



LETTER TO THE COMMUNITY FROM DR. DAVID ADERHOLD, SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

*I always get this feeling in retrospect (and sometimes still in college), that there is some sort of race to reach somewhere, but I don't even know where that race is supposed to go or why it exists in the first place since everyone's pace is different.... Being in college, it seems like those huge things that seemed so all-encompassing like Option ii seem so distant and small now. But I suppose that's insight only gained with time and age!
(Recent WW-P Valedictorian)*

We've all heard the famous quote, "Change is inevitable. Change is constant." This maxim applies to everything in our lives, from the smallest detail to the most important events. It is with this statement in mind that I wanted to write an extended letter to you: to offer my thoughts on the vision I have for WW-P.

There have been many changes taking place within our district. From the simple ones of moving classrooms or buildings, to the larger ones of revising report cards, redesigning student databases, and assessing the impacts of data. There are some important changes that have affected us this year, which I want to explain in a larger context. In addition, I will offer a few thoughts on the other ideas that are swirling around that promise to bring change!

We have incredibly dedicated and intelligent students who work hard to succeed, but often struggle with the normal process of failure and learning from mistakes. While our students make us proud by the way in which they carry themselves and represent WW-P, I cannot help but think that we may be failing them by reinforcing an educational system that perpetuates grades at the expense of deep and meaningful learning. If we are going to remain committed to educating the "Whole Child," we must continue to work to bring balance to this community by celebrating the academic achievements of our students, and by focusing on the social and emotional aspects of the "Whole Child."

During the 2014-2015 school year, we sent over 120 middle school and high school students for mental health assessments; these include assessments for anxiety, depression and suicidal ideations. These were not drug and alcohol screenings; these screenings were additional. When 68 percent of high school Honors and AP students state that they are stressed “always or most of the time,” the balance is simply not there. The perpetual achievement machine continues to demand higher scores and greater success each passing year. Such pressure is like a giant “flywheel” that keeps turning and gathering speed. Unfortunately, perspective seems to be gone as we keep pushing the education system to the point where we – and, I mean the collective we (parents, teachers, and students) -- have created a system where learning takes a back-seat to academic success. The grade has become the end point, not the learning.

Our WW-P community feeds on excellence and academic success. However, success has a breaking point. While we value educational excellence, we also value the development of the “Whole Child.” As such, the administration and the Board of Education have taken many steps to address this matter and are conscientiously working to monitor the demands on students while still maintaining educational excellence. We are working to ensure a balance in the lives of students; and also providing time and opportunities for students to apply their learning and explore their passions.

Our “WW-P Core Values” offer us a path forward and provide us with grounding for what the West Windsor-Plainsboro communities value:

- We believe that continuous learning is essential for individual fulfillment and for the advancement of society.
- We believe that every individual has intrinsic worth.
- We believe that embracing diversity enriches and empowers our community.
- We believe that honesty, integrity, and trust are cornerstones for continuing excellence.
- We believe that people reach their highest potential when challenged to believe it is possible.
- We believe that openness to change is essential to progress and future viability.

In the pages ahead, I will talk about several big topics, and the changes we have made support our Core Values. I will try to provide insight into how and why these decisions were (and are being) made, and why I believe that these decisions are in the best interests of our children, our community, and our future. These topics will include:

- Why Bother To Change?
- Shifts in Curriculum and Instructional Practices
- Beyond the Classroom
- Putting It Together for our Children

My hope is to paint a mosaic of the changes that have taken place over the past several years in the district. I respectfully ask that as you read the remainder of this message, you keep in mind

three things: 1) Our district’s vision of educating the “Whole Child” 2) WW-P’s Core Values; and 3) Change is not inherently bad; change is an evolution of thinking that can offer new possibilities for continued greatness ahead.

WHY BOTHER TO CHANGE?

WHOLE CHILD

Educators often use terms in “Eduspeak” that we assume the greater community naturally understands. “Whole Child” is one of those terms.

