

Week 2: Historical Background and Current State of Education

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## **Introduction**

Sayles School, which is the only school for Sprague School District, is a pre-K through 8 public school located in rural southeastern Connecticut. First established as a public school in 1957 the building itself has undergone many changes, including multiple additions to the original building. Sprague School District, located in Baltic, also serves the villages of Hanover and Versailles. With 302 students currently enrolled the school serves students from the ages of three to fourteen, providing many different high school options. The Town of Sprague is home to 2,952 residents as of 2016, 2,553 White alone, 48 Black alone, 25 Native American, 97 Hispanic/Latino, and 276 Other/Multi-Race. The median household income for this town is \$65,861 with a poverty rate of 8.2% and an unemployment rate of 5.7% in 2016. Median house price is \$227,700 with a median rent of \$1,113. Educational attainment for the town is as follows: High School Graduate-41%, Associates Degree-10%, and Bachelors or Higher-21% (Connecticut Economic Resource Center, 2018).

## **History: Past and Present**

Sayles School was named after Frederick Sayles, a businessman who tried to revitalize a local textile property. The mill's operations ultimately came to a halt in the latter part of the 1960s. Another big business to the area was formed in 2005, Fusion Paperboard. "In December of 2014 Fusion Paperboard's website says it is winding down operations in Versailles because the 'operation can longer be sustained'" (Witkowsky, 2014, pars.3). This was a devastating blow to the area and to Sayles School. There are no other big businesses in the Town of Sprague to bring much- needed revenue and taxes for the school.

Sayles School principal Jean Weirzbinski retired in June 2016 leading the Sprague Board of Education on a search to replace her. Also, in June 2016 parents began to petition the Board of Education, calling for the removal of the superintendent. Parents stated they were no longer confident in the superintendent's skills to run the school effectively and by December of 2016, the superintendent had officially resigned. With a new principal and now an interim superintendent, staff and students continued as usual. In the spring of 2018, it had come to the new superintendent's attention that the school had a budget deficit of \$800,000 (Sprague Board of Education Minutes, June, 2018).

Along with debt concerns the school was again in search of a new principal for the 2018-2019 school year. This school year started rough; a new principal and a budget deficit still to be addressed. Changes have been made this year; cutting two teacher positions, paraprofessional staff, library, technology, and contracted services for students. The school is in a struggle with teachers adjusting to lack of resources and supports for students, lack of classroom supplies/materials, and little to no valuable professional development. It was stated at the most recent Board of Education meeting that even with the cuts made and teachers taking two furlough days that there will still be a budget deficit of approximately \$200,000 this year.

The Sayles School mission statement reads: "The mission of the Sprague Public School Community is to provide a center of learning which encourages participation in challenging learning activities by providing a safe environment, relevant curriculum, cultural literacy, diverse opportunities, guidance for the future and family engagement" (Sayles School Parent Student Handbook, 2018, p. 7). With the current budget situation, it is difficult for one to see the mission statement addressed. Students are not receiving services unless they have an IEP or 504. There is a population of students who need para support, counseling, or other resources who are not

currently receiving them. Teachers are struggling to implement new programs with little or no training, teach technology skills while sharing technology equipment school-wide, and working with challenging behaviors in class with no support.

### **Technology**

Creating a makerspace in Sayles School would be beneficial in many ways. “A great educational makerspace is within the reach of any educator possessing a powerful vision and a willingness to try new things” (Kurti, Kurti, & Fleming, 2014, p.24). A makerspace does not necessarily need to include a lot of technology; students could begin with everyday materials. Sayles School does not have the means to create a technological makerspace, but the students would benefit from a space in which they work collaboratively on a challenge. Horizon Reports states, “The rise of makerspace in education can be understood by examining the valuable skills cultivated during hands-on activities, including problem-solving, critical thinking, patience, and resilience” (Adams Becker, Freeman, Giesinger Hall, Cummins, & Yuhnke, 2016, p.36). The students at Sayles School would greatly benefit from a makerspace that resulted in them using and understanding how the strategies in a makerspace can help them elsewhere.

The students at Sayles School are not always fortunate enough to attend field trips or have educational assemblies. If they had the means to purchase VR headsets and other technology the students would not be at such an educational disadvantage. “VR supports opportunities to provide differentiated learning experiences, and of course, learners love traveling and experiencing the world beyond the school walls with virtual reality” (Johnson, 2019, p.25). Students could use this technology to deepen their understanding of historical events and scientific content. Horizon Reports states, “In the K-12 sector, VR is well-positioned as an educational tool, generating immersive environments for field trips, with simulation and

research activities serving as a prime enabler of student centered, experimental, and collaborative learning” (Adams Becker, Freeman, Giesinger Hall, & Yuhnke, 2016, p.42). The use of these technologies will not only benefit the students at Sayles School academically but socially as well.

## References

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