Report to the Cherry Hill Public School District
Drafting a Blueprint for Student Success

Pre K-12 Language Arts

External Program Review

Conducted: February 4, 5, 6, 2008
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District Goals

Begin implementation of an integrated curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development framework that will insure continuous student progress within an aligned PreK-12 educational program.

Continue to improve student achievement at all grade levels and close the achievement gaps where they exist.

Introduction

In response to the district goal—“Begin implementation of an integrated curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development framework that will insure continuous student progress within an aligned PreK-12 educational program”—the administration has articulated “A Blueprint for Student Success: Aligning Curriculum, Instruction, Professional Development, and Assessment.” The Cherry Hill “Blueprint” outlines a multiple year cycle that guides a consistent approach to the study of each content area through six components; an internal needs assessment, an external program review, curriculum development, resource allocation, implementation, and evaluation/revision. This state-of-the-art process exemplifies the best from research in the field, and is an effective blend of traditional practices and contemporary frameworks. Traditionally, the external review has been one of the integral components of curriculum work for many years. However, this process is new to the Cherry Hill Public Schools.

The “Blueprint for Student Success” provides the Cherry Hill Public Schools with the needed infrastructure for the work of aligning curriculum and program which is applicable to all content areas and, most importantly, is sustainable over time within the organization. The development of this infrastructure recognizes the need for a viable, well-articulated, and guaranteed curriculum which research describes as the single most important factor in schools that impacts student achievement. Consequently, this work also addresses the district goal to “continue to improve student achievement at all grade levels and close the achievement gaps where they exist”.

The Cherry Hill Public Schools are commended for inviting this external lens to current practice to inform the curriculum development process. The members of the school community are also commended for their positive engagement and investment in this process at all levels and settings which insured the success of the review and the credibility of the data collected. The external team was warmly welcomed, and school visitations went smoothly because of the in-house planning by district administrators, building principals and their staff maximizing time in each setting. Every staff member encountered provided assistance to the team. Administrators dedicated time to participate in the process. Teachers openly invited observers into their classrooms and took time to share their practices and perspectives. Students and parents willingly participated by providing their insights into their experiences with the English/Language Arts program.
This report documents the findings and recommendations of the external review of the PreK-12 English/Language Arts program of the Cherry Hill Public Schools. Staff of the Cherry Hill Public Schools will utilize these findings as they develop detailed and comprehensive plans for the alignment of the district English/Language Arts curriculum and program. The report consists of these sections:

- Overview of the Review Process
- Program Review Findings:
  - District
  - High School
  - Middle School
  - Elementary School
- Closing Statements

**Overview of Review Process**

The external review of the PreK-12 English/Language Arts Program was conducted for the purpose of informing the curriculum renewal process. The goals of the review were to celebrate the strengths of the program, recognize the needs, and provide recommendations in response to those needs. The focus was inclusive of the PreK-12 English/Language Arts classroom, intervention, special education, and ELL programs. The process occurred simultaneously in the nineteen district schools and the administration. The review took place during the period of February 4th through the 6th, 2008.

The review process was conducted by a team of thirty experienced (PreK-college levels) literacy professionals including a facilitator. The process was driven by questions developed by the English Language Arts (ELA) Curriculum Committee as a result of the internal review process. The questions addressed five components of the English/Language Arts Program: **Program and Philosophy, Program Implementation, Student Assessment, Resources and Materials, and Professional Development.**

External team members immersed themselves in the schools to experience the instructional program through classroom observations and interviews-individual and small group-of teachers, building and central office administrators, coaches, students, and parents. Qualitative data from classroom observations and interviews were recorded. An approximate tally of the number of classroom observations and interviews illustrates the scope of the review.

- 259 Classroom observations
- 268 Interviews of teachers/ISS/Coaches (individual or focus group)
- 75 Interviews of students
- 57 Interviews of parents
- 33 Interviews of administrators

Data collected were analyzed within the framework of observed and learned program qualities. Individual team members reviewed their extensive notes for **patterns** within the data guided by the questions generated by the ELA Curriculum Committee. Groups studying the same levels, high school, middle school, elementary, analyzed their collective data for **consistent patterns** of strengths and needs across district settings. In light of these analyses, recommendations informed by current practice and research in the field were articulated. These recommendations provide
suggestions for the district to consider as they move forward in the “Blueprint for Student Success” process. The review process provides the district with a “snapshot” of the English/Language Arts program to use for planning and development following the on-site visit.