In WW-P, when we state “Whole Child,” we are specifically addressing the development of the *social, emotional, and academic development of each student*. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) began the Whole Child Initiative in 2007. ASCD stated, “The demands of the 21st century require a new approach to education to fully prepare students for college, career, and citizenship. Research, practice, and common sense confirm that a whole child approach to education will develop and prepare students for the challenges and opportunities of today and tomorrow by addressing students' comprehensive needs through the shared responsibility of students, families, schools, and communities.” The Association further stated, “A Whole Child approach, which ensures that each student is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged, sets the standard for comprehensive, sustainable school improvement and provides for long-term student success.”

WHOLE CHILD TENETS

- Each student enters school **healthy** and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.
- Each student learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally **safe** for students and adults.
- Each student is actively **engaged** in learning and is connected to the school and broader community.
- Each student has access to personalized learning and is **supported** by qualified, caring adults.
- Each student is **challenged** academically and prepared for success in college or further study and for employment and participation in a global environment.

THE TEENAGE BRAIN

The developmental vulnerability of the human brain is at the greatest risk during the teenage years. Children and teenagers have more synapses or connections between brain cells than adults. However, we now know that different regions of the brain grow at different rates and the connections within these regions are often not as fast as in an adult brain. Brain research also tells us that the frontal lobe is the last region that develops strong connections. So, what is significant about that? According to study after study, the frontal lobe is responsible for judgment, problem solving, memory, language, impulse control, empathy, spontaneity, decision making, social behavior, etc. If you’ve ever asked yourself, “What was he/she thinking?” then

you most likely have come to a point in which your teenager was forced to access their frontal lobe quicker than their frontal lobe was ready.

Simply, a teenager's brain is still developing. The teenage brain is impressionable and vulnerable. Teenagers are susceptible to stress, addiction, poor judgment, pressure, temptation, and challenges. It is hard enough for a fully developed adult brain to deal with pressure and stress, much less a developing teenage brain. Anxiety and other disorders like obsessive compulsive disorder, panic disorder, anorexia, bulimia, cutting, and other symptoms and disorders can be an outgrowth of stress and anxiety as can headaches, stomach aches, and fatigue.

Dr. Frances Jensen, professor and chair of the Department of Neurology at Perelman School of Medicine University of Pennsylvania and author of the book, *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults*, states,

Even though a teen may be adult-size, his or her brain is not adult yet. It is still building itself. Every day, it's building something. So whether it's chronic pot smoking, binge-drinking episodes, or stress, any negative experiences can stall brain development. And you can't ever get that development opportunity back. That's why this is a sensitive time.

Why talk about the importance of brain development and the differences of the teenage brain? Simply, as adults, we have a responsibility to ensure that our children grow up healthy. We have a responsibility to develop the "Whole Child," not just the academically inclined part of the brain. This is the reason we must support extra-curricular activities, the arts, music, sports, media centers, and technology enhancements. When we only focus on academics, we fail our children in developing their full potential.

21st CENTURY COMPETENCIES

"The rigor that matters most for the 21st century is demonstrated mastery of the core competencies for work, citizenship, and life-long learning. Studying academic content is the means for developing competencies, instead of being the goal, as it has been traditionally. In today's world, it's no longer how much you know that matters; it's what you can do with what you know." -- Tony Wagner, *The Global Achievement Gap*

A 21st century education must be founded on the solid ground of content knowledge. Hence, core content subjects are the groundwork of the WW-P competency framework. WW-P works to build upon this foundation with six competencies: Collaborative Team Member; Effective Communicator; Globally Aware, Active, and Responsible Student/Citizen; Information Literate Researcher; Innovative and Practical Problem Solver; and Self-Directed Learner. A study of each of these competencies allows us to reflect upon their individual and collective importance.

Our students must be prepared to succeed in this world, and we must prepare students in a new way. Together, we must master an understanding of the global world. The success of our students is dependent upon our ability to teach them the 21st century competencies.

