



Citizens For Education



Spring Issue May, 2010

The objectives of Citizens For Education are to ensure a quality education for all students of the Council Rock School District, to better inform the Council Rock community of educational issues, and to increase the involvement of the community in the decision making processes affecting the quality of education in Council Rock.

Recognizing the Value of Accelerated Classes

Citizens For Education met with Joy McClendon, Director of Elementary Education/Curriculum, and Barry Desko, Director of Secondary Education, to discuss the rigor levels of courses in the two high schools. Currently, there are five different levels of classes given at the high schools (AP, Honors, Accelerated, Academic and Foundations), although not for all subjects, and not at every grade level.

Beginning with this year's sophomore class, the class of 2012, different weights are assigned to the grades earned in those classes, creating a weighted GPA. On page 2 is a chart detailing how the weighted GPA is calculated for all letter grades.

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Benefits of the Council Rock Music Education Program

Music education in Council Rock not only provides students with many benefits, but it can also lead to an experience that ranks as the performance of a lifetime. In addition to the positive effect that Council Rock's elementary through secondary concerts have on both listeners and the school district's reputation, research shows that students who are involved in music perform better in school and on standardized tests. Those who elect to take music in high school get the added bonus of an opportunity to perform on the world stage.

Music helps students get better grades overall. Some research has shown that studying and creating music may help people who play music develop more interaction between the left and right side of the brain and improve their capacity to learn other subjects because music encompasses all facets of academia:

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enVision

New Math Program for Grades K-5

Council Rock will implement a new math program, titled enVision, by Pearson Learning, in third through fifth grades during the 2010-2011 school year. Kindergarten through second grade will be added in the 2011-2012 school year. This two-stage phase-in of the program allows for greater Math Specialist support of the classroom teachers, ensures that all classrooms will have the needed technology (smart boards, projectors, etc) and spreads the cost over two budget years.

Selecting a Curriculum

The last math curriculum, implemented ten years ago, was considered a success, but after a decade it was time to choose a curriculum to move

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(Accelerated Classes—continued from page 1)

Level	A	B	C	D	F
AP	4.8	4.3	3.3	1.8	0
Honors	4.5	4.0	3.0	1.5	0
Accelerated, Academic, Foundations	4.0	3.0	2.0	1.0	0

The vast majority of students are enrolled in either Academic, Accelerated or Honors/AP classes. Foundations, according to the Program Planning Guide, is one of the “alternative programs for regular and special education,” and, on average, about 7.5% of the high school population is enrolled in these classes. Below is a chart detailing the number of classroom sections currently offered in the high schools, broken down by course rigor (for purposes of this article, Honors and AP classes have been grouped together).

School/Year	Academic		Accelerated		Honors/AP		Total
South 09-10	119	37%	108	34%	93	29%	320
North 09-10	128	36%	118	33%	114	32%	360

Historically, and as can be seen above, these three levels of classes have been nearly equally populated. It is a strong statement about the quality of the Council Rock School District that it recognizes the need to have three different tracks in many subject areas, allowing students the opportunity to learn with their peers at a challenging and appropriate level. With a total graduating class of over 1,000 students each year between the two high schools, the district doesn't limit choices that could lead to a student taking a class either above or below their academic comfort level.

It is interesting to note, however, that Academic and Accelerated classes, while having different rubrics and work expectations, are equally weighted. According to Mrs. McClendon and Mr. Desko, several aspects were considered two years ago, when the change to a weighted GPA was approved, including the following points:

- The primary function of the grading and weighting systems is for the college entry process. Council Rock wanted to be competitive with other schools that weight GPAs, which is a current trend among many high schools.
- Many other schools do not have an “accelerated” track. Council Rock provides an explanatory paragraph about this level in its profile, which is part of every student's transcript packet when applying to college. The administrators believe that by virtue of the delineation, colleges will recognize the increased degree of rigor, without the need for an additional weight to be placed on the grade itself. Council Rock also does not offer Accelerated courses in every subject at every grade level and some Accelerated classes are not named as such.