Findings from the external program review were presented by team members at 4:00 PM on the end of the last day of the process in the auditorium at High School West. Administrators, School Board Members, members of the Internal Needs Assessment team, and district faculty were invited to attend. Findings were reported at four levels: district, high school, middle school, and elementary. Findings consisted of descriptive statements of strengths, needs, and recommendations for each of the levels with the exception of the district level report that consists of strengths and needs. Those recommendations were integrated throughout the other three levels. **The following are the findings of the external program review.** These lists of patterns of findings are not prioritized so the order does not suggest a level of importance (that can be determined by the district).

**Program Review Findings**

**District Level Patterns of Strengths:**

- Dedicated, hard-working, enthusiastic, knowledgeable, student-centered teachers and administrators, and their creation and engagement in the collaborative cultures that exist in the buildings.

- Student population that is consistently described as a joy to teach, positive engaged learners who offer both the gift and challenge of diversity.

- Evidence of research-based best practices effectively implemented at all levels that can potentially provide in-house models for practice.

- An administration and School Board that recognize, establish goals, and support the accomplishment of those goals that address district infrastructures and systems that potentially will impact student achievement.

- Evidence of student performance growth on state assessments, the closing of the achievement gaps in general, and ongoing attention to that data for decision-making.

- Overall belief that data, research-based district and building level data, would be of value for informing the health of the system and instruction, and for providing longitudinal data profiles for individual students.

- Evidence of a parent population that supports and values education.

- Evidence of character education in the relationships between administrators, faculty and students in all schools; Evidence of specific character education dialogue and school-wide programs in the PreK-5 schools.

- District PreK program that effectively embraces developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum, philosophy, and vision.
Knowledgeable, competent, and caring ELL teachers who maximize their instruction to meet the specific needs of the ELL students in the district by teaching specific strategies in vocabulary, reading, and writing to aid students in all areas of language development.

And, the belief that ALL students can learn, achieve, and meet expectations with appropriate approaches and resources.

Program Review Findings
District Level Patterns of Needs:

These four district needs should be effectively addressed in the previously described “Blueprint for Student Success: Aligning Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment and Professional Development” process.

1. Need for an agreed-upon articulated district vision for the English/Language Arts program that meets the needs, goals, values of the student population and the district and greater community- and which will guide decisions surrounding practice.

2. Need for an articulated, aligned curriculum for reading, writing, listening, speaking, and research PreK-12.

3. Need for a district, research-based assessment system that fills in the gaps left by the state assessment system in the student profile as literacy learners, and provides longitudinal data on each student to inform instructional and programmatic decisions.

4. Need for district office level assessment of professional development needs, and design and delivery of purposeful, targeted, and timely professional development. Professional development needs in the area of English/Language Arts exceed the current capacity of any one school.

The following address district-wide technology needs. The first two describe the needs that would support an assessment system. The third applies the understanding of 21st Century Literacies and the need for integration of technology across all disciplines.

5. Need for the use of technology that will allow the district to further analyze both state and local data to inform curriculum design and instructional decisions.

6. Need for a data warehousing systems that will allow accessibility of all staff to assessment data to inform curriculum design and instructional decisions.

7. Need to address limited technology availability and limited integration of technology in the English/Language Arts program. (With that said, there were a couple of examples observed that are exemplary models for integration.)

The final need addresses the district ongoing response to the ELL population.

8. Need for development and consistent application of a working knowledge of ELL standards, schedule reorganization, and professional development for ALL teachers on English language acquisition, modifications, and accommodations.
Program Review Findings
High School Patterns of Strengths:

➢ Students *like* English, willingly comply with teacher requests, participate in the activities, and are appreciative of teacher and departmental efforts on their behalf.

➢ Students have significant choice in writing topics and independent reading.

➢ Considerable evidence of concerted effort to prepare students for important standardized tests.