EXTERNAL FEEDBACK: THE PRESENCE OF EXCESSIVE STRESS

During the 2014-2015 school year, a team of experts in gifted education from Ball State University were contracted to conduct a comprehensive, formal evaluation of WW-P's program for gifted and talented students. The purpose of the request was to seek feedback about the effectiveness of the current program. The expert reported, "A culture of respect for high achievement permeates the district. From the academic extracurricular opportunities to the array of advanced course offerings at the high school, the promotion of high achievement is evident throughout the district."

However, this program review also uncovered an uncomfortable reality: Our students are living with frighteningly high levels of stress. Middle school and high school students, teachers, and parents were asked about their perceived levels of stress (on students). Results are included in Table 1; this information also is available in the External Program Review on pages 32-34.

Table 1. How much of the time do you feel stressed as a result of school work and activities?

	Middle School Students	High School Students	Middle School Teachers	High School Teachers	Middle School Parents	High School Parents
Always Stressed	3%	31%	13%	9%	4%	13%
Most of the time stressed	18%	37%	26%	33%	6%	24%
Sometimes stressed	59%	26%	54%	58%	53%	48%
Rarely stressed	15%	5%	6%	0%	28%	13%
Never stressed	6%	2%	2%	0%	10%	2%

The external reviewers noted, "Stakeholders at the high school were less positive regarding the impact of their school experiences on their level of engagement, attitude toward learning, and stress. Thirty-one percent of the high school student respondents and 22 percent of parents said that their school experiences had a negative or very negative impact on their attitude toward learning." Furthermore, "Sixty-eight percent of students reported that they are stressed always or most of the time. This percentage is much higher than the 37 percent of parents and 42 percent of faculty reporting that students were stressed always or most of the time."

The evaluators included the following student responses that clearly demonstrate some of my great concerns:

- *“Without a doubt, learning is something I’m grateful for. The amount of stress is the main issue I see. Especially with this district, people aim really high, which makes it difficult to stand out among the crowd. With this, competition is abnormally high. Stress has been there literally everywhere I go. In the hallways, there aren’t discussions about someone’s weekend, or about a movie, or anything of the sort. Every conversation that goes on is about the amount of stress piled on the students, and comparisons of teachers.”*
- *“I hate going to school. Clubs are perhaps the only positive school-related experience, other than friends. For me and many other kids in my classes - perhaps an overwhelming number - school is no longer about learning but instead about grades. Potential Bs cause me stress every single day. I absolutely do not enjoy classwork or homework, mostly due to the amount of weight everything has. No attempt is made to explain the course material or explore it in greater depth. It’s all about formulas, AP strategies, and checklist-like essays.”*
- *“I love learning, but after this school district’s experience, I think that school is a prison that we just live through in order to get on with our life.”*
- *“I’ve begun to hate learning, if I am to be completely honest. I feel like [school] is beating the learning out of me to the point where I dread, rather than enjoy it.”*
- *“Coming out of 12 years in this district I have learned one thing: that a grade, a percentage, or even a point is to be valued over anything else. This includes sleep, family, and personal health.”*
- *“You guys need to fix the system as soon as possible.”*

SHIFTS IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

CURRICULUM/INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

As a district, we have been very aggressive in working to revise and update curricula, to align curriculum documents to best practices and standards, and to provide professional development and resources to our staff to ensure a successful implementation of those changes. We have worked to phase in a 1:1 Learning Initiative (Chromebooks) in Grades 5 to 7. We have redesigned the 9-12 Math sequence, added Introduction to Engineering, and phased out semester courses in Grades 11 and 12 Language Arts. We are beginning a Fine and Performing Arts Program Review, and recently completed a review of our Gifted & Talented Program and Special Education Program. We are working to create a Robotics Team build site and we are exploring the potential of redesigning the Grades 6-12 libraries.

This past summer, several teachers from all grade levels and buildings worked on the development of a sequencing and pacing guide for our K-5 Math curriculum. The pacing guide is aligned to the indicators on the new report card and provides the scope of standards that should be assessed in each marking period.

