

District Highlights

Newtown Public Schools

Students spend 13 years within Newtown Public Schools, from the first step they take into a Kindergarten classroom to the day they walk off the stage at the end of graduation. All that time they are growing and preparing to become a full member of society. While students may not recognize the goal when they are in Kindergarten, by the time they reach High School it has become obvious that they are well into this journey. By that point, it becomes important that the school district provides plenty of opportunities for students to prepare to successfully transition from school to society, regardless of what path they pursue after graduation.

In this newsletter, we look at some of the different ways we set students up to succeed when they leave Newtown High School. We highlight offerings such as the Capstone program, NHS' BEAT department, and the transitions services available to students with disabilities. We also take a look at the Portrait of a Graduate initiative and take "A Closer Look" at the Coordinator of the NHS College & Career Center.

We hope that you will enjoy the glimpse into the opportunities that students have as they prepare to move into our global community.

Daniel Cruson Jr. and Deborra Zukowski
BoE Communications Subcommittee

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At Our Core

A Vision for Student Success

By Dr. Lorrie Rodrigue

Our district has long embraced the belief that all students can learn well. Captured in our mission statement "to inspire each student to excel in attaining and applying the knowledge, skills and attributes that lead to personal success," our vision has compelled Newtown educators to work toward developing an environment where all students feel included, engaged, challenged and supported. Realizing our vision, however, has remained a complex journey, requiring continuous improvement and self-reflection. How do we ensure all students have equitable access to rigorous content? Is our instruction culturally responsive? How do we promote student agency and investment in learning? Can students demonstrate their understanding in traditional and non-traditional ways? Do we provide appropriate systems of support? As the 2021-22 school year approached, Newtown staff was eager to design a framework that would ensure students had equitable opportunities to utilize digital tools, receive appropriate support, access challenging content through academic pathways, and experience voice and choice in their own learning.

Throughout the period our schools implemented remote and hybrid learning models, the use of digital tools provided a silver lining for educators, allowing students to access critical concepts and skills across

subject areas. Newtown educators adopted new digital tools that would augment classroom instruction in language and math, including IXL, Rosetta Stone, Ed Puzzle, Newsela, and Everyday Speech. With students' access to Chromebooks in all grade levels, a blended learning approach would deepen students' understanding. While direct instruction would never be supplanted, the use of software programs would help students make meaningful connections to the content being taught.

Aside from the use of digital tools, school leaders agreed that a more consistent network of support would be necessary as students returned to in-person learning. Counselors and support personnel were prepared to assess students' emotional needs, and a new teen talk counselor at the middle school was positioned to address the trauma that some students might be dealing with following the pandemic. The addition of a new ELL teacher would offer support for the increased number of English-language learners who often experienced barriers to learning. The creation of a Hope Squad at the high school, a peer to peer suicide prevention program, trained students to identify friends and peers in emotional distress. Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, including Second Step K-8 and Project Empower at the high school, were in place to provide students with strategies to resolve conflicts, deal with adversity, express empathy, and show respect for diversity.

In addition, the development of a new co-teaching model at the middle school was designed to provide immediate support for learners with disabilities in the mainstream classroom by teaming both regular and special education teachers. A Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) through building-level teams would continue to offer a sound process for monitoring and addressing students' learning and emotional concerns. Leaders were also confident that the district's recent inclusion of Educlimber, a new data platform, would enable teachers to review relevant student information and develop targeted intervention plans more effectively.

While a strong support system is one essential component of our vision, school leaders and staff worked collaboratively to create new academic programs that would pique student interests, deepen their engagement in learning, and advance their depth of understanding. Pathways in math, science, language and other unified arts programs will provide students with a foundation for future college and career readiness skills. The adoption of a new Bridges math program K-5 will foster students' problem solving and critical thinking skills. At the middle school, two unified arts courses in kitchen science and Project Adventure were included as unique pathways to build students' exposure to culinary arts, nutritional science, collaboration, team building and leadership. The expansion of world language into 6th grade should prove equally important, encouraging students to learn about and empathize with peoples of other cultures, including their customs and traditions.

