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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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March 4, 2013

MEMORANDUM

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Bobbi Jo Kenyon, 2012-2013 Michigan Teacher of the Year

SUBJECT: Teacher of the Year Report

In Grand Rapids - Ottawa Hills High School

Our school began to implement an Extended Learning Plan this semester. Through the plan, staff will address specific content area deficiencies identified through the data produced by Gaining Achievement in the New Standards (GAINS). To make time each day to implement the plan, we started school earlier to allow an additional 15 minutes to be added at the end of 3rd hour. Our action statement for this initiative states "In order to improve student achievement, we must have a sense of urgency for intentional planning and instructional delivery that not only deepens students' knowledge and skills of the prescribed curriculum, but also targets specific areas of deficiency." Each week day will have a different core focus and data will be collected through the use of Turning Point Clickers. On a daily basis, teachers will submit the report generated through Turning Point to our Data Support Specialist. Student progress will be shared with students and staff, and analyzed for areas that need more improvement. This new strategy will allow us to have more time to work with students in areas of math, science, English language arts (ELA), and literacy. Hopefully this will help us increase their skill sets as well as help them be more successful in standardized tests such as the American College Test (ACT).

Our literacy coaches and Instructional Leadership Team presented our School Improvement Grant (SIG) professional development (PD) learning around Smarter Balanced Assessments. After receiving positive feedback from the staff taking the ACT last month, which helped teachers to see what skills were needed to help students be more successful, we decided to have teachers complete a section of the Smarter Balanced Performance Assessment in science called, "*Nuclear Power: Friend or Foe?*" After having time to do the task, the staff had a discussion about what skills students need in order to do well on this assessment.

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Students would need to evaluate and select information from a series of sources and then write an argumentative paper that: 1) gave a clearly established claim about the topic; 2) presented relevant supporting evidence, details, and elaboration consistent with the position, purpose, audience, and sources; 3) effectively organized their ideas; 4) used proper grammar and conventions; and 5) addressed the issue of reliable and unreliable resources. Again, this was an eye-opening way for teachers to see what direction assessments will be going and what skills we must teach our students to be career and college ready. As a leadership team, we have found that telling teachers what has to be done to help students be successful has far less impact than having them perform tasks that students will need to do and then realizing what skills they must address.

Our school held a full PD day this month where we addressed several topics: close and critical reading, writing rubrics and addressing conventions, and examining student work. Each topic was presented by a literacy coach or our Instructional Leadership Team member. As always, when planning the PD for our teachers, we look at what we are noticing in our Learning Walks, Instructional Rounds, classroom observations by coaches, and teacher surveys. We also make it a priority to not have teachers just “sit and get”, but to have them actually practicing strategies and allowing them time to think of how they will use them in their classrooms. For example, after learning about Close and Critical Reading and doing a group activity, teachers were given time to develop a lesson in their current unit using this strategy. We then had teachers share out, which allowed everyone to see multiple ways this strategy could be utilized. In the session on examining student work, sample student assignments were distributed and teachers followed the tuning protocol to see how student work could be examined in their Professional Learning Communities (PLC). This strategy allows departments to have dialogue around such topics as quality, rigor, relevance, and the alignment of the assignment to standards. The importance of teacher collaboration in activities such as this is essential to assuring student success.

At the end of the day, our team distributed a commitment slip to all the teachers. They chose something they learned and made a plan to implement it in their classroom, and found a way that its success could be measured. They were also asked to bring samples of their strategy and student work samples to their PLC in two weeks. This allows for greater accountability for the implementation of material they learn and creates a constructive dialogue around its effectiveness. I believe this very important aspect of PD is often lacking as we give teachers strategies, but then do not hold them accountable for its implementation, give feedback on its use, or discuss its effectiveness.

Our District

Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) hosted its third district-wide PD day that allowed teachers to choose which sessions to attend. This model continues to be successful and teachers feel the day is worthwhile as they decide what areas they would like more support in. Feedback is an important component when implementing new models such as this to evaluate effectiveness. To do this, our district sent out an online form for teachers to rate the quality of learning in their sessions as well as give an input into future sessions. Throughout the past year, teacher and community input has been a very important factor in creating an atmosphere of respect and accountability in our district.

Superintendent Teresa Neal reminded teachers of the importance of being ambassadors and “sales” representatives for our district as competition becomes fiercer due to expanding charter schools and “school choice” among public school districts and parochial schools who are consistently getting more aggressive in their efforts to recruit students. She spoke of the quality secondary school choice opportunities within GRPS with University Placement and Recruitment for Educators Program (UPrep), Grand Rapids Montessori High School, City High, Innovation Central, Union High School’s new *Challenge Scholars*, Ottawa’s new cutting edge partnership with Historically Black College and Universities, dual enrollment choices, and a multitude of other initiatives and programs GRPS offers. As districts face the ever growing competition for students, it is essential that we remain positive and highlight all the amazing work we do as well as continue to be innovative and focus on being schools where students are successful and career and college ready.