As a result of the work done in literacy and mathematics, changes to the Basic Skills program also have begun to be implemented. We have established consistent criteria for the program's entry and exit and are moving to a model in which students no longer are labeled for the full school year (or several years) as Basic Skills. We will assess students throughout the year and determine needs for support on an ongoing basis.

ELIMINATION OF MIDTERMS AND FINALS

“As educators, school leaders, and policymakers, we exist in a world where too often assessment equals high-stakes tests. This is a very limited view of assessment. The fundamental purpose of assessment is the improvement of student achievement, teaching practice, and leadership decision-making.” Douglas Reeves, *Ahead of the Curve: The Power of Assessment to Transform Teaching and Learning*.

This summer, the administration and members of the Board of Education Curriculum Committee discussed the current structure of high school midterms and finals.

Administrators and Board members reviewed all district and state assessments, noting that common assessments are embedded throughout the school year. We also reviewed concerns raised by teachers and high school students. High school teachers noted that multi-part exams made it difficult to have an adequate number of assessments for marking period grades. High school teachers added that even with the last four days of the school year set aside for final exams, many students had multiple parts for these exams administered during the last full week of classes, meaning that students were assessed continuously throughout the month of June. Since there are no classes after these exams, the only feedback students received on finals was the grade, thus, providing no opportunity to review the exams with students. High school students expressed the feeling that there are many more assessments than ever before.

The administration and the Board of Education Curriculum Committee also discussed the weighting of these exams, adding that for many students, these exams do not impact final grades.

Further, over 80 percent of WW-P students take AP classes and AP exams (over 1,100 AP tests were administered at each high school this spring). And, of the students who take AP courses, over 93 percent receive a 3 or better. Since AP courses are college-level work completed in high school, AP exam results are a better indicator of how students will do in college than a final exam for a high school class.

Lastly, as far as students losing an opportunity to rehearse for the rigors of college due to the elimination of final exams, the administration felt that the way in which the district was implementing finals was not necessarily helping students prepare for college and beyond. It is important to note that seniors were previously exempt from final exams if they had an “A” average; the vast majority of seniors, going off to college, never took a final exam in the senior year. Furthermore, with final exams, students calculate the exact score needed to earn the grade desired and often did not study for mastery. Therefore, the final exams were essentially a game being played versus an opportunity to demonstrate one's learning.

Given these and other concerns, WW-P decided to no longer administer midterms and finals beginning with the current school year. Moving forward, district administrators will continue to focus efforts on the common assessments already in place in middle school and high school courses in order to measure student learning, discuss areas of strength and growth, and plan professional development centered on meeting the needs of the “Whole Child.”

COMMON ASSESSMENTS

“Common assessments” are the tests, quizzes, projects, and other materials teachers routinely give their students throughout the school year to determine student understanding and application of concepts and content and achievement towards grade level standards and benchmarks. Many of these assessments are given district wide to all students in a particular class or grade, regardless of school building. Common assessments, including projects and presentations, as well as exams, can provide for more authentic learning experiences and are a stronger indicator of student achievement towards desired goals.

CHANGES IN OPTION ii

Option ii was created by the State of New Jersey to allow students to receive credit for experiences outside of school. Generally, Option ii was developed as a way to add additional courses and studies that a school was unable to offer.

When Option ii began in WW-P, there were no policies in place. Procedures were developed over time as the number of students who have applied for Option ii increased over the years.

The Board of Education looked at the number of students applying to take Option ii, the passing rate of students, as well as how successful Option ii students have been as they continue into higher level courses in the district. After reviewing the data and holding a multitude of discussions, the High School Program of Studies was modified in the 2014-2015 school year to allow students to earn credit for one course per subject area and/or sequence throughout their high school career. Furthermore, students now are allowed to take only one Option ii course per year. It is important to note that these decisions were based upon a number of factors and only after careful analysis of data.

