

Middle School Program Review

School Board Instructional Report

February 15, 2005

Executive Summary

The School Board and Superintendent have targeted the improvement of middle school programs through a Priority directing that staff review curricula, particularly exploratory and world languages programming, and make recommendations for changes that will increase instructional rigor.

Operating from a set of shared assumptions regarding best practices in maximizing academic learning time and raising achievement levels for all students, middle school principals recommend the following actions for 2005-2006:

- Expand academic learning time for students enrolled in standard or practical level language arts or mathematics to a minimum of 90 minutes of high-quality instruction daily in those classes;
- Collapse exploratories at the middle school level into 3 strands: World Languages, Career and Technical Education, and Visual and Performing Arts;
- Require students to participate in at least one exploratory in each strand by the time they complete middle school, beginning with the 6th grade class in 2005-2006.
- Strengthen the World Languages program by offering Spanish and French to students in standard and advanced/honors-level language arts beginning with semester offerings of Spanish and French in grade 7 to be followed by 2 semesters of Spanish or French in grade 8 beginning in 2005-2006;
- Develop a 6th grade conversational Spanish curriculum to be implemented in 2006-2007;
- Require all students in grades 6, 7, and 8 to participate in language arts, math, science, social studies, and health and physical education; and,
- Incorporate the study of Latin roots and Greek combining forms into middle school language arts.

These recommended actions represent only the first phase of the middle schools' continued focus on all students entering high school with the prerequisite skills and knowledge necessary for successful mastery of the high school curriculum. Areas for additional work are included at the end of the report.

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Background

The School Board and Superintendent have targeted the improvement of middle school programs through a Priority directing that staff review curricula, particularly exploratory and world languages programming, and make recommendations for changes that will increase instructional rigor. This priority results from ongoing analysis of trends in local, state, and national middle school achievement data indicating that middle school students do not gain academic ground at the same rate as students in elementary and high school. In addition, the Board and Superintendent have acknowledged that exploratory and world languages program offerings need to reflect future career pathways reflective of ongoing technological innovation and globalization of the economy. Finally, the Board and Superintendent have stated the importance of all students continuing to enter high school with the prerequisite skills and knowledge necessary for successful mastery of the high school curriculum.

Maximizing Learning Time

The assignment of time, space, and personnel in Albemarle County reflects a commitment to success for all students. Master schedules align these elements in order to maximize student achievement. Class length and use of best practice instruction affects the depth of student understanding attained. The organization of our schools contributes to our capability to offer students the optimal degree of challenge while providing support for those who need additional time and instructional strategies to meet achievement targets.

Operating from a set of shared assumptions regarding best practices in maximizing academic learning time and recognition that literacy and numeracy knowledge, skills, and understanding positively impact student achievement in all content areas, middle school principals recommend that students enrolled in standard or practical level language arts or mathematics receive a minimum of 90 minutes of high-quality instruction daily in those classes. As such, all middle schools will implement 90 minute block classes in these areas for 2005-2006, maximizing academic instructional time and flexibility in meeting student needs. The expanded time will allow for additional academic support during the regular school day, provide a structure that allows more opportunities to vary instruction in response to learner differences, engage students in investigation, and raise levels of student achievement.

One of the most critical factors in ensuring the academic success of all students is to provide adequate time for high quality curriculum to be taught and mastered (Marzano, Robert J. What works in schools: translating research into action. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2003). Research suggests that the secondary schools that make the greatest gains in student achievement provide more time for language arts and mathematics instruction for students at-risk (Reeves, Douglas B. Accountability in action, 2nd. ed. : a blueprint for learning organizations, Englewood, CO: Advanced Learning Press, 2004).

Students who meet some or all of the following criteria will receive a minimum of 90 minutes in practical or standard level language arts/math instruction daily beginning in 2005 - 2006:

- Failure of most recent grade SOL (in math, reading, or writing)
- Recommendation from previous year's teachers using achievement evidence
- Performance on formative assessment
- Performance in course as indicated by teacher reports and report cards

Additionally, teachers will focus on best practices and application of high yield strategies as follows:

- Collaboration between classroom teachers, literacy specialist, special education staff, and content coordinators for planning and instruction
- Roles and responsibilities for student learning clearly defined
- Development of an instructional plan for each student based on pre-assessment and ongoing reassessment
- Use of multiple assessments and targeted instruction based on that information
- Grouping and regrouping to ensure that instructional levels are closely matched to student readiness
- Engagement in authentic tasks vs. skill and drill
- Achievement measured using a balanced assessment model including application and contextual problems, open and/or guided response, and short answer
- Use of systematic monitoring processes to ensure that students are working at the appropriate instructional level
- High expectation for success in the curriculum
- Student inclusion in goal-setting and monitoring
- Assignment of master teachers to students at risk
- Involvement of community structures/supports such as after school programming, summer programming, mentoring
- Belief that the responsibility of success rests with the primary instructor
- Use of re-teaching, reinforcing, and pre-teaching
- Focus on time on task
- Appropriate use of data to identify students

Implications

- Students in standard and practical level language arts and mathematics will benefit from additional high-quality instruction and targeted focus on core academics.
- Teachers working in 90 minute blocks of instruction will require professional development support in the identification and implementation of best instructional practices and high-yield strategies.
- Use of block scheduling provides additional opportunities for teachers to collaborate during the regular school day.
- Additional sections of practical and standard level languages and mathematics will be required. Teachers holding middle school endorsements may be required to teach sections of language arts or mathematics. While middle school certification allows teachers to teach in these areas, teachers may not have practical experience in these content areas.

