

Newtown Board of Education
Newtown, Connecticut
Education and Instruction Subcommittee

Minutes from the Board of Education Curriculum and Instruction Subcommittee held on Tuesday, April 27, 2021.

M. Ku A. Uberti C. McArthur P. Vitarelli
J. Vouros L. Silveira R. Notoro

Also present Board of Education member Deborra Zukowski.

J. Vouros called the meeting to order at 11:00 a.m.

J. Vouros moved to approve the minutes from the 3/23/21 meeting.

M. Ku seconded the motion.

Public Participation: None

Presentation: Foundations Implementation Update – L. Silveira, C. McArthur, P. Vitarelli, R. Notaro, Elementary Language Arts Consultants.

Lina Silveira provided an update on the Foundations program that was implemented in Kindergarten and first grade in 2019 and in second grade in 2020. The program provides systematic and explicit instruction in foundational reading skills, spelling and handwriting. Grades K – 1 were implemented 2019/2020 school year. The program integrates a multisensory approach through activities such as tapping and skywriting.

Patti Vitarelli explained that Foundations supports the readers and writers approach at K, 1, and 2 levels by focusing on word study, coding and decoding skill. Students learn and practice letter identification and letter sounds individually and in small groups. Through the use of magnetic boards teachers can see students work and provide immediate feedback.

Cynthia McArthur addressed that the learning progresses as students move through the grades. In Kindergarten, students explore how letters and sounds work and are able to read words like “cat” or “bed”. In first grade, students master more complex reading and writing skills such as blends, digraphs, based words, suffixes and prefixes. They also learn about capitalization, punctuation and syllabication. The program expands on this in second grade as students apply their knowledge of word structure to longer words and examine all six syllable types. They continue to practice their skills in readers and writers workshop to build stamina and strengthen fluency.

Robyn Notoro shared that students greatly enjoy the program and teachers have seen an enormous benefit to student learning regardless of reading level. Students learn letters and sounds much faster than in prior years. Intervention teachers reinforce skills in small groups and even our most advanced readers have benefitted from the program. She also noted that there is a high degree of skill transfer –

teachers have observed students breaking apart words in reading and writing utilizing the tapping strategy and there has been improved performance on DIBELS NWF screening. Penmanship has improved greatly.

M. Ku asked if some letters are easier to form than others. L. Silveira said the straight letters are the easiest to form. The more difficult are the letters that have a slant. The students are taught lower case letters, before they are taught upper case letters. The lower case letters are the letters they see more often when they are reading and the letters that they use when they are writing. The understanding is that when students attend pre-school they learn upper case letters, so the emphasis is put on lower case letters. Students learn the upper case much quicker.

P. Vitarelli added because Foundations does have that connection between the handwriting, the sound, and the shape of the letter, use of Zaner Bloser penmanship program has been discontinued in K through 2.

Newtown Middle School New Course Update – A. Uberti

A. Uberti announced that current 6th and 7th grade students had voted and the choices for the two new courses at NMS will be Kitchen Science and Project Adventure. NMS is in the process of creating postings for the two new positions. Kitchen Science will require appropriate science certification. Project Adventure position will require training. That person will work closely with Sara Strait to develop the units of instruction. Both courses will require draft curriculum be written this June.

Newtown Middle School and Newtown High School Student Support Efforts – A. Uberti

A. Uberti stated that additional support for struggling students is currently taking place at NMS and NHS. NMS identified 23 7th grade students and twenty eight 8th grade students who were failing two or more classes at the conclusion of the third quarter. Those parents were contacted and offered to have their child stay at the school for the full day. Students have their lunch then at 12:55 they are supported by building subs to complete work. Students then log on for the last class which assures that they attend and bussed home afterward. 20 out of 23 7th graders and 19 of 24 8th graders are participating. Causes of failure are tied to lack of work completion and engagement. This approach seems to be working.

