

BOARD OF EDUCATION
Ellington, Connecticut

October 27, 2020

Curriculum Committee Meeting Minutes

The Curriculum Committee of the Ellington Board of Education met on Tuesday, October 27, 2020, at the Ellington High School Library, 37 Maple Street, Ellington, CT.

Attendees:

Administrative/Staff Team Members: Mr. Brian Hendrickson, Erin LaFleche, Dawn Dwyer, Michelle Bennet, Lynne Ouellet, Matt Murphy, Maria Enrique, Steve Autierri, Michael Nash, Ed DePeau

Board of Education Subcommittee Members: Dr. Michael Young, Gary Blanchette, Jen Dzen, Liz Nord, Kris Picard-Wambolt and Mirium Underwood

Call to Order: The meeting was called to order at 5:05 p.m. by Dr. Young (Chair).

AGENDA

1. Citizen and Staff Forum

None.

2. Seeds of Civility/Presidential Election 2020 and the School District's Role

The importance of discussing controversial issues with civil discourse is highlighted by the upcoming US elections. Ms. Ouellet reported to the committee about how she recommends teachers engage students in scholarly discussion on the controversial issues using the Seeds of Civility, citing an example discussion of Supreme Court appointments and election debates. She described a recent class activity simulating a virtual Supreme Court nomination process that required the use of Wednesday planning half day. The Kennedy Institute moderated a role play of the nomination process online. This resulted in a "very civil" conversation about the process of Judge Barrett and some surprising changes of student attitudes. The role play itself also occurred in the half day Wednesday time block, and utilized the polling feature of Zoom.

Mr. Murphy provided an elementary school perspective on addressing current issues with civil discourse and minimized bias. He reported about Constitution Day as one hook in the curriculum he uses every year. He reflected on a student who was so troubled by the 2016 presidential outcome that s/he did not come to school the next day after Election Day. He told us how that event caused him to reflect on his own role and how he hoped he did not "reveal his hand" when discussing topics in class. He says he is a little nervous about how ready students are to discuss controversial issues in his 6th grade class.

Mr. Hendrickson pointed out the importance of Wednesday half day planning time to support collaboration among colleagues particularly with regard to the Seeds of Civility. Mr. Nash was intrigued and pleasantly impressed that Mr. Murphy was even using Wednesday time to collaborate with middle school instructors as well as elementary instructors about how to deal with classroom issues. Mr. Hendrickson mentioned Mr. Spada's work on using multiple digital sources to ensure balanced presentations on controversial issues, which itself was the focus of 2020 teacher professional development. Mr. Murphy also mentioned that he has also been teaching the Seeds of Civility to his 6th graders since September to lay the ground work for further discussion during their World Regions curriculum.

Ms. LaFleche, Ms. Dwyer, and Ms. Bennet described the Grade 3 need for teacher planning time to redesign lessons to stay consistent across schools as well as with the distance learning groups. They noted that even in-person instruction needed redesign to accommodate social distancing and enable what is best for students, in light of the physical guidelines the classroom environment. Ms. LaFleche provided examples of collaborative manipulatives and group activities from last year's pre-existing lesson plans that simply could not occur with the changed conditions. Pressure from a shortage of enough substitute teachers is also reducing planning time for teachers as their students' time at specials are reduced. Efforts to align scope, sequence and pace among classes also requires more frequent planning among teachers that takes place during Wednesday half day planning. Mr. Hendrickson noted that the physical classroom layout constrains what pedagogical strategies can be used by teachers at all levels. Ms. Dwyer described how Wednesday planning time is used to meet with a variety of educational specialists in Math, Reading, Special Education, Tech specialists, and others. It was reported that Silver (distance learning) teachers use the Wednesday time to become familiar with grade level teams and understand the existing curriculum so it can be delivered remotely. The importance and need for collaborative team time (eliminated by Hybrid and DL design schedules) cannot be under emphasized.

Ms. Nord asked if Wednesday planning was a stress reliever for teachers. Ms. LaFleche confirmed it was essential for planning and stress reduction and that those 3 hours are compressed with rapid-paced information exchanges. Ms. Picard added the need for such planning time. It was noted that the 3rd grade team is creating a common 20 slides per day are created for shared presentations and helps coordinate and align the curriculum.

Ms. Underwood asked teachers to confirm their need for Wednesday planning time for the rest of the year, which they confirmed. The committee discussed how the full Board might undertake a discussion and deliberation about extending the Wednesday half-day beyond the emergency COVID response and associated Governor's executive orders.

3. EMS Math program development

Mr. Nash shared a few thoughts about how important it is to have a few fun moments with students particularly in extraordinary times and the stresses of the COVID response. He particularly cited Ms. Enrique's approach to playful activities in her math classes. Mr. Hendrickson reported that 8th grade math continues to be a focus area for curriculum improvement for the district and is part of how planning and instructional improvements are continuing despite changes related to the pandemic.

Ms. Enrique reported that 8th grade math was de-leveled this year as planned and Wednesday planning has been essential to this effort. Wednesday half day planning time is used to seek enrichment opportunities and create contingencies for dynamic schedule changes each week. Because at the middle school level teachers have in-person and distance students at the same time, they use Wednesday time to plan for individual student work that frees the teacher to meet with both Silver and in-person students as needed. Curriculum pairs (teacher dyads) are using the Wednesday time to align their work. Dr. DePeau reported how math is coordinated across all district schools by grade level.

Mr. Nash pointed out that the modified middle school schedule reduced availability of Special Education teachers, and that function is now accomplished using Wednesday planning time. Also, as the rigor of the 8th grade math curriculum is increased in accord with Board goals, new assessments and materials need to be designed, and Wednesday planning time is essential to this work as well.

It was discussed that the number of high school seniors taking Calculus may be one indicator of how middle school math changes are succeeding to improve math achievement while ensuring support for both deep understanding, enrichment opportunities, and acceleration for some. A discussion of how some students may "burn out" when accelerated too quickly in the math curriculum.

The meeting was adjourned at 6:35 p.m.

1st. K. Picard-Wambolt

2nd. M. Underwood

VOTE: Unanimously approved.

Minutes respectfully submitted by:

Michael Young, Curriculum Committee Chairperson