Under the new grading system, counselors will be reporting only the weighted GPA to colleges, not attached to a “maximum” GPA. Instead of a class rank, the GPA will be divided into 10 percentage areas called deciles. A chart in the profile will show what GPA range is associated with each decile. It will be up to the colleges to determine in which 10% segment each student falls.

One concern about not weighting Accelerated classes differently from Academic classes is that students will “play the system” – taking an Academic class instead of an Accelerated class because there is no perceived advantage to taking an Accelerated course, while there is a risk of getting a lower grade in the Accelerated class. As a result, students could begin choosing courses less rigorous than their abilities in greater and greater numbers. Since the program has only been in effect for two years, it is too early to recognize any emerging trends.

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(Accelerated Classes—continued from page 2)

A larger concern is that a student in Accelerated courses, doing work at a higher level of rigor, but receiving even one lower grade than their Academic counterpart, could end up with a GPA lower than the student in Academic level classes, where the course rigor is not as demanding. That student could also be in a lower decile that is reported to colleges.

Regardless of the college-motivated influences, students should be recognized for work per-

formed. If the expectations of students in an accelerated class are consistently higher, sometimes even using the same textbook as honors classes, they should be rewarded for that increased level of expectation. **To fully recognize the additional work done by students in Accelerated classes, Citizens For Education recommends that the administration and School Board reconsider the current policy and assign a higher weight to Accelerated classes, above Academic and below the Honors level.**

(enVision—continued from page 1)

Council Rock into the future. To begin this curriculum renewal process, a committee of over 30 staff members, consisting of math specialists, teachers from all levels, special education teachers and administrators, met from January-May 2009 and considered four possible programs. The committee saw presentations from each publisher and engaged in committee discussions. A parent committee was also formed in the spring of 2009 to review the findings and be brought into the discussion.

Math Curriculum Coordinator, Donna Pianoforte, had seen enVision in its developmental phase but was even more impressed once it was ready for release. Ms. Pianoforte feels that it represents comprehensive instructional methods and was pleased that enVision was authored by two presidents of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM).

enVision was selected for a number of reasons. They include:

- It is a 21st century product
- It is visual
- It strikes a balance between conceptual and skills based learning
- It contains a “bridge” sequence of pictures to present new concepts
- Technology is used throughout the program, including animated concepts
- It focuses on problem solving, a notch up from the “problem of the day” used now
- It has a literature connection
- Differentiation is integrated into the program (giving students the opportunity to learn at their own pace)
- The topics (not chapters) are shorter
- It includes a special education piece for intervention
- It is paced for state assessment tests and includes items specific to Pennsylvania’s state tests (PSSA)

The Pilot Program

enVision is being piloted this school year in 21 classrooms, representing both primary and intermediate levels at all schools. Teachers piloting were primarily those on the committee. Pilot teachers have representatives of Pearson Learning coming in to do enVision workshops with them. Teachers also meet monthly after school from 4:30-5:30 for pilot meetings.

A different math program, McDougal-Littel Course 1, was chosen for sixth grade because of its seamless transition to the new middle school curriculum, McDougal-Littel Course 2/3, which was introduced this year. There should be no problem transitioning students from enVision in 5th grade to the different 6th grade curriculum, as this happens currently.

Benefits of enVision to Students

There are a number of pieces to this curriculum that were viewed as superior to the last program, such as:

- Technology – interactive visual and symbolic instruction “makes concepts come alive.” For example, a quarter can be shown on the screen and when tapped it will crack to produce 2 dimes and a nickel

(Continued on page 4)

(enVision—continued from page 3)

- More sophisticated math vocabulary – the same vocabulary used at higher levels
- Contains “centers” activities
- Has more integration of math and language arts
- Contains electronic manipulations
- Organization and management of materials is much improved

enVision is easily accessed online, and projectors and smart boards are used for instruction. Grades 3-5 were selected for the initial implementation because those classrooms have greater access to the technology. For classrooms lacking smart boards and projectors, principals are dedicating funds from their buildings, and PTOs are assisting where they can.

enVision is Changing Math Education for Students

Teachers of the pilot program have observed more enthusiasm for math in their classrooms and student grades have improved. Conceptual understanding is being developed. Kids are really learning instead of doing rote practice. As one math specialist stated “we are seeing 3rd graders doing math in their heads!”