NHS is focusing on supporting seniors due to the time urgency. At the end of the 3rd quarter there were 24 seniors with failing grades and identified as being in need of “senior management”. Again, work completion and lack of engagement were the biggest issue. Students are assigned to work with a staff member for one hour per week. This person assists the student in completing missing assignments. The parents of these students are also involved through meetings.

Both staff and administration have gone above and beyond in their efforts to support students who are struggling due to the impact of the pandemic on their school experience the past two years.

M. Ku asked if there were opportunities for others, besides seniors, to get assistance at NHS. A. Uberti stated that students are being supported through other measures such as math center and the student support center. School counselors are supporting many students each day.

J. Vouros inquired about 5th and 6th graders and whether they could also stay on Wednesdays.

A. Uberti said there are still a large number of remote learners at Reed and the middle school. As of last week, it was around 60 as opposed to the elementary schools who in most cases have less than ten remote learners. Many K-6 teachers use the time on Wednesdays to connect with their remote learners more personally. Teachers are connecting with their remote learners on Wednesday to help keep them caught up. There has also been increased effort to encourage parents to have their remote learners return to school in person if it is not working for their student at home. This seems to have been more success at the middle school level, likely due to parents becoming concerned about how their student will perform in high school.

Assistant Superintendent Update – A. Uberti

Kindergarten screening is underway. Principals collaborated and created video presentation which is posted on our website. Parents then have an opportunity to meet their principal directly.

The K-5 math pilot is wrapping up and the selection will be announced to teachers next week. F. Purcaro is in the process of compiling all of the data that has been collected. A. Uberti stated that there will be a presentation to C & I on May 11th regarding the selection of the program. That will be a preview of the presentation to the full board on May 18th.

NGSS and Smarter Balanced testing is underway. The window closes June 4th. Individual buildings are devising their own plans based on the number of remote learners and any issues of mass quarantining that arise. The CSDE has asked that all students be tested, preferably in person, but if not then remotely.

A. Uberti addressed additional questions that had been raised regarding changes to the math placement process for incoming 5th graders. She reiterated that the process had to change since many of the data points are not available due to the COVID disruption to typical testing. Questions regarding Math student placement grade 4 to grade 5. She shared that in order to have multiple data points for consideration, an in-house assessment was created in order to identify students who are performing at a much higher level than a typical end of year 4th grader. She received multiple questions regarding the decision to include 5th grade content on that assessment. She explained that this was the only way to ascertain which students were advanced. She also reminded Board members that the NWEA, which has been used for identification purposes for years, has no ceiling which means students are exposed to questions that may cover content up to and through high school. Parents are discouraged from “prepping” students for testing but some do and always have. Students who enter 5th grade well above grade level, sometimes even doing Algebra, have often participated in extracurricular math work.

M. Ku noted that there are families who have the resources that will prepare their students and is concerned about those who cannot.

A. Uberti acknowledged that ideally aptitude should be part of what is considered which is why OLSAT non-verbal scores are used. This is also the reason why 5th grade Math Plus teachers focus on depth more than acceleration. And lastly, the math pathways have multiple entry points for students to advance taking Algebra in 8th grade type problems. The placement process for this year will be a two-

step process. Data from several measures will be analyzed to determine who is recommended to take a final placement test. However, it will be an open process meaning that any parent who wants their child to take that placement test can request them to do so.

A. Uberti shared that Project Challenge students in 4th graders returned to Reed for the first time this year on Wednesday. Every student attended, parents and teachers were very happy. They will continue attending the cross-district class on Wednesday through June 2nd.

J. Vouros asked for an update on Project Lead the Way. A. Uberti said she would be happy to add that to a future agenda.

Public Participation: None

J Vorous adjourned the meeting at 12:14 p.m.

M. Ku seconded the motion.

Respectfully submitted,
Donna Norling

THESE ARE DRAFT MINUTES AND ARE SUBJECT TO THE APPROVAL OF THE CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION COMMITTEE.