Our vision recognized that success in school also relies heavily on the investments students make in their own learning. Teachers across the district have encouraged authentic demonstrations and presentations, including formative assessments of learning through small group work, reader's/writer's workshops, labs, and hands-on activities. Further, more formalized venues for students to share their depth of knowledge and understanding have been established through the high school's Senior Capstone Project, where students have the chance to research and develop a presentation on a topic or concept of their choice as a final assessment of their educational journey.

Allowing for student choice and voice will remain a priority as we revise curriculum and plan for innovative instruction to inspire our learners. Any teacher or leader would likely agree that student success relies on the connections students make with the content and daily instruction. Staff and leaders have worked hard to create a reliable framework that aligns rigorous content standards with concept-based instruction, and provides authentic assessment opportunities for students to demonstrate their

understanding and skills as learners. Through the Assistant Superintendent's office, a student advisory council will work alongside educators in providing input on curricular and instructional decisions so it reflects relevant and culturally-responsive perspectives.

Newtown's vision for the success of all students is a journey worth taking. It is not a box to be checked, but an aspiration to ensure equitable learning opportunities exist for all students. Through the inclusion of quality instructional practices, digital resources, new innovative programming and student support systems - the vision can be realized. It requires the dedication of staff, the oversight of leaders, the input from our learners, and the partnership of families. Only then can we make certain our district is a respectful, inclusive, inspirational, and supportive place where all students can learn, grow, and achieve.

Capstone

By Deborra Zukowski

In 2017, the Connecticut General Assembly amended a law specifying public school graduation requirements. The amended law includes a one-credit mastery-based assessment. According to the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, the assessment may take many forms including being embedded in a required course, student self-study project, or Capstone Project. Regardless of method, it must be capable of demonstrating that students have achieved mastery of one or more cross-curricular skills. (Effective communication, problem solving, and critical thinking are some examples of such skills.) Initially Dr. Rodrigue, then principal of Newtown High School, decided to use Capstone Projects based, in part, on hearing extremely positive reviews from teachers with Capstone experience in other districts. When Dr. Kim Longobucco became principal of the high school, she enthusiastically supported continuing with the effort because, as she says, "The beauty of the Capstone is that it is personalized, and every student can be successful through this process."

So what is a Capstone Project? As provided by the Newtown High School curriculum, a Capstone Project is a personalized, in-depth study composed of three stages. In the first stage, students identify a topic of interest, create a list of resources, and develop a proposal for the work. In the second, they create something that demonstrates mastery in the selected topic. In the final stage, they prepare and deliver a talk that highlights both the work and their experience. The three stages are more succinctly captured in the high school's slogan for the program: "Process, Product, Presentation."

The administration and staff at the high school have spent the last several years honing student supports and delivery of instruction for the program. First, a group of 20 students participated in a pilot during the 2019-20 school year. For the 2020-21 school year, the program was opened up to all students. That year, students voiced concerns about the addition of a new assignment during a time when COVID-19 was disrupting schedules and even the ability to attend school. However, the addition came with unforeseen benefits. According to Dr. Longobucco, the program "allowed students to do something they really cared about" during a time when passion for education was dissipating. Students also provided feedback more specific to the structure of the program, including that too many resources were being required and that the product development phase was starting too late into the process. This feedback helped refine the structure for the 2021-22 school year. Now, the overall effort is split across three years. Sophomore and junior years are used to identify and plan the scope of the overall project. Senior year is for making it happen.

During the sophomore year, counselors run workshops to engage students in an "interest inventory." The intent is to help the students focus on their passions and which of those passions they would look forward to investigating more deeply. During the junior year, students participate in 40-minute advisory lessons

twice a month to further review, possibly modify, and then select and refine the passion and related activity that will frame their Capstone Project. They then find appropriate resources and draft a proposal. By the end of their junior year, the students should have a final version of the proposal, including their target work product. In senior year, every student is placed into a one-semester Capstone Project class based solely on time schedules, i.e., the classes include students of mixed abilities and interests. The students for a given period are further divided into three groups, each assigned two days of class within the 8-day rotation. (On the remaining days, students may have science labs, counselor workshops, or study/free time.) So, while there are roughly 28 students assigned to a “class,” at most 10 students meet at a time with the teacher, ensuring that they get more support from both the teacher and their fellow classmates. Students continue developing their resources, and begin creating their product. By the end of senior year, students should have a well-researched and detailed product along with an engaging class presentation.