Though textbooks are provided, students with internet access do not have to take textbooks home, because work can be done with the program online. Parents can help students with homework online as well. The program includes a “homework helper” where certain problems are represented and solutions explained. It also contains an error analysis piece where common mistakes are contained in a solution and the student must identify the mistakes.

Students can take quizzes online and the data is transferred to the teacher’s account. This allows data to be graphed and students having trouble are identified immediately. The program will generate individual worksheets tailored to a student’s weakness. This allows for an understanding of math, not just computation, through visual means.

Staff Development

Due to the technology involved, there is a staff learning curve and staff development is planned. Staff members will be brought up to speed on using smart boards for this curriculum. A June or July workshop session will be held for all 3rd through 6th grade teachers along with a make-up session in August. Since a new math curriculum will now be in

place from grades 3 through 8, a school opening in-service devoted to training math teachers will occur. Act 48 time (for continuing professional education) that the state requires all teachers to perform, will be used as well.

Elementary Math Specialists are the key to staff development, yet last year a Math Specialist was cut from the budget. **With all that the Math Specialists are tasked to do, as well as supporting a new curriculum, it is imperative to reinstate the Math Specialist position. Citizens believes that Math Specialist support for teachers and students is key to the success of enVision in Council Rock.**

Parent Development

With enVision’s internet component, parents can reinforce in-class learning at home. Ms. Pianoforte and the Elementary Math Specialists are educating parents through presentations to PTO groups which are being held now. There will also be fall meetings throughout the district for parents once the program goes live across all classrooms in grades 3-5.

The Cost of enVision

The cost for the new curriculums in grades K-6 is \$435,000. There is also a minimal yearly cost for workbook worksheets in grades K-2. The cost includes product support for the life of the implementation, expected to be at least 6-7 years. Council Rock received a reduction of 20% off the normal price by having a signed contract by 12/31/09. We will receive all new materials and the newest edition of the program. CR also received shipping at a 2% rate, instead of the typical 10% because we used Pearson’s new online ordering system.

All told, there was a savings of close to \$150,000 thanks to negotiations by Ms. Pianoforte and her team, and a quick school board vote. Citizens For Education urges the administration and school board to spend a portion of these savings to reinstate the Math Specialist position cut in last year’s budget.

Citizens For Education thanks Math Curriculum Coordinator, Donna Pianoforte, and Math Specialists Julie Eastburn and Linda Morrin for spending time talking with Citizens about this new curriculum. Their enthusiasm for the new program is contagious and Citizens is excited to see such a dynamic, interactive curriculum beginning in Council Rock.

High School Reading Initiatives

Council Rock has made a concerted effort to improve both reading instruction and test scores at the high school level. This is the second year that Council Rock is offering a program called “READ 180” to 9th graders (and a few 10th graders) as the administration continues to use additional strategies to improve the district’s PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) testing results in 11th grade.

The 9th grade Reading Remediation - Students who need reading remediation in 9th grade are offered a course called “Strategies for improving your Reading” (Strategies). The combination of “Strategies” and “English Foundations” is designed to help both regular education and special education students. “Strategies” and “Foundations” are both full-year, daily courses.

Approximately five percent of the 8th grade populations of each middle school were recommended to take “Strategies” in the 2010-2011 school year. All in-coming 9th graders recommended for “Strategies” must have parental permission to be enrolled in the course. This program is unique to 9th graders at both high schools, and a few 10th graders at North. The only students who take reading courses in 10th, 11th and 12th grade are Special Education students, whose IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) requires a reading component.

“READ 180” - The intervention program employed by teachers of the “Strategies” classes is “READ 180”. “READ 180” uses instructional software, high-interest literature, and direct instruction in reading skills. It is a proven, research-based intervention, and at a cost of \$60,000, Council Rock purchased a total of sixty-nine “READ 180” licenses, which can be used at either high school.