➢ Seminar program is unanimously appreciated for increasing discussion, amount of writing, level of “intimacy”. The shared planning time is also highly valued.

➢ Articulated curriculum map does not impede teachers from using creative approaches to literature and collaborating in sub-groups on lesson plans.

➢ The program has the students’ attention: they are thoughtful, respectful, hardworking, and interested in establishing a good base for college.

➢ Familiarity with walkthroughs and “open door” engenders a welcoming attitude and confidence in students, even in the presence of strangers.

➢ A high percentage of students volunteer and contribute to class: significant engagement, including use of texts.

➢ Teachers demonstrate strong content knowledge and a nurturing and caring attitude.

➢ Curriculum focus on note-making seems to have translated into student behavior even without (frequent) teacher reminders.

➢ Building administration reports being very involved in the instructional program and has created a welcoming and engaging environment.

➢ Library is an outstanding instructional resource for the English program.

Program Review Findings
High School Level Patterns of Needs:
PROGRAM/PHILOSOPHY

➢ Need vertical and horizontal articulation of curriculum from grades 6 through 12.

➢ Need to examine best practices in reading writing, grammar, vocabulary instruction, and timely and useful feedback on student writing.
➢ Need to improve communication of expectations/vision with all stakeholders.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION
➢ Need to extend the benefits of the Seminar model to the junior and senior classes.
➢ Need to offer more opportunities for diverse experiences with reading and writing.
➢ Need examination of the tracking model now in use in view of current research.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT
➢ Need a common departmental approach to assessing and monitoring student progress in reading and writing, which includes a common expectation for skill mastery in reading and writing at each grade level.
➢ Need more literacy performance data that are available to all teachers.

RESOURCES/MATERIALS
➢ Need an improved selection of texts.
➢ Need additional and updated technology and increased utilization of existing technology.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
➢ Need to provide a voice for instructional staff in the focus/design of professional development.
➢ Need a greater emphasis on specific professional development for English teachers.
➢ Need collaboration on best practice (vocabulary instruction, timely and useful teacher feedback on student writing, etc.)

Program Review Findings
High School Level: Recommendations
PROGRAM/PHILOSOphy
➢ Create a vertical (6-12) language arts team to examine the reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary program.
➢ Investigate best practice research in the language arts (Beck, Ehrenworth, Noden, Murray, Beck, Marzano, Beers, Tovani, Burke).

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION
➢ Extend the benefits of the Seminar model to the junior and senior classes.
➢ Offer more opportunities for diverse experiences with reading and writing.
➢ Examine the purpose and availability of English elective classes.
Increase variety of texts and bring in new and more contemporary books

STUDENT ASSESSMENT
- Create a literacy profile for each student to include standardized assessments in grades 9 and 10; and instructional levels for students so that instruction can be appropriately monitored.
- Develop a means for assessing the program to see that it is meeting the needs of all learners, while incorporating best practice strategies.
- Monitor the frequency and quantity of assigned reading and writing.

RESOURCES/MATERIALS
- Streamline process for approving new texts to update reading lists and that values teacher recommendations.
- Define the purpose of Summer Reading, develop a range of consistent expectations for how (and when) it will be assessed, and reassess what texts will be offered for students to choose. Texts should be offered that are appropriate for reading without teacher instruction.
- Reexamine the use of adapted texts (Shakespeare, especially).

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
- Invite teacher voice in the design and implementation of professional development.
- Address the content learning needs of the staff as well as the focus on instructional strategies relevant across disciplines.
- Examine supervisory structure to insure that the supervisor can be an effective instructional leader in the language arts.

Program Review Findings
Middle School Level Patterns of Strengths:
- Students are extremely respectful to administration, faculty, staff, and one another. Students also spoke highly of their language arts experiences and exhibit positive attitude toward literacy.
- Staff collegiality and support is evident especially within the learning communities.
- Parents praise the middle school staff as being exceptionally caring and committed to their children.
Administrative teams (principal and assistant principals) in each building promote a positive environment for working and learning. Their enthusiasm for middle level education is contagious. They are respected and supported by faculty, staff, students, and parents.

Time is built into the middle school schedule for teachers to meet with their team members and interact with colleagues outside the team. The time allotted is valued, used effectively and productively.