While the process and the overall work sound ambitious, especially since every student is expected to participate in a Capstone Project, current experience is that the program has been very successful. A special education student loved dinosaurs and was interested in their names, when they lived, and what they ate. For his product, he created biographies of ten dinosaurs. His enthusiasm was clearly present in his presentation, making it even more enjoyable for the class to watch. A fine arts student composed an original song, complete with lyrics and guitar accompaniment. She then created a “fabulous video” (so called by Dr. Longobucco), with the help of family and friends that brought the song to life. She showed a side of her native talent that was beyond what could be demonstrated in a traditional classroom setting. This experience further strengthened her commitment to continue with her studies in the Fine Arts. Another student wanted to give back to the community. She wrote an entire preschool dance curriculum and gave it to her dance studio. And, yet another decided to embark on a more formal research project. She had torn a ligament in her knee and because of that experience was interested in the recovery process and best practices for those with similar injuries. She worked closely with a local physical therapist during one of his patient’s eight-week recovery process. The experience reinforced her interest in physical therapy.

As shown above, skills and abilities come alive when students have an opportunity to focus on their passions. “This is exactly why we chose Capstones,” Dr. Longobucco added. In addition, the projects give students the opportunity to support one another, work with local businesses, and give back to a community they hold dear.

Each year, students will embark on a project that they get to choose based on their own passions and goals. Each year, their classmates will cheer them on during the end of semester presentations. Each year, their teachers will ask for feedback and the program will be refined. And most importantly, Newtown Public School students will graduate with skills that will help them be successful in their future years.

This article reflects the energy and passion, along with the knowledge and experience of Dr. Longobucco. She is an avid champion of creative and engaging programs that can reach and enrich every Newtown High School student.

Business, Entrepreneurship and Applied Technology Department

By Dan Cruson Jr

Newtown High School's Business, Entrepreneurship and Applied Technology Department, also known as BEAT, is the home to many of the school's elective courses in Business, Technology, and Family & Consumer Sciences. It also hosts the school's student enterprises such as the Snack Shack, NHS Auto, Greenery, NHS Graphics and Yearbook. The BEAT department is more than just students pursuing hobbies or finding a class that is "easy" compared to rigorous academics. Each class in the department offers multiple ways in which it helps prepare students for whatever they choose to do after high school, be it heading off to a 2- or 4-year college, pursuing a trade, or even going straight into the workforce. In addition, each is scheduled as a semester long class so that students can pursue their interests more easily within their sometimes-tight academic schedules.

At its highest level, each course within the BEAT department teaches a similar set of important life skills; each of the courses teach students skills in time management and meeting deadlines through their various assignments and projects. All courses also teach general technological skills that students need to live in today's technology-oriented world, using different software and hardware to complete the assignments for the courses. These basic skills are ones that students will need when they leave Newtown High School, regardless of whether they find themselves moving forward in the field that the classes were in or going in some other direction.

If a student decides to pursue further education in a field that BEAT has a course for, there are further benefits to them. Each course is taught using industry standard equipment and practices. This gives students a chance to gain true experience in the field that they are working in and gives them a leg up. For instance, in Business Accounting students are taught to use software such as QuickBooks (among others) which is used in businesses throughout the world. This course is also unique in that the department has made an agreement with the University of Bridgeport where students who achieve an 80 or higher in the course can convert it into 3 college credits. In Computer-Aided Design (CAD), they get a chance to work with not only industry standard software, but also a Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machine for translating their designs into real life products. A CNC machine will take a computer created design and carve or engrave it within a variety of materials. These machines are used by a wide range of industries to create parts and products for various uses.

After students have had a chance to experience certain interests in a classroom setting, the Enterprise portion of the BEAT department is the next step for some. The Enterprises are businesses run by the students, giving them real world experience in the field that they are interested in. The greenhouse is run and managed by the Greenery students, NHS Auto is run by the auto shop students, the Snack Shack is run by the culinary students and the Yearbook is run by yearbook students (either in the class or the after-school club). Each enterprise allows them to take the skills and lessons they have learned in their respective classes and gives them real-world experience.