High School Reading Measurements - Although the main measurement for reading in high school is the spring PSSA exam given in 11th grade, the students in the district’s “Strategies” class are continually tested for progress and monitored for improvement through the Scholastic Reading Inventory (see Middle Level Literacy article on page 12 for more information about the Scholastic Reading Inventory). The district shared results that demonstrate substantial growth for most of the students at Council Rock South who are in the program. Because the first Council Rock students to participate in “READ 180” are only in 10th grade this year, it will be another one and a half years before the district gets the results of their 11th grade PSSA exams.

PSSA Reading Results – The PSSA tests are the measurement Pennsylvania uses to assess if a school has met Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals under the Federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation. A 4-year tracking of 11th grade PSSA data, noted on the chart below, shows Advanced scores have gone down and Below Basic scores have gone up during this time period. The PSSA web site recognizes that Below Basic signifies “a need for additional instructional support and/or increased student commitment to achieve the Proficient Level.”

11th Grade PSSA Data				
	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
CR Totals				
Advanced	50.9%	45.5%	49.7%	46.9%
Proficient	30.9%	35.4%	30.5%	31.3%
Basic	10.5%	10.9%	11.6%	12.1%
Below Basic	7.6%	8.2%	8.2%	9.8%
CR IEP Totals				
Advanced	8.9%	8.4%	11.6%	2.9%
Proficient	27.4%	30.1%	30.8%	26.8%
Basic	29%	27.3%	27.4%	26.8%
Below Basic	34.7%	34.3%	30.1%	43.5%
State Totals				
Advanced	31.2%	28.6%	31.5%	32.7%
Proficient	33.9%	36.5%	33%	32.2%
Basic	16.3%	15.5%	16.4%	16.2%
Below Basic	18.5%	19.3%	19.1%	18.9%

(*High School Reading—continued from page 5*)

Last year's Below Basic total was 9.8% out of almost 1,100 students. If these testing results truly reflect academic performance, the percentage would translate into over 100 students graduating this year who scored Below Basic in Reading in 11th grade.

Since neither North's nor South's Special Education IEP students met the Federal *No Child Left Behind* law's 2009 requirement that 63% of this measurable sub group score Proficient or above, both schools were put on warning for not meeting their AYP goals. Instead, 70% of Special Education IEP students are Basic (26.8%) or Below Basic (43.5%).

The chart above provides a view on four successive years of testing, each year with a different cohort of students taking the test. The chart below, however, is longitudinal, meaning it demonstrates the scores of the same group of students at two different test sittings, in 8th grade in 2005-2006 and in 11th grade in 2008-2009. The data indicates that test scores in 11th grade dropped significantly in the Advanced level and increased in the Below Basic level from these students' 8th grade results.

	% Advanced	% Proficient	% Basic	% Below Basic
2005-2006 8th grade	65.5%	22.8%	5.9%	5.8%
2008-2009 11th grade	46.9%	31.3%	12.1%	9.8%

To try and improve the overall decline in 11th grade PSSA testing, Council Rock has focused on areas that could help improve performance.

The 11th grade Testing Environment: During 11th grade PSSA testing, students report to their high school at their regularly scheduled time. This year, PSSA testing took place on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, April 13-15, when most of the senior class was on their high school senior trip. The PSSA testing took place from 7:30am to 10:30am without any other students in the school. Eleventh graders had the opportunity to eat lunch from 10:30 to 11:00 before joining all other high school students in grades 9, 10 and 12 (if they are not on the senior trip), who did not report to school until 11:05. All the students then had an abbreviated class schedule for the remainder of the day.

Benchmark Critical Reading Test: Peggy Walsh stated, "This year the high school instituted benchmark critical reading tests for 9th, 10th, and 11th grades." The tests, which are administered three times a year in 9th and 10th grades and twice a year in 11th grade, are an attempt to keep students familiar with the format of PSSA questions. Students have a two-year gap in taking PSSA tests; no formal testing is done in 9th and 10th grades. The test data from these benchmarks is available on performance tracker (the computer program the district uses to keep track of student grades) and serves as a formative assessment to chart student progress in critical reading."