A review of Option ii changes that occurred between summer 2014 and summer 2015 is examined in Table 2. The numbers reflect courses taken in which WW-P students took a district final exam to determine the award of credit. (An exception to this process is Financial Literacy as there was no final exam and, therefore, students received credit for successful completion of the Option ii course. Financial Literacy will have an equivalent culminating exam required for the awarding of credit beginning summer 2016.)

Table 2. Option ii changes from 2014 and 2015.

	2014	2015
Total Students	672	402
Total Students Pass	203	251
Total % Pass	30%	62%

There was much public conversation about the Option ii changes. Let me provide some insight from a recent WW-P valedictorian:

I have heard much about the Option ii drama, and of course have my own opinions about it. I definitely think that Option ii has been overly used, particularly in the case of history, science, and math classes. I was able to get to high level science classes without skipping any science, and still felt like I had a lot of empty room in senior year, which is why I decided to explore more history and humanity courses that year (which was very nice!).

AP/HONORS

During the 2011-2012 school year, new Honors/Advanced Placement Eligibility and Procedures were adopted. The following criteria apply to the determination of eligibility for Honors and Advanced Placement courses at High School North and High School South:

- Students who are currently in Advanced Placement and Honors courses can continue in that level as long as they are passing the course with a grade of 70 (C or better).
- Students who are currently in Honors and achieve a grade of 80 (B) can enroll in an Advanced Placement course
- Students who are in a College Prep course who achieve a grade of 80 percent or higher (A or B grade) are eligible to elect an Honors level course.
- Students who are in College Prep course, who achieve a grade of 90 percent (A) in a College Prep course are eligible to elect an Advanced Placement course
- Students enrolled in A&E Math and transitioning from 8th grade to 9th grade can continue in that level as long as they are passing the course with a grade of 70 (C or better).
- Pre-requisite courses will continue to be required as described in the Program of Studies.

A student who meets these criteria shall be eligible for enrollment in the respective Honors or Advanced Placement course, but shall not be required to enroll in the course. Such a decision should be made only after consultation with appropriate parties, which may include the student, guidance counselor, parents, teacher, subject area supervisor, and, in the case of a student receiving Special Education services, members of the IEP team. For students eligible to enroll, the final decision to enroll in the course resides with the parents or, in the case of an adult student, the student. Therefore, we ask students and parents to consider the balance of coursework demands, e.g. Honors vs. College Prep, in relation to interest, ability, and extra-curricular

activities. Serious thought should be given as to what a student can handle without creating undue stress.

What we know is that since we introduced the above criteria, *more* students have entered into Honors and AP courses, not less. At the time, the elimination of “Parental Overrides” was highly criticized by many in the community. The data show that the establishment of entrance criteria did not have a negative impact on student opportunities; rather the criteria enhanced the ability to make determinations about academic program in conjunction with counselor, teacher, and administrator input.

NO HOMEWORK NIGHTS

During the 2014-2015 school year, we held four No Homework Nights. The purpose of No Homework Nights was to give students time off from preparing homework and projects and studying for tests, as well as offering students an opportunity to explore topics about which they are passionate, spend time with family, enjoy outside activities, and attend WW-P concerts, plays, and athletic events.

As a follow up, I requested a subcommittee of the Superintendent’s Advisory Council (composed of teachers from each school) to study the topic of homework. As part of its review, the subcommittee conducted surveys to examine student, teacher, and parent attitudes regarding No Homework Nights. The surveys and the results showed that over 80 percent of K-12 students and parents supported No Homework Nights, over 80 percent of K-8 teachers supported these nights, and 45 percent of high school teachers supported No Homework Nights.

During the 2015-2016 school year, the subcommittee, known as the Homework Committee, will continue its work. The subcommittee will draft district policies and procedures, which will be submitted for review.

There is tremendous value in engaging in meaningful homework assignments that reinforce concepts and skills taught during the school day. At the same time, as evidenced by the responses on the surveys, there are times when we need to collectively have a break from the responsibilities of homework and enjoy time with family and friends.

