold Spring Harbor Central School District on Long Island, New York. The district has three elementary schools and one high school with more than 1,500 students. She has more than 34 years of teaching and administration experience in education.*



Jill Gierasch

You have led the Cold Spring Harbor Central School District for the past three years. How do you define its mission?

Working together to create the pathways to success for all students has always been our mission. Communication towards this effort has been elevated at all levels to ensure our families are keenly aware of the district's initiatives, curriculum, and our students' accomplishments.

What are your views on the challenges in education today?

There are increasing demands on our teachers and staff stemming from state regulations, administration, and members of the community, all of which can impact morale. While the demands are mostly legitimate, it is challenging to manage it all and stay positive.

The education landscape is ever-changing. We must continue to stay current and innovative to keep our students interested and connected while at the same time preparing them for their future, not ours.

There is also the challenge of time. Students are not only taking classes, but playing athletics, putting on plays and performances, taking Advanced Placement courses, completing advanced research studies, and participating in language, literature, computer science, and many other extracurricular clubs and activities. It puts a lot of pressure, sometimes too much, on students that must be managed to create balance. In partnership with our families, we try and help students to prioritize all of these opportunities which in itself is a good life lesson.

How is Cold Spring Harbor succeeding in meeting these challenges?

The key components for us are communication and transparency. Our schools cannot be a black box. Parents especially need to know what and how their kids are learning, what initiatives the district is embarking on, and our students' very real accomplishments and challenges. Fortunately, our community values education and our interest in not only staying current, but offering enriching and innovative experiences for students, working collaboratively so they succeed. One hundred percent of

our students graduate and almost all go on to post-secondary education, many of them to some of the finest colleges and universities in the United States.

More than 90 percent of our Jr/Sr high school students graduate having taken one Advanced Placement exam, a solid indicator of college readiness. Our Cyber-Hawks robotics team went to the Global FIRST Robotics finals in Texas, having won the Long Island Regional competition. This international competition was viewed by more than 40,000 people.

Our success in science is also seen in our nearby Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, where our students get to interact and learn from scientists all over the world. The lab has shaped contemporary biomedical research and education with programs in cancer, neuroscience, plant biology, and quantitative biology. Barbara McClintock and James Watson, Nobel laureates, pioneered the initial research into DNA at the lab.

Our student athletes across all sports have earned many county, state, and all-state awards. This season, our varsity lacrosse program is particularly outstanding. The boys' lacrosse team has won five state championships in the past 10 years and the girls' team has won two. And while our students perform well on the field, all of our teams earned the honor of scholar-athletic teams by the New York State Athletic organization.

Throughout the year students receive numerous awards for their talents in music, the arts, humanities, math and science, to name a few.

Will you highlight the strength of the elementary schools?

This school year, the U.S. Department of Education has designated the district's Lloyd Harbor Elementary School as a 2022 National Blue Ribbon School. This highly prestigious and coveted recognition was awarded to Lloyd Harbor Elementary School as an Exemplary High-Performing School among New York State's highest performing schools as measured by state assessments or nationally normed tests. Only seven elementary schools in New York State were selected from among more than 3,500.

The district's other grade 2-6 school, West Side Elementary, earned this same distinction back in 2013 and I have no doubt they are on their way to becoming recognized again.

What have been the keys to the district's success?

It is a strong partnership and commitment between the Board of Education, students, teachers,

parents, and the community as a whole. Let me give you some examples:

For parents, we have had literally dozens of parent and community meetings in the past year. Given the concerns by some about what and how our students are learning, we recently created parent curriculum guides so that we can be transparent about the units of study in each course and grade level, K-8. This fall, the high school is rolling out similar guides. These documents have been well received and will continue to strengthen our home-school connection.

New this year, we hosted a Parent University where parents took classes on topics in which they are interested, such as student mental health, the best ways to support their children with homework and social media, navigating the special education program, and our growing research program. This is an informational night for parents and guardians regarding school-related topics for grades K-12 based on parental feedback and teacher and administration input. This year our keynote speaker honed in on the use of drugs, alcohol, and gaming, and their effect on the teen brain.

We also provide a monthly guidance newsletter for parents, *The Guidance Light*, on topics ranging from course selection to Advanced Placement coursework demands, to the college application process and timelines. At all schools, every Friday families receive *The Friday Notes* to stay current on school-wide events along with monthly updates at our Parent-Teacher group meetings. They are also offered opportunities to attend workshops that include math, literacy, digital citizenship and internet safety.

In addition to all our parent and community meetings, I literally answer hundreds of emails from parents on topics ranging from curriculum to building level guidelines, which include attendance, grading and cell phone use. No matter what the topic, the parents care and are deeply involved.

The district has always been focused on the whole child and we have been working on creating a district culture that fosters respect, inclusivity, and embracing differences. As such, we want to make sure students feel a sense of belonging, a strong connection between our faculty and staff, as well as see themselves reflected in our curriculum.

Will you discuss the impact and commitment of the teachers?

When we acknowledge students, we acknowledge teachers. Behind the majority of every student accomplishment is teacher encouragement and support for those achievements. Few



*The Cold Spring Harbor robotics team, the CyberHawks, demonstrates its robot (above);
A tug-of-war by Cold Spring Harbor faculty during the First Annual Sports Night (opposite page)*

realize to what extent teachers work and interact with students beyond the classroom, whether coaching athletics, participating in leadership development clubs, honor societies, debate teams, newspaper publications, community service activities, or producing the numerous theatrical performances.