PSSA scores are going to be on the transcript – Council Rock administration reports that interviews with students have revealed that the 11th graders do not take PSSA testing seriously. To comply with Chapter 4 regulations of the Pennsylvania School code, and to counteract students' contention that their PSSA scores do not matter, beginning this year, the 11th grade PSSA proficiency levels will be reported on student transcripts in all four course areas (Reading, Math, Writing and Science). It is hoped that since the colleges will now see each student's PSSA scores, an 11th grader's motivation to do their best will be improved.

Citizens would like to thank Council Rock South's reading teacher, Shannon Gehman, for her enthusiasm toward students who struggle with reading and for sharing the progress they have made in the new Council Rock Read 180 program. Citizens would also like to thank RELA coordinator, Peggy Walsh, and Director of Elementary Education and Curriculum Services, Joy McClendon, for their assistance with this article. Citizens will follow up with Ms. Walsh and Ms. McClendon when more testing results are available for those in the new reading initiatives.

(Benefits of Music—continued from page 1)

- Music is science – it is exact and demands exact acoustics. A musical score is a chart, graphing that shows frequencies, intensities, volume, melody and harmony within the control of time.
- Music is math – rhythm is based on fractions of time that are done instantaneously, too quickly to be worked out on paper.
- Music is a foreign language – terms are in Italian, German or French. Musical notation is a type of shorthand, its own language. Music is the universal language.
- Music is history – music reflects the period of its creation and the culture and country of origin.
- Music is physical education – requiring incredible coordination – fingers, hands, arms, lip, cheek and muscles. It also requires control of back, stomach and chest muscles.
- Music is art – music takes all the technical parts and creates emotion

Research shows that music students perform better on standardized tests. Recent research speaks to why this happens; students who can differentiate musical sounds have the ability to discriminate between outside distractions in a classroom and focus on listening to the teacher. Additionally students learn discipline, time management, teamwork and working toward a common goal.

In Pennsylvania, comparisons of PSSA scores have been made between music students and non-music students. These comparisons in April 2007 show the following PSSA aggregate scores:

	Reading	Math
Music Students	1526	1487
Non-music Students	1350	1353

In Council Rock, the secondary students who invest many hours as part of choir, band and orchestra, while finding a social niche during their high school years, are also high achievers in state assessments. A large percentage of the top academic performers and students recognized by the National Merit Corporation are music students.

In Council Rock's elementary music program all kindergarten through sixth grade students take music class, and music students participate in many

classroom and musical performances from "Teddy Bear Picnics" and Flag Day Celebrations, to musical theater. Elementary instrumental students have a ½ hour "pull out" program for music lessons each week. Each elementary school also has winter and spring instrumental and choir concerts.

Elementary choir participation encompasses all but a handful of the 5,854 students in 5th and 6th grades. Approximately 1,868 elementary students participate in instrumental music from 3rd through 6th grade. Beginners (1st year students) comprise 884 of those students.

Each of the 2,003 middle school students takes classroom music as part of their arts rotation. Of those, 401 are involved in instrumental groups while 298 are part of the choir groups. The student commitment at this level is primarily during the Resource Activity (RA) period at the start of the school day. Music is a choice that students make over clubs, homework or other RA activities. Many of these students participate in more than one band activity and therefore are committing to doing this for as much as five days a week. There are also occasional before and after school practices and evening rehearsals leading up to their two concerts each year.

In high school, music can be an elective or a co-curricular. Both high schools offer courses such as Music Appreciation, Musical Theater, and Guitar that are open to all students in high school, but the heart of the music program is the students who take band, choir and orchestra classes. Unlike any other subjects at the high school, these three music curriculum offerings are co-curricular and have a required time commitment after school and, possibly, on weekends. The student's out-of-class requirement contributes to their in-class grade.

Council Rock North and South have: 656 students enrolled in co-curricular music classes: 247 students involved in band, 261 in choir and 148 in orchestra. The numbers above only represent students who are in those classes. Many more participate in extra curricular groups such as Master Singers, Jazz Band, Lab Band, etc. Additionally, some music students choose to drop in to other groups during their lunch periods. For example, a band member may also play with the orchestra or an orchestra member might be part of the Chorale.