PROGRAM REVIEWS

WW-P believes in a systematic review of instructional programs. Program reviews consist of an external team and an internal team who investigate the key aspects of the instructional program. These teams work separately to ensure independence and validity of the findings. Upon the completion of the review, an action plan is created that incorporates the findings of both the internal and external reviews. Recent program reviews have been completed in World Language, Language Arts, Social Studies, Special Education, and Technology (Infrastructure). We currently are starting a review of our Fine and Performing Arts programs.

G&T INTERNAL TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to the external review of the Gifted & Talent Program, the district had an internal committee, comprised of district representatives who met to review the G&T Program. This committee offered six areas of recommendations: Identification, Continental Math League (CML), Accelerated and Enriched Math (A&E Math), Twice Exceptional (2E), Professional Development for Staff and Administrators, and Parent Outreach. While A&E Math has generated the most public interest, the recommendation to transform A&E Math is only a component of the totality of the recommendations for the Gifted & Talented Program.

Our A&E Math curriculum is “designed to meet the needs of those rare students who have exceptional talents in Mathematics”; A&E includes topics that may not be covered in other courses. While the program has been perceived by members of the community as successful, there are some fundamental aspects of the program that have been called into question. The most alarming issue raised throughout the conversation of A&E is the starting point: Quite simply, I have not found an educator who has witnessed the testing process in Grade 3 and believes it is developmentally appropriate to begin determining a child’s mathematical capabilities at this point in a student’s educational program. Asking 8 or 9 year olds to take a high stakes test that questions deep mathematical thinking often yields a success rate below 10 percent. As a district, we are not reaching enough students -- due to test anxiety and the paralysis of standardized testing. As a result, the following recommendations have been made:

1. Eliminate the A&E identified program in Grades 4 and 5 and provide Math resource specialists to assist in the development of deep mathematical thinking and understanding for all students.
 - a. Data collected show no statistically significant difference in students starting the program in Grades 4 and 5 versus students who start the program in middle school. Therefore the A&E program in the middle school and high school sequence of courses will remain the same, culminating with Multivariable Calculus.
 - b. This solution will afford more students the opportunity to experience rich problems, explore Math concepts, and study historically important events in Mathematics. It will prepare all students for Math success by laying a broader and deeper foundation.
 - c. Provide Math resource specialists to work within classrooms and with targeted pull-out groups to meet beyond-the-curriculum learning needs.
2. Teachers should be provided with professional development that targets strategies for providing enrichment for all students.
3. We recommend that the district investigate establishing new criteria that will better identify students for the A&E Math. Identification of students should take place in Grade 5 for admittance into an A&E Program starting in Grade 6. An entrance criteria should be established that uses multiple data points and, if possible, over the course of

multiple years. This allows for the consideration of all students. The talent pool should be bigger to allow the district to grow the program.

The administration is working on finalizing recommendations for the A&E Program in conjunction with the Board of Education Curriculum Committee. It is anticipated that a public presentation on the recommendations will be made this year.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

As a district, we continue to reflect on our practices and approaches to meeting the needs of students who receive Special Education services. We must work to build student success from their strengths, rather than view them through their challenges. We must continue to work toward “inclusive practices” while ensuring that we support the needs of each individual child. We have completed a three-year implementation plan focused on our Special Education Program Review. We will continue to work on strengthening our relationship and communication with parents. We are committed to ensuring a continuity of care in the design and implementation of programs. All students deserve the opportunity to fully develop their competence and strength; as such our charge is to ensure that we are developing all students’ strengths while supporting their areas for growth and development.

BASIC SKILLS

During the last two school years, we have reviewed the Basic Skills Language Arts and Mathematics programs at the elementary level. During the review, inconsistencies were found related to entrance criteria, delivery of instruction, and exit criteria. For example, delivery structures included a range of push-in, pull-out, and hybrid models. Some students were in a program for a year, others exited throughout the year. In Basic Skills Reading, the number of students being supported ranged from a low of 6 students in one school to over 70 students in another school.

