

## **10 minutes with Ballston Spa Central School's chief Joe Dragone**



Donna Abbott Vlahos | Albany Business Review

Joe Dragone has led the effort to bring students from the region's high schools to study technology at the Tec-Smart campus in Malta, New York.

*[Joe Dragone](#) played saxophone as a young college graduate. As the superintendent of Ballston Spa Central School District and leader of the Clean Technologies Early College High School, he's setting the tone for education partnerships between schools and businesses to prepare high school students for smooth transitions into college or the workforce. We sat down with him recently to find out how he went from playing music to educating children, and how he sees schools playing a part in economic development.*

### **Did you grow up in New York?**

Western New York. I came out here in 1986 to go to The [College of Saint Rose](#).

### **You studied music education. Had you always known you wanted to be in education?**

It was really about my passion for music and how can you share that and share my strength. It was really through teaching where you can do that.

### **After you graduated, you spent three years playing saxophone professionally before teaching. What was that like?**

The last project I was involved with full-time was The Burners UK, an incredibly popular band. I was one of the original members. We were a corporate party band, per se. We played a ton of the local clubs as well. It was pop and rock 'n' roll. Music provided me with a ton of opportunities.

### **Did you ever think about leaving the region?**

No. I never really went back to Western New York after I came out here for undergrad. It's an interesting path, but it worked out for me. When I go to [Saratoga Performing Arts Center](#) for graduation, I think, in 1997, I was here as a musician. Now, I'm doing commencement addresses and talking about what opportunities lie ahead for kids and how your path is never predetermined.

### **Your tenure as superintendent of Ballston Spa Central School District is noteworthy because of the early college high school you created with business and higher education partners. What was the first partnership you formed with somebody outside of the school?**

When I was at Albany [as an assistant superintendent], we had the opportunity to do some innovation development with [IBM](#). Talking about the innovation process was an important moment for me to understand how to apply that lens to the work we do in the public sector, especially in K-12 education.

**In addition to business partnerships, the district has also partnered with community organizations.**

The reality is, some of the only meals our kids get they get here. Some of the only chances they have to be in an supportive environment are here. We work very hard on partnerships with family and community, helping students become not only academically successful, but also well-rounded. This year, we launched a partnership with Parsons Child and Family Center. We have a full mental health and behavioral health clinic in our elementary schools and we're expanding it next year.

**How do you decide what partnerships to pursue? What is your vision for harnessing these outside resources?**

The biggest piece of the puzzle is economic development. How do we position ourselves to be where the resources are? What are the strategies around creating resources? I think it's around collaboration and it's around understanding sectors, understanding economic development, understanding regional assets and positioning yourself in that market, which I think we have so far been fortunate to leverage. We work very hard on it every day.

**You helped launch the Clean Technologies Early College High School and were awarded a state grant to expand the program. What does the future hold?**

We had about 23 students in our first group and the students were from Ballston Spa and Saratoga Springs. Now, we have 20 school districts and 110 kids across seven counties. Next year, it's growing even more. We're bringing in 60-plus freshmen on top of our juniors and seniors.

It's incredibly exciting because it's work that maximizes the kids' opportunities. We couldn't do it without our partners, and they understand we're using that lens to drive our workforce pipeline. Everybody talks about how the need for trained, skilled workforces in these industries only continue to grow.

### **Joe Dragone**

**Age:** 45

**Title:** Superintendent of Ballston Spa Central School District

**Grew up:** North Tonawanda, about 15 miles outside Buffalo

**Family:** He and his wife, [Janet Dragone](#), have a 2-year-old daughter, [Gianna](#)

**On the resume:** Dragone previously worked as an assistant superintendent at Albany City School District. Prior to that, he was a principal, associate principal and teacher at various local school districts. Dragone is also on the board of trustees at The College Board, miSci and the Saratoga Economic Development Corp.

**Education:** Undergraduate and graduate degrees from The College of Saint Rose; certificate of advanced study and Ph.D. from the University at Albany

Megan reports breaking news and covers education.

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