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(Benefits of Music—continued from page 7)

In high school the level of out-of-class commitment to music hits its peak. Band, choir, and orchestra classes require extra out of class commitments. While all students are expected to practice their music at home, the choir, orchestra and concert band require two days a month throughout the school year. Leading up to the two concerts each year, this requirement rises to four commitments a month, or approximately a day each week after school.

A comprehensive list of every music group's additional performances would be difficult to outline within this newsletter, but the highlights include both North and South orchestra's participation at an adjudication festival for area high schools hosted at South. South has recently performed with the Philadelphia Orchestra and at the PMEA Convention in Hershey.

Choir members have an extensive performance schedule of community concerts especially during holidays, go to numerous adjudications, and sing at special events including Veteran's and Memorial Day remembrances. Choir members may also perform in smaller vocal groups and some are active in music theatre presentations.

Marching band begins the second week of August and runs through the first week of November, non-stop. Students rehearse three to four days a week after school; attend all home and away football games, and four to five competitions, on Saturdays in the fall. Marching band also performs at a handful of parades throughout the year and concerts in the fall and spring.

Symphonic band, the higher level band class, attends PMEA adjudication events and performs in the spring concert. Jazz band members meet only after school and have an extensive performance schedule at jazz festivals in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

The highlight of a student's music participation is the high school music trip. Students in marching band, choir and orchestra have the opportunity to go on a trip once every four years. In the past few years, South's band has performed in Ireland, the orchestra in Italy and the choir in England. North's choir has performed in China, band in Spain and orchestra in England. Next

year North's band will head to Buenos Aires, Argentina and South's orchestra will go to Paris and Cannes in France.

The high school music trip requires comprehensive planning. While these trips are the highlight of the student's high school years, they require many hours of coordination and planning. Staff planning time begins up to a year in advance, from looking into venues and cost proposals, to fundraising for each trip, to coordination of moving hundreds of students, instruments, music stands, equipment and uniforms to a foreign country, everything must be completely organized. Once there, students have some flexibility to see the area, but many hours of practice and performances also occur.

Music trips have many benefits for students:

- Encouraging self discipline and developing group discipline
- Developing an awareness of the group's benefit
- Maintaining a strict schedule and planning ahead
- Packing, moving and maintaining equipment and uniforms
- Developing personal responsibility and following directions
- Achieving personal and group goals
- Working together for maximum group effectiveness

Trips to other countries have additional benefits:

- Exposing students to new cultural and culinary experiences
- Providing interaction with students from another country
- Providing foreign language experiences
- Reinforcing history lessons
- Performing at outstanding performance venues
- The opportunity to represent the United States on the world stage

Kudos to Council Rock's excellent music program! Citizens For Education thanks Mr. Lee Hauslein, Music Curriculum Coordinator, and Mr. Rick Bogle, Music Department Head at CRHS North, for meeting with us to fill us in on all that music in Council Rock encompasses. They are just two of the many dedicated Council Rock music teachers at all levels, from kindergarten to twelfth grade, who, together with hard working students, are responsible for the high quality of the music program; a program that benefits students outside of music class, reaps many awards, and enhances the reputation and recognition of Council Rock.

In the Numbers

A Look at the Proposed 2010-2011 Budget

The budget for next year is a work in progress. Below are some highlights of the Preliminary Budget adopted by the School Board on April 22. By state law, the Preliminary Budget must be posted for 30 days and adopted before June 30. The administration is committed to continuing to look for ways to improve the budget picture. It is expected that the final budget will be adopted at the School Board Meeting on June 3.