In an effort to improve practices and better support students, data were collected in the 2014-2015 school year and every student identified for Basic Skills was rescreened in Basic Skills Reading (September 2014). All students were screened again at the end of the next two trimesters (January and April). Using that data, the committee worked to set consistent entrance and exit criteria for all K-5 schools in the district.

For the 2015-2016 school year, students were placed in Basic Skills Reading based upon the newly developed entrance criteria. Table 3 compares the number of students who started in the program in 2014 versus 2015.

Table 3. Basic Skills students year-to-year comparison.

Grade Level	Fall 2014	Fall 2015
2nd grade	51	33
3rd grade	49	37
4th grade	38	16
5th grade	62	20

As we apply the new criteria, we see a significant decrease in the number of students being serviced by Basic Skills Reading. Many questions are raised by the data: What professional development is needed? Do our entrance and exit benchmarks need to be adjusted? How are these changes affecting the cultures at each school? How can we support teachers?

The data indicate more: In a community in which the push for academic excellence starts in Kindergarten, the data suggest that a student reading at grade level was being perceived as needing Basic Skills support, when in fact the student was reading at the appropriate level. In an effort to protect students from over-competition, students were being unnecessarily recommended for extra help so that they could “keep up.”

K-5 REPORT CARDS AND CONFERENCES

Last school year, a group of 30 K-5 teachers worked to align the elementary report card to content standards, district curricula, and grade-level benchmarks in each content area. The new K-5 report card was designed to provide parents with effective information about their child’s progress, including areas of strength and areas for improvement. The feedback will be tied to standards and will not be reflected in the terms of an academic grade. In addition, the new reporting periods will be based upon a trimester system with the first report cards being available in mid-December.

We also have changed the timing of parent-teacher conferences. The focus of the October parent-teacher conferences is to establish connections and open lines of communication between parents and teachers early in the school year. Unlike previous years, these conferences will not focus on the first marking period report card. Conference days are also planned for January and April for parents of students who are not yet meeting expectations.

INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC (Grades 4-8)

During the 2014-2015 school year, we ended the practice at some of the Grades 4-8 schools of recommending that students withdraw from Instrumental Music due to their ability. This practice expanded further to performance requirements that led to students being denied the right

to participate in concerts (either in totality or on specific pieces). The administration ended this practice with the simple philosophical approach that every student “has the right to squeak.”

There are many values in participating in Instrumental Music. Our practices often have discouraged those who have not had private lessons and those who did not begin their instrumental career in WW-P. Also, our practices have discouraged students in Special Education programs from participating in Instrumental Music.

All students should participate in Music. The value in participation goes far beyond the act of playing the specific instrument. The value lies in the skills one learns in performance, practice, and participation in a group. Playing an instrument activates both sides of the brain. It teaches the value of effort and achievement. It teaches appreciation for the arts.

At the upper elementary level and the middle school level, we should want our students to participate in these experiences. If not at this age, then when? The reality is that if students do not participate in Instrumental Music during Grades 4 to 8, there is a strong probability that they never will have this experience to appreciate and play music.

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING SERVICES

The WW-P Guidance and Counseling Program is concerned with the “Whole Child.” The personnel providing services are alert to the multiple dimensions of the child and view her/him as an individual – a unique human being endowed with dignity and worthy of respect. Our school counselors believe: **Guidance is for all children.** Each student is a worthy individual possessing unique qualities, abilities, and needs. Thus, focus is on identifying and providing for the individual needs of all students. Each person has the right to dignity as a human being without regard to gender, race, religion, color, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or handicapping condition. **Guidance is preventive.** All children move through developmental stages during which readiness to learn new skills is optimal. A carefully planned, sequenced program provides opportunities to meet these developmental challenges. **Guidance is concerned with remediation and crisis counseling.** Counselors are aware that some children will need more on-going individual and group counseling in order to cope with difficult life experiences. Identifying and attending to these special needs is critical to promoting optimal development. **Guidance is an integral part of the total educational program.** The WW-P Guidance program emphasizes understanding the dynamics of human behavior through the development of interpersonal relationship skills, satisfying and socially acceptable methods of coping, and responsible decision-making skills.