Common literacy terminology is assimilated and articulated in all content areas (e.g., Better Answers formula, ILP research strategies, MLA formatting).

Non-fiction writing program is well developed and executed within and across grade levels.

Evidence of scaffolded-learning with students building and extending understandings as they move vertically through the grades.

Test preparation is embedded in the curriculum within and across grade levels; it is not taught in isolation.

Information Literacy Project (ILP) is an exceptional example of best practice in terms of extending literacy across the curriculum as well as teacher-student collaboration. ILP moves beyond the standard expectations for middle school literacy learning. Practice is due to the support of the advisory program.

Program Review Findings
Middle School Level Pattern of Needs:

PROGRAM/PHILOSOPHY

- Need for a district articulated language arts curriculum.
- Need increased time for language arts instruction. Time allotted within each learning community’s core time (45-minutes) seems inadequate to sufficiently address the demands of the curriculum standards and benchmarks.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

- Need for more balance in varieties of writing. Review of Language Arts Curriculum Map (6-8) indicates a major emphasis on non-fiction writing (e.g., editorial, feature article).
- Need wider range of reading experiences within and across grade levels (i.e., updating core novels, availability of summer reading selections as well as book club/lit circles choices).
- Need systematic spelling/word study, grammar, and mechanics programs.
- Need incorporation of differentiated instruction as a means of addressing the learning differences of all students.
STUDENT ASSESSMENT
➢ Need district assessment system that monitors student progress and provides data for transitions.

RESOURCES/MATERIALS
➢ Need for more consistency in library availability.
➢ Need more technology in language arts classrooms (e.g., smart/active boards, LCD projectors, mobile lab-tops)

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
➢ Need comprehensive understanding of differentiated instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Program Review Findings
Middle School Level: Recommendations
PROGRAM/PHILOSOPHY
➢ Articulate the language arts curriculum beyond the curriculum map and NJCCCS in order to provide a robust framework within which teachers can craft lessons that are aligned with the standards, utilize the Understanding by Design model, and implement a wider variety of differentiated instruction.

➢ Explore opportunities within the schedule to allow for more time for language arts instruction. Additional time would allow for richer, more meaningful language arts experiences.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION
➢ Include variety in the types of writing within and across grade levels in terms of the language arts curriculum. Writing program would be enriched by the inclusion of more creative writing assignments.

➢ Investigate current research-based approaches to the teaching of spelling/word study, grammar, and mechanics.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT
➢ Design an assessment system to monitor student progress and that allows for communication of data between the middle schools and elementary and high schools.

RESOURCES/MATERIALS
➢ Explore current titles that could be incorporated into the literacy program (e.g., BER Best Books of the Decade Conference, teacher led book reviews). Teachers could also tap the student population for recommendations.

➢ Investigate ways to carve out time in the schedule for students to utilize the library.
➢ Explore the possibility of integrating additional technology into all language arts classrooms (e.g., smart/active boards, LCD projectors, mobile lab-tops)

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
➢ Provide on-going professional development in differentiated instruction to acquaint teachers with best practice to address the struggling reader or writer to the high ability learner.

Program Review Findings
Elementary Level Patterns of Strengths:
➢ Systemically, stakeholders strongly believe that all children can achieve and learn to read and write.

➢ Teachers are dedicated, child-centered, knowledgeable, and provide a well-structured, safe learning environment where creativity is fostered. Teachers continue to strengthen their skills as educators. Additionally, the ISS is a valued resource in the learning community.

➢ Principals are knowledgeable educational leaders who use effective leadership skills to create positive, safe, and risk-free learning environments for both students and teachers. They demonstrate a hands-on approach to all aspects of school culture.

➢ Students are positive and engaged. They love to read and write, and at the same time are receptive to instruction and suggestions for improvement. They understand goals and expectations.

➢ Parents are supportive, positive, knowledgeable, and involved. There is a strong home-school connection.

➢ Exemplary writing instruction is pervasive.

➢ Establishment of community is evident through effective and respectful classroom management routines.

➢ Small class sizes support the research for student achievement.

➢ Large blocks of time dedicated to literacy.