I spent an hour and a half at Newtown High School touring the different BEAT classes with Erik Holst-Grubbe. During my time, in addition to the classes listed above I saw the Culinary, Video Production, Graphic Arts and the recently added Robotics courses. In each I saw students working on a variety of projects and learning many of the skills I mentioned above. In some cases, they were working on individual projects, in some they were working collaboratively (such as building robots to complete different challenges in the Robotics class). I also saw instances of students teaching other students, such as in the auto shop where one student who was an expert in the tire machine was teaching two others how

to work it.

The BEAT department has a lot to offer students on their way through Newtown High School that can benefit them after they graduate. It provides practical skills that can apply generally to any field, specifically to a variety of industry-specific skills, and even (in one case) to college credits. But an added benefit to students is that it gives them a chance to experience a variety of different fields that they might be interested in before they begin their next educational experience. This can be valuable to help them find what they might like to focus on in whatever path they take after Newtown High School, instead of discovering after a year or two that what they had decided to pursue wasn't really what they wanted after all. So there are many ways in which the BEAT department helps set individual students up to succeed.

I would like to thank Erik Holst-Grubbe for taking the time to show me around the courses that make up the BEAT Department, and all of the course teachers who welcomed me into their classrooms while they were teaching.

Newtown Community Partnerships

By Daniel Cruson Jr.

“Transitioning into the world of work can be scary, but it is necessary and everyone can do it.” If the Newtown Community Partnerships (NCP) had a motto, this quote from Noel Loveland would be appropriate. The goal of the transitions services that NCP offers is to foster independence in students with disabilities by appropriately reducing support, learning to advocate for themselves, learning the value of hard work and earning their own paycheck.

NCP is a program designed for students in the special education program at Newtown High School and surrounding districts. The services it provides range from helping students identify interests and abilities to helping them find paying jobs. These services commonly start at the age of 18 for students that have a disability, have completed their academics and receive services under an IEP.

Within NCP there are a few different programs, because students have varying levels of needs and abilities. Some programs provide career exploration, teach interviewing techniques, and acquiring work skills. Others provide lessons on daily independent living activities such as cooking and cleaning, social media and personal relationships. There are also programs on community inclusion, where the students can learn how to access public transportation, medical care, banking and appropriate adult agencies that can help them as they become more independent. The wide range of offerings is important in order to create a learning environment that is respectful and safe, as well as challenging and even competitive.

One of the main opportunities available is the Better Day Café in the Newtown Community Center, which is open to the public Monday from 8:45 AM to 12:15 PM and Tuesday – Thursday from 8:45 AM to 12:45 PM. This opportunity was created through an alliance between the Newtown Board of Education and Community Center. This café has had students in the transitions services involved since its inception, beginning with them choosing the name, logo and mission statement prior to opening. They are always fine tuning recipes and, with support from the NCP Staff, students are responsible for all the daily operations of the Café, from cooking and cleaning to customer service and sales. Some students even prepare the deposit for the bank. This has created a wonderful place for them to get real experiences in a safe and inclusive environment.



NCP is an important extension of the offerings of the Newtown Public Schools to the segment of our students that need a bit more support beyond the traditional end of High School. As the opening quote highlights, NCP helps these students make the necessary transition from being a student to a full member of our community. NCP is always looking for potential work sites and learning opportunities for their students. If you wish to help with the program, you should contact Noel Loveland (lovelandn@newtown.k12.ct.us) or Jennifer Radachowsky (radachowskyj@newtown.k12.ct.us) to discuss further.

Thank you to Noel Loveland for taking the time to discuss NCP's offerings with me.

Portrait of a Graduate

By Deborra Zukowski

When you graduated high school, what was the world like? What paths did you have in front of you to build a life, a community, a family? How did you communicate and continue to learn? When our youngest students step into their kindergarten classrooms next fall, they begin the first of thirteen years of their educational journey. In June, 2035, they will walk across that wonderful stage to receive their high school diplomas. Into what world will they graduate? And, how can we ensure that they are fully equipped to build their futures?

Our world has changed dramatically these past few decades, driven in part by the relatively recent infusion of technology throughout all aspects of our lives. Technology connects people from one end of the globe to another while simultaneously isolating some from their immediate environs. It informs and misinforms. It is now so integrated in our lives and businesses that long-held social and professional practices have changed. The 3 R's of education, while still important, are no longer sufficient.