PROGRAMS FOCUSED ON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Fulfilling our mission statement and core values is not done in a vacuum. To educate nearly 10,000 students, we reach out to many partners: parents, community leaders, local and state

organizations and services, and others. Together, we work to teach our students, and ourselves, the values that are integrated into our lifestyle.

Our counseling and teaching staff members are instrumental in providing a warm, welcome, and respectful environment. We proudly support character education programs throughout the year. Our elementary schools utilize responsive classroom strategies in their classrooms and hold morning meetings. Our schools provide safe learning environments that are free from harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB). Our district has made a commitment to safe and respectful behavior for all. We work to support activities throughout the year with myriad programs focused upon conflict resolution, bullying prevention, promoting respect and tolerance, character education, cyber ethics, and cyber bullying.

We appreciate the support we receive from our PTA/PTSA partners in supporting the many assembly programs that work to reinforce the very messages we are working to uphold on a daily basis in our buildings.

CAMPAIGN CONNECT

Campaign Connect-New Jersey (CC-NJ) is a program provided by the Center for Safe and Supportive Schools (CSSS). The program is designed to “support New Jersey schools in becoming safer, more supportive, engaging, and inspiring by providing them with the training, tools, and resources to facilitate a team of stakeholders (administrators, faculty, students, parents, and relevant community organizations) through a data-informed, relationship-driven cycle of continuous school improvement.” High School South, High School North, Grover Middle School and Community Middle School are all working with school-based teams to utilize protocols to surface challenging issues and develop and implement a strategy and action plan to address those challenges.

During the past five years, I have been an advisory member for the Center for Supportive Schools. I believe in its work and I am proud of our participation as a district. Campaign Connect is grounded in research that when students are immersed in “safe, supportive, engaging, and inspiring environments where they feel connected to their school community through healthy relationships with adults and peers, they come to believe that people in their schools value them and want them to succeed.”

COMMUNITY CHALLENGE

There appears to be differences in the learning outcomes and expectations that our diverse community values. While I do not pretend to have the answers, we have to find opportunities to come together to discuss our hopes and dreams for our children. We have much work to do as a community to find opportunities for fellowship and partnership. Our children’s collective fates may be riding on the ability of the adults to come together with a common understanding, and with mutual respect.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER FOR OUR CHILDREN

The mission of the WW-P school district is to “develop passionate, confident, lifelong learners.” At the same time, the pervasive feelings of stress contributing to such negative attitudes toward learning are especially troublesome. As noted, the district has attempted to put policies in place to enhance systems, build consistencies, strengthen instructional practices, and provide opportunities for students to develop as citizens of the world.

One of our recent program reviewers stated, “With a community culture demanding a multitude of advanced academic offerings as well as high performance in all areas from their children, WW-P is in an admittedly challenging situation. The district must figure out how to help preserve the love of learning inherent within intellectually capable individuals while simultaneously preparing them to be competitive for selective college admissions.”

At the start of the school year, I sent an e-mail to staff that included this statement: “As educators, our responsibilities are to support students in pursuit of their learning, to support students in pursuit of their dreams, and to support students in pursuit of imagining successes not already conceived. While we strive to enhance teaching and learning, we also need to confront the social and emotional issues of all students; we need to answer the question: What does it mean to be successful?”

In a society that is focused on isolated issues versus issues of the whole, I hope this letter gives you a picture of the changes we are attempting to weave together to strengthen our district and to meet our responsibility and charge: to develop the “Whole Child, Every Child.”

We will continue to critically examine all programs, policies, and practices to ensure that we meet the cognitive as well as social-emotional needs of all children. I look forward to our continued work ahead in service of your children.

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