For instance, newly organized this year was a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math) night for grades K-8, where 800 parents and students showed up to participate in a variety of learning stations on topics including electricity, geometric shapes, robotics, art, and mechanics, to name a few. Our teachers, administrators and high school students facilitated each of the sessions. It is this level of volunteerism and commitment that is essential for events such as this one.

Our teachers also helped institute our First Annual Sports Night. Teachers competed in fun events like tug-of-war, egg toss, relays, and scooter races. We had over 1,200 students and parents attend, and no one would argue that the level of enthusiasm wasn't over the top. Students came out in their school gear and homemade signs screaming in support of their teachers. The event also raised more than \$15,000 for pediatric cancer families following the death of a teacher's son who was recruited by the Philadelphia Phillies at age 20 before succumbing to cancer.

Even at the elementary school level, we have a wide variety of extracurricular activities with our teachers incredibly engaged both inside and outside the classroom, whether it be art clubs, intramural clubs, knitting, ice skating, literature or tech clubs.

To say that our teachers are committed would be an understatement. Whether it includes instruction in the classroom or through cultivating and encouraging student passions, teachers make an incredible impact and deserve to be recognized. We try to do so in a number of ways, highlighting them in our newsletter publications, on our website, via personal notes or just a word of appreciation – and sometimes even a surprise ice cream food truck. Our parent organizations do a great job providing holiday cookie trays, a Cold Spring Harbor tradition, and back-to-school and teacher/staff appreciation breakfasts and luncheons.

Will you highlight some of the experiences that are afforded to the students?

We certainly don't want to lose the main focus on academics. For the Class of 2023 with about 122 graduates, they will be attending 69 different colleges and universities in September. Impressive to note, one third of our high school's graduating class in 2022 took nine or more AP classes during their tenure in CSH.

As mentioned, the opportunities outside the classroom are almost endless. We have 77 athletic teams for 7-12 students. This includes fencing, crew teams, wrestling, swimming and much more. Overall, for our Jr/Sr high school, on average, 75 percent of students participate in at least one sport. We also have more than 50 extracurricular clubs.

Thanks to our arts booster club and parent volunteers, we provide cultural enrichment programs. For instance, one elementary school hosts an Ellis Island reenactment day where students, parents and relatives dress up in costume. The children learn about immigration dating back to the early 1900s through various experiences, similar to many of their ancestors. Guest authors, circus events, storytellers, and more visit our schools on a regular basis to further bring the curriculum to life.

For many years, the junior high school social studies students have visited the Tenement Museum on Manhattan's Lower East Side, former home to nearly 7,000 working-class immigrants in 1863. The field trip is an immersive experience into the lives of immigrants as the students visited the museum and other historical locations, including City Hall, Chinatown, Little Italy, Tweed Courthouse, the Woolworth Building, and the famous Alleva Dairy, America's oldest cheese shop, established in 1892.

Each spring, the foreign language department hosts an International Night where students learn about the heritage of the district's residents and the various countries from which their ancestors came. Shortly after this big night, and thanks to our teachers and staff, our French club ventures off on a three-night, four-day trip to Montreal and Quebec City for an awe-inspiring experience.

How important is it for Cold Spring Harbor Central School District to partner with the community?

We have numerous partnerships in the community including a variety of parent-teacher groups, booster clubs in everything from athletics to the arts, and an Educational Foundation that helps to enhance the curriculum and learning environment. These groups do a tremendous amount of fundraising each year to provide experiences or equipment to students and the district at large. An example of this is the money raised, approximately \$30,000, to send our robotics team to the international robotics competition in Texas. The community and our athletic booster club provided the support for a new state-of-the-art Fitness Center at the high school replacing an old weight room originally located in the basement of our Jr./Sr. high school. The Cold Spring Harbor Educational Foundation contributes generously to all aspects of the curriculum and learning environment. This includes a significant donation to support STEAM Night and outdoor musical instruments for our youngest learners, to name a few.

A significant Bond referendum was approved by the community in 2019 to improve various infrastructure, student safety, and our sports facilities. Speaking of which, the district has very well thought out and implementable safety plans for all our schools that are coordinated with applicable law enforcement agencies.

We also try to maintain strong relationships with the school districts on Long Island. For instance, we had 107 teachers from 36 Long Island school districts attend our first annual Advanced Placement Institute. The overwhelming response and collegiality were worth every penny of time to coordinate and facilitate these sessions.

One interesting change we have made to be more inclusive of the entire student body is that our Homecoming is not just the traditional high school football event, but one involving numerous fall sports. We include our students K-12 and set-up activities for children of all ages. It is a great way to kick off the school year with this level of school spirit.

How do you see the Cold Spring Harbor Central School District of the future?

I believe the importance of parents understanding and being involved in what we are teaching and what their kids are learning will continue to be of major importance.

I want to maintain our high academic standards while providing our students with a variety of opportunities for their personal growth and success, an education that not only creates intellectual excellence but ignites their passions. An education that is academically challenging, psychologically satisfying, and socially fulfilling for students at all levels.

As our board president has said: "If I could sum up Cold Spring Harbor in two words, it would be 'student centered.' The decisions that guide the district from top-down answer the question of how does this benefit our students? Our students are the force behind decisions we make, paths we choose, and choices we make. Our goal is to have every student succeed in the way that is best for them. Success looks different for every child and our goal, as a district, is to help that child reach their target and then look onto new ones." ●