“Portrait of a Graduate,” also known as “Vision (or Profile) of a Graduate,” is a K-12 initiative whereby district leaders and members of the community work together to create a vision statement for their district that, when implemented, assures that students graduate with the skills and characteristics needed to help them more easily adapt to the ever-changing world they will enter after their public school education. The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) has endorsed the program and included it as part of its newly restructured accreditation process.

In 2017 Dr. Kim Longobucco, the principal of Newtown High School, attended a NEASC training session to prepare for the next NEASC visit. While there, she learned about the added requirement for a community vision statement conforming to the “Portrait of a Graduate” initiative. Assistant Superintendent Anne Uberti independently learned about the statement and initiative at a national curriculum leadership conference during the 2018-19 school year. Both administrators were impressed with what they heard and looked forward to facilitating the work needed to create vision statement that articulates a portrait for Newtown students. At this point, the district is still in the planning phase, though some elements of the effort have been identified.

To begin, the district needs to define a core set of skills and/or characteristics that the Newtown community embraces. The choice of skills and characteristics should be broad-based, for example some could be cross-curricular skills like communication and critical thinking or techno-social skills like digital literacy, while others could be personal characteristics like resiliency or perseverance. (The examples listed are provided for illustrative purposes only.) This year, the goal is to begin to define the core set of skills and characteristics Newtown graduates should possess prior to graduation. Initially, this

work will be centered at the high school and will include the district’s administrative team and high-school leadership. Once the groundwork for the vision is laid, district leaders plan to reach out to high school teachers and other staff to craft an initial version of a reasonable, effective, and implementable vision. They then hope to refine and/or enhance the vision using focus groups and surveys to reach out to students, alums, and parents along with local businesses and professionals, with the effort eventually culminating in a finished K-12 portrait for a Newtown Public School graduate.

Once the district and community agree, the vision statement for Newtown’s “Portrait of a Graduate” will be completed, though it will take additional time to implement. Newtown will draw from its extensive social and emotional learning curriculum to help inform and guide the development of a cohesive educational framework capable of implementing the vision statement. During the 2022-23 school year, the district will begin to evaluate the relevant existing curricula and then define and assemble a suite of courses, teaching practices, and services that together fulfill the vision statement. Some of the challenges to be addressed are ensuring that 1) every student is able to learn about and embody the characteristics and skills included in the vision, 2) learning begins when students first enter the public schools, and continuously builds in an age-appropriate manner throughout their K-12 education, and 3) school-based benchmarks can be identified, monitored, and achieved by students prior to transitioning to the next school level. Defining the educational framework and assembling the suite of courses, practices, and services will be a multi-year effort, and is expected to be developed and fully implemented by the next NEASC visit in 2027.

As described above, creating and implementing a community vision statement conforming to the “Portrait of a Graduate” initiative has just begun; the overall effort will take several years. As the work unfolds, more information will be provided to parents and families by the district’s administrative team. In addition, the Newtown Public Schools Strategic Plan will be revisited so that it reflects both the vision and the educational framework. This final effort will provide another opportunity for the district and community to work together in a way that further ensures the success of the initiative, and Newtown graduates will begin their futures having the skills and characteristics needed to build their lives, their families, and their communities.

Many thanks to Assistant Superintendent Anne Uberti and High School Principal Dr. Kim Longobucco. Their enthusiastic discussions (and multiple reviews of the text) helped lay a more solid foundation for this rather nebulous, though very important and forward-looking, initiative.

DID YOU KNOW?

There are a large number of scholarships available for students in Newtown. They are available through a number of sources, including the Newtown Scholarship Association. Noreen Morgenstern in the Newtown High School College & Career Center can help students navigate the choices and application process.

A Closer Look

with Noreen Morgenstern, Newtown High School (NHS) College & Career Center Coordinator

By Deborra Zukowski

How long have you been with Newtown Public Schools?

I have been with Newtown Public Schools for 4 years having started at Middle Gate Elementary as a special education paraeducator.



Please share a brief description of what you do at the career center office.

My primary responsibilities in the NHS College and Career Center, listed in order of what I do from the start of the school year until the end, include:

- setting up and managing college representative visits,
- communicating college rep visits with students and staff,
- developing and managing the NHS College Fair held in the Spring,
- developing and sharing the NHS Monthly Newsletter,
- managing the scholarship program,
- overseeing the NHS Awards Night which is held at the end of the school year.