In My Classroom

My students have started to learn about genetics this semester, and this is traditionally one of their favorite units. Students have explored their own traits, researched the experiments of Mendel, saw how traits are passed from parents to offspring, built models, and worked on finding probabilities of offspring for various types of genetics and scenarios. This month, they will continue to delve deeper into how DNA codes for proteins as they look into the processes of transcription and translation. These concepts can be very difficult even for college students, but with inquiry, a lot of hands-on activities, great online resources and simulations, and reflection, I know they will do well. A favorite phrase that I tell students when they start to learn new and difficult concepts is, “Trust me, this may seem difficult at first, but we will work through this together – you *CAN* and you *WILL* be able to do this!” It is amazing what high expectations and showing students belief in them can do – whether they are gifted, at-risk, or have special needs. Watching students go from never hearing about a difficult concept to being able to explain it to me (with pride), is an incredible feeling and one that really builds their self-efficacy: what an awesome joy of teaching!

Creating self-efficacy and holding high standards for my students is very important to me. Working in the inner city with the majority of students behind grade level and many never being successful in science in the past, has its challenges. For these students, I truly see that success (no matter how small) will breed more success. Last Friday illustrated a prime example.

“Jeremy” has not passed any biology tests all year, he often is a behavior problem, and is labeled as a special needs, at-risk student. He often seems to understand the concepts (when he pays attention), but fails every assessment. I had tried a multitude of strategies to reach him, but had been unsuccessful. One day last week, he had a “good” day and I pulled him aside to really praise him and tell him how I noticed he really was paying attention, and I knew he could do it. He said the material is too hard and he couldn’t learn it – I tried to tell him of the connection of paying attention in class to learning. I challenged him to pay attention all week and if he didn’t pass the test, I would let him retake it. He focused all week, like I encouraged him, and I made a conscious effort to constantly praise him for staying on task. Thursday was the test review and he was excitedly shouting out answers. The other students were looking at him and saying “I didn’t know you were so smart”, which put a big smile on his face.

Friday was the test, and I was very excited to see what he could do. He received the test and looked at me uncertainly – I reassured him he could do it. I watched him take the test with more concentration than I have ever seen from him and with 5 minutes left he handed it in (a student who usually scribbled down anything, was done in 15 minutes, and refused to put forth more effort). He asked me if I could grade it after class (he never cared about his grade before this and never wanted a test back). I couldn't wait either! His grade was an 88% or a B+. We smiled at one another and then he gave me the biggest hug. It was all I could do not to tear up. He asked to bring the test home to show his grandma (she is raising him) who wouldn't believe it. The best part is what I heard him say, "Wow, you are right, I can do this. I just didn't think I was smart enough to learn school stuff. I feel so good!"

My year is *filled* with stories like this. It is a constant battle sometimes to get kids to this point, but I will never give up - it is what teachers do. Working with at-risk students can be challenging, but that is why I teach where I am. I live for moments like this! Success is definitely one step at a time, and like the story of the child throwing the starfish back into the ocean, "to this one, I made a difference".

As Michigan Teacher of the Year (MTOY)

I presented at the GRPS Board Meeting this month about what I have been doing as the MTOY. I talked about the website I developed to share my MTOY journey, my instructional strategy blog, and the resources I made available for teachers. I also shared highlights from each month (September through January), which included my presentations to area schools for PD, talking with pre-service teachers, attending and presenting at conferences, and my Arizona trip where I met other State Teachers of the Year (STOYs).

One thing I acknowledged to the GRPS Board is that when I meet with other schools and STOYs, I realize that our district is on the forefront of a lot of innovation and best practices that other districts and states are just beginning to implement. I truly believe the phrase "if we keep doing what we have always done, we will keep getting what we always got" is a great motto for education as we look at what we do and see the need to re-invent ourselves. To better prepare our students for their futures and to move our nation's education system forward, we must think creatively and learn from research how we can help our students be more successful.

I continue to network with the other STOYs that I met in Arizona at the National Teacher of the Year Program Conference in January. They have been a wonderful resource. In addition, it is a great way to give each other support in our endeavors as we all have the common goal to help improve education across the nation.

Next month I look forward to presenting to pre-service teachers at Michigan State University and Grand Valley State University, talking with a Kent Intermediate School District Teacher Leadership class, and attending several conferences.