Total Revenues	\$194.3 million
Revenue from the State	\$37.1 million
Federal Revenue	\$3.8 million
Current Real Estate Revenue	\$127.2 million
Earned Income Tax Revenue	\$12.5 million
Revenue generated by gambling	\$5.0 million
Total Expenditures	\$200.4 million
Salaries	\$104.1 million
Benefits	\$36.1 million
Debt Service	16.2 million
Transportation Contract	\$9.1 million
Textbooks, classroom supplies, software	\$1.5 million
Needed from taxation	\$ 4.0 million
Percent tax increase	3.1%
Cost of tax increase for average assessment	\$135

Filling the Director of Business Administration Slot

On April 22, the Council Rock School Board confirmed by a vote of 8-0, with Dr. Anagnostoakos absent on business travel from this meeting, the appointment of Robert Reinhart as its new Director of Business Administration. Mr. Reinhart will fill the position vacated by Robert Schoch who went to the North Penn School District in January 2010. Mr. Reinhart is currently employed by the Penridge School District and will begin his employment at Council Rock on July 1, 2010. His wife Gail is a teacher in Council Rock. Citizens will interview Mr. Reinhart for its Fall Newsletter.

In the interim, Citizens would like to welcome Richard L. Schrecengost back to the Council Rock. Mr. Schrecengost was Council Rock's Director of Business Affairs from July 1993 to July 1996. He returns to assist Council Rock from April 22 to June 30, 2010, for the district's crucial finalization of the budget. Mr. Schre-

cengost brings with him a wealth of experience and recognition including six years in the US Air Force where he was a flight instructor, functional test pilot, and Captain with a Top Secret clearance. He has 25 years experience as a creative and conservative financial manager of three Pennsylvania school districts, starting in 1983 at Merion Center School District before Council Rock. After 13 years with Hempfield School District, he retired in July 2009, and is now consulting in public schools and in alternative energy businesses.



Citizens
For
Education

...a voice for our children!

Parents' Perspective on Homework in Council Rock

From January to March, Citizens For Education administered online surveys to parents in the district to collect information regarding families' experience with homework in Council Rock schools. Teachers and staff are instructed to follow a specific policy and administrative guidelines concerning the assignment and content of homework. (To review current policies, go to: <http://www.crsd.org/503924385625/site/default.asp> and click on policy 130 and 130-R). The purpose of the surveys was to get a general sense of whether or not the policy and guidelines are being followed.

There were separate surveys for the elementary, middle school and high school levels. Nearly 500 community members participated in the surveys and their feedback provides a wealth of directional information about this topic. Here is a list of some key findings:

From the elementary survey:

- Over 90% of elementary students are assigned homework on a daily basis
- For the most part, elementary school teachers are observing the "10 minutes per grade level" guideline for amount of homework assigned
- Two thirds of parents think homework assignments are meaningful and appropriate and their children are receiving the "right amount" of homework

From the middle school survey:

- Respondents have children that are taking a mix of both Academic and Honors courses
- 44% of students spend 1 to 2 hours a night on homework. 38% have less than 1 hour and 18% have 3 or more hours
- Assignments are a mix of both appropriate homework (48%) and busy work (46%)
- 51% of parents believe their students are getting the "right amount" of homework; 33% believe their students are getting "too much" homework, and 17% say their students receive "too little" homework
- Though district policy notes that weekends and holidays are to be used for long term assignments and not newly assigned work, many parents indicate that is not the case. New work being assigned on weekends was

reported by 70% of parents and on holidays by 37% of parents

- 82% of parents say their students are adequately prepared to complete their homework assignments
- 38% of parents report that all homework assignments can be found online; 33% say assignments are posted for most classes
- 35% of parents are dissatisfied with the communication between teachers on a team to help prevent the scheduling of tests or excessive homework on the same day.

From the high school survey:

- Respondents have children that are primarily taking Accelerated, Honors and AP courses. Less than one third of respondents have students in Academic or Learning Support classes.
- Like the middle school parents, high school parents also report that new work is being assigned on weekends (80%) and holidays (44%)
- The length of time students' spend on homework varies: 6% spend less than 30 minutes, 18% spend between one half hour and 1 hour, 31% spend between 1 and 2 hours, 23% spend between 2 and 3 hours, and 23% spend 3 or more hours.
- 50% of parents report that homework assignments have a degree of "busy work"
- 54% of parents report that their child receives the "right amount" of homework, while 35% say they receive "too much" and 11% say they receive "too little"
- 73% of parents think their students are adequately prepared to complete their homework assignments
- Only 12% of parents report that all homework assignments can be found online; 24% say assignments are posted for most classes