How and when does the center support students interested in pursuing college degrees?

The Newtown High School Counseling office team begins in freshman year helping students to identify their strengths and interests. This continues into sophomore year. Junior year students start to create lists of schools of possible interest based on all they learned about themselves so that by senior year they have an idea of where they may want to apply. I work alongside the counseling team to provide students and families with information about the college search - websites to use to support their search, information about financial aid news and links to information to educate students and parents on the cost, and resources about scholarship sites to research early on. I developed a virtual bulletin board - The College and Career Planning Resource Padlet - in which I share links to a variety of resources for students and parents as they navigate this process. The link is available on the NHS College and Career Center website and is updated as needed.

What services are provided for students who prefer to begin building their careers directly after graduation?

I help provide resources and information about available programs for the trades, so that students have the option to pursue that career path through job training or specific college programs or trade schools. I also post and share any news or information about available training programs for students looking to move directly into the career path. Ana Mendes, a counselor and new member of the College and Career Center, helps oversee the military path connections for students, as well, and I share and communicate any news about this path when appropriate.

What support do you provide to help students learn about and access financial assistance?

The local, state, and regional scholarship programs that Newtown High School students are offered are tremendous. I provide information to students and parents about resources for scholarships starting in the Fall and also run a scholarship workshop for students in January teaching them all about the scholarship program, how to apply, eligibility, deadlines, and any and all information to help them take advantage of these incredibly generous opportunities. The Weller Foundation offers \$15,000 every year to students for

which they create, develop, and share a self-directed project for a chance to earn this award. The Weller Foundation also offers a variety of scholarships for \$6,000 for the fields of education, engineering, and more. I share those scholarship opportunities with our seniors. The Newtown Scholarship Association runs an incredible scholarship program each year, and I help inform students of what is available and when to apply. Our Newtown PTAs offer scholarships to students having attended those schools, and it is exciting to see students who receive these go back to the schools, particularly at the elementary level, and talk with the current students and tell them about all they have done thanks to their incredible Newtown Schools' education.

I provide resources for the above scholarships and others to students and families to research scholarships along with websites about financial planning and prep specific to college planning. This year I was able to help take part in and help run the NHS Financial Aid Night for parents during which time they learned about how to plan and pay for college. I am always available to support students in whatever way I can to answer financial assistance questions. I also share information to families about free college courses and scholarship programs that our local community colleges offer.

What services are available to connect students with members of the broader Newtown community?

The Newtown High School Community Newsletter is my primary connection to the community. This, similar to the College and Career Planning Padlet, is a virtual bulletin board that I share with students and families at the beginning of each month, or update during the month as needed. I let students know about school events, volunteer opportunities, job opportunities, internship opportunities, college planning information, college athletic recruiting information, and other happenings in the community in which they can get involved. As I connect with more members of the business and nonprofit community, I am able to share a richer variety of volunteer and job opportunities with students.

As a new coordinator, what are your thoughts about how to further improve services to help Newtown students succeed?

I am looking forward to helping grow career pathways for students alongside Ana Mendes, the counselor I mentioned previously, who is overseeing the program. We are looking to further grow already established contact lists of members of our community, as well as create new contacts, to be able to offer more career shadowing opportunities, more internships programs, and to have guest speakers come in to speak with students about their careers and possible pathways to those careers. I am really excited to find ways for our students to learn more about themselves through this program and help them discover what they do and don't like to do in an effort to help them find their own pathways heading into college or career when they leave us.

What advice do you have for Newtown High School students and their families?

Enjoy your time here at Newtown High School. It seems like there is so much to know and do, and the four years can fly by. They do! Get involved in the high school community in ways that interest you. Get to know your teachers and the staff. They are here to support and guide you every day. Go to sporting events, try a new club, create a new club, go to a show, and enjoy being a part of what the Newtown High School Community offers. We are happy you are here and are here for you!

Is there anything else that you feel should be included in this conversation?

I truly enjoy supporting these students every day in whatever way I can! Have a great school year everyone!



NEXT ISSUE

In our next issue we will be talking about curriculum & classroom instruction in Newtown Public Schools. We will take a look at the Curriculum Development Process, testing, professional development and more!