- Students in standard or practical level language arts or mathematics will not be able to participate in as many exploratory offerings as a result of additional instructional time in language arts and mathematics.
- Staffing for exploratory offerings will be reduced as a result of additional time for students in language arts and mathematics. Reduction in art and/or music staffing, as well as career and technical education, will have a ripple effect across the Division.
- The ability for students to cross grade levels will be reduced (e.g. 7th grade students participating in 8th grade band).
- Students in practical or standard level language arts and/or mathematics will spend a significant portion of the day with this peer group. As a result, students in advanced/honors level classes will also spend a significant portion of the day together. It is important to note that leveled-classes, whether taught in extended or traditional time blocks, produce a similar effect.
- Staffing to support double-block scheduling at middle schools should be considered, particularly as schools transition from single- to double-block practical and standard level classes.
- Uncertainty in redistricting makes it difficult to develop master schedules.

Exploratories

Middle school exploratories should be designed to reveal opportunities for contributing to a global society, to provide students opportunities to develop self-knowledge, and acquainting students with cultural and leisure-time pursuits (National Middle School Association. This we believe: developmentally responsive middle level schools. Columbus, OH: Author, 1995).

Exploratories at the middle school level will be collapsed into 3 strands aligned with the aforementioned National Middle School Association report: World Languages, Career and Technical Education, and Visual and Performing Arts beginning with the 6th grade in 2005-2006. Beginning in 2005-2006, 6th grade students will be required to participate in at least one exploratory in each strand by the time they complete middle school. Curricula revision and alignment in support of this change will occur during the 2005-2006 school. A common core of exploratories will be identified and offered at all middle schools in the county in 2006-2007. Career and Technical Education exploratory curricula will be revised and aligned with Career Pathways during the 2005-2006 school year.

Implications

- As a result of additional time in core academics, the number of exploratories available to some students will be reduced in two middle schools.
- Student interest will determine exploratory offerings beyond the common required core.

World Languages

French I and Spanish I will be offered as three semester courses to students in standard and advanced/honors-level language arts beginning with semester offerings of Spanish and French in grade 7 to be followed by 2 semesters of Spanish or French in grade 8 beginning in 2005-2006. A 6th grade conversational Spanish curriculum will be developed to be implemented in 2006-2007, replacing World Cultures.

Implications

- Study of Spanish and French will help students develop vocabulary, as these languages have had a significant influence on the English language.
- It may be difficult to staff the additional sections of Spanish and French with highly qualified instructors.
- A support structure must be developed and implemented for 8th graders who do not take the first semester language offering in grade 7 but wish to participate in grade 8 (i.e. 8th graders new to the Division, 8th graders who wish to change languages, 8th graders who did not choose to take a language in grade 7).
- Additional opportunities to participate in World Languages at the middle school level will possibly reduce the demand for exploratories in other areas.
- Students will have the opportunity to complete a seven-year curriculum in conversational Spanish.

Required Classes

Required classes for all students at grades 6, 7, and 8 shall include language arts, math, science, social studies, and health and physical education.

Implications

- Regardless of where a child attends middle school, participation in a consistent, common core curricula is required.

Language Arts Curriculum

Based on Division-level student achievement data, the Division's Literacy Achievement Team identified several actions at the secondary level including enhancing student reading comprehension through fluency development, additional use of non-fiction texts, and word root study. As a result, study of Latin roots and Greek combining forms will be incorporated into middle school language arts.

Implications

- Breadth of vocabulary and depth of reading comprehension, particularly in non-fiction texts, are gateways to access of more rigorous coursework. Contextual integration of the study of Latin roots and Greek combining forms into language arts instruction for all students will increase the capability of students to successfully access more rigorous coursework in high school.
- Middle school teachers will need support in the form of professional development to integrate the study of Latin roots and Greek combining forms in language arts.
- Middle school students must engage in reading and writing *practice* during extended instructional time, reflecting on reading and writing experiences through discussion.
- Additional instructional resources will be needed to support word root study and fluency instruction.

Impact of Differences in Middle and High School Schedules

Differences in middle and high school schedules will make it difficult to share staff between middle and high schools. In addition, coordination of individual schedules for students who have successfully completed middle school offerings in a particular content area to

participate in courses offered at high schools, including Algebra II and advanced world language offerings, would need to occur.

Areas for Future Work

Middle school principals and central staff identified the following areas for continued work:

- Develop and distribute a new middle school program guide.
- Incorporate promotion/retention practices in the new middle school program guide.
- Build teacher capacity to implement best practice instruction and high yield strategies during extended class time.
- Revise curricula in core classes to challenge all students.
- Identify and implement strategies to increase opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively.
- Identify and implement strategies for increasing opportunities for students to work in interest areas outside of the regular school day.
- Determine minimum time expectations for common exploratories.
- Consider possible keyboarding alternatives (such as incorporating into a language arts block in support of the writing process).
- Examine the impact of using exploratory time as extended learning time on class size.
- Clarify required teacher endorsements for middle school (For example, do keyboarding teachers need an endorsement in business?).
- Identify and implement best practice scheduling for science, social studies, and health and physical education (i.e. every day vs. every other day vs. 9 weeks rotation vs. semester).
- Ensure that there is no variance in core offerings across middle schools.
- Establish common core of Visual and Performing Arts courses across middle schools.
- Establish common core of Career and Technical Education courses across middle schools.
- Examine current course leveling practices using research related to best practices and student achievement.
- Re-examine the 21 recommendations for middle schools made by the Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design of the University of Virginia.