➢ Teachers and students consistently use sophisticated literary terms and vocabulary in both reading and writing.

➢ At K-2 level, differentiation occurs through guided reading based on assessment.

➢ Evidence of character education embedded in the school culture and classroom instruction.
Many best practices are evident, including the following: metacognitive strategies, Guided Reading, Character Education, student-led conferences with parents, celebration of learners, and strategies integration such as making literary connections and reading-writing responses.

Student achievement is reflected in the successful level NJ State assessment scores.

Program Review Findings

Elementary Level Patterns of Needs:

PROGRAM/PHILOSOPHY

- Need for Language Arts vision statement understood and used by members of the LA faculty and community.

- Need for standards-based curriculum for English/Language Arts in grades PreK-5 which is fully implemented and aligned vertically and horizontally.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

- Need for comprehensive literacy program that balances the quality and effectiveness of both reading and writing programs.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT

- Need for an assessment system to collect, analyze, and monitor student progress over time with data made available for teachers.

MATERIALS/RESOURCES

- Need for resources and materials to support differentiation of student needs.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Need for ongoing, systematic, differentiated professional development that supports a consistent curriculum.

Program Review Findings

Elementary Level: Recommendations

PROGRAM/PHILOSOPHY

- Move understanding of curriculum from a program orientation to philosophy orientation.

- Create a vision statement for English/Language Arts which all teachers understand and embrace.

- Write curriculum that is aligned vertically/horizontally with state standards & benchmarks, inclusive of assessments, supported by resources, and supported by ongoing professional development.

- Develop explicit scope and sequence for each grade level.
PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION
➢ Direct special attention on a research-based approach to word study that includes spelling, vocabulary, and phonics.

➢ Design more systematic plan for teaching reading comprehension strategies (as per Harvey et.al.) as part of the larger reading curriculum.

➢ Integrate literacy within the reading/writing workshop model as well as all content areas.

ASSESSMENT
➢ Develop a philosophy of assessment that describes the role of assessment in evaluating program, monitoring student progress, and informing instruction.

➢ Identify both common and differentiated assessments which reflect curriculum, are aligned to state standards, and serve to inform instruction for all students.

➢ Create a district-wide data warehousing system to monitor student progress over time.

MATERIALS/RESOURCES
➢ Conduct a review of currently available resources for English/Language Arts and assess what supports the newly designed curriculum.

➢ Identify resources which are varied culturally, by instructional level, and supportive of best practices which align to the newly designed curriculum.

➢ Continue to bolster nonfiction resources in both the library and classrooms.

➢ Determine how technologies can support innovative and differentiated instruction.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
➢ Provide sufficient professional development to ensure teacher competency for reading instruction comparable to level of writing instruction.

➢ Develop a comprehensive/systematic professional development plan that provides more effective and differentiated opportunities for teachers.

➢ Expand upon the job embedded opportunities for professional development by and for ISS, ESST, and ELA Colleague teachers.

➢ Reexamine the effectiveness of induction and ongoing support for teachers new to the district as well as those with new teaching assignments.
Closing Statement

The purpose of this external program review of the English/Language Arts program in the Cherry Hill Public Schools was to inform the curriculum renewal process articulated in the “Blueprint for Student Success: Aligning Curriculum, Instruction Professional Development.” Goals of the review were to celebrate the strengths, recognize the needs, and provide recommendation in response to those needs. The report details the patterns of needs found in the data collected through classroom observations and interviews, and articulates recommendations in response to the learned needs.

The report also illustrates the patterns of strengths in the Cherry Hill Public Schools and within the PreK-12 English/Language Arts Program. The Cherry Hill Public Schools, the incredible human resources within those schools—the administrators, teachers, coaches, and students—should be celebrated. The history of effectiveness, pride in the schools, students, and work, as well as the recognition of the need for change in response to the diversity of students arriving at the schoolhouse door, deserve recognition and celebration. Action by the administration in developing infrastructures such as the “Blueprint” should be celebrated because that work can only strengthen the organization and its effectiveness in meeting the needs of the student population and the broader community. And finally, participation in and contribution to the curriculum renewal process was thoroughly enjoyed and celebrated by all of the members of the External Review team.