Each survey provided an opportunity for parents to make additional comments about homework. The following is a sample of some of the responses we received:

- *"There are definitely inconsistencies between the type and amount of homework assigned by different teachers."* —elementary school parent

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(Parent Perspective on Homework—continued from page 10)

- *“I feel that most long term projects assigned are above the level of what children in that grade are capable of completing on their own. So, the parents generally end up helping way too much. These are basically "parent projects". –elementary school parent*
- *“HW and long-term assignments need to be updated on the website. During an absence it would be nice to get on the computer see what HW needs to be done without calling, texting or emailing friends. Long-term projects should also be listed for the parents' knowledge if their child tends to forget when something is due and the rubric.” –middle school parent*
- *“I think it would be helpful to have more coordination between teachers regarding tests particularly at the end of the marking period where everyone seems to be getting in their last test, making it difficult for the students to adequately prepare.” –middle school parent*
- *“AP homework over the summer seems excessive.” – high school parent*
- *“We need to step into the 21st century and REQUIRE teachers to post assignments, class-outlines, grades, etc. online.” – high school parent*
- *“I disagree with giving homework on weekends and over holiday breaks. The kids need some free time to themselves, not having to worry about getting assignments done. There is more than enough homework during the week-nights.” – high school parent*
- *“Since the beginning of 9th grade, holiday breaks seem to be the time to LOAD the kids with homework including newly assigned projects that are due upon returning to school. My child is even more stressed after break due to*

the workload. There doesn't seem to be any down time for Honor Students. Ever!” – high school parent

- *“The middle school does a much better job at posting homework and assignments online than the high school.” – high school parent*

The Council Rock administration has begun to look at the homework issue. According to Joy McClendon, Director of Elementary Education and Curriculum, “An Elementary Advisory Committee has spent this past year reviewing elementary homework practices and making suggestions for revising/updating homework administrative regulation – 130R. Elementary Principals and I have read the book, *Rethinking Homework* by Cathy Vatterott, discussed best practices and are planning to share the book and information with teachers this spring and next year. The purpose is to engage teachers in examining current practice, discussing best practices reflective of 21st century learning and make adjustments in practice as warranted. Additionally, I’m working with secondary administrators to convene a secondary group of teachers to do the same work as is being done this year at the elementary level. I expect we’ll work well into next year. The goal again is to examine current practice, discuss best practices, revise/update 130R and determine professional development needs.”

Citizens For Education is pleased that the administration is looking into the issue of homework, a topic that has not been explored for many years. We will report on additional district news and possible changes to policy/regulations in future newsletters.

Citizens For Education
Executive Board 2009-10

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Middle Level Literacy

Citizens For Education last reviewed the Middle Level Reading program in 2007. This year, Citizens revisited the curriculum to determine how the program has changed and progressed. The focus of the curriculum is continual increase of more students into Advanced levels of proficiency on state testing and an emphasis in Writing as well as Reading.

Literacy Course Offerings – All 7th grade students continue to take both an English and Literacy class, accounting for a double period of RELA (Reading/English/Language Arts). They are placed in either “Literacy Learning” or “Literacy Skills” (see details of how placement is determined below). In Literacy Skills, the students learn essentially the same material as Literacy Learning, only not in as great a depth, and

the classroom pace is slower. In addition, Literacy Skills classes use Teen Biz, a web-based reading and writing program that is individualized to each student’s ability.

Because many of the students in 7th grade Literacy Skills are reading below grade level, it often takes two or more years to raise their reading ability. This is the reason, according to Peggy Walsh, District RELA Curriculum Coordinator for grades 7-12, that many of the students in 7th grade Literacy Skills forgo beginning World Language in 8th grade, in favor of a second year of remediation.

For the 2009-10 School year, of the 1,005 students in 8th grade, 804 are taking a World Language and 201 are in Literacy Skills. The chart below breaks out the enrollments in Literacy Skills classes in each Middle School.

School	Number of Students in Skills 7*	Number of Students in Skills 8*
Holland Middle	67 out of 344 students (19%)	75 out of 369 students (20%)
Richboro Middle	25 out of 202 students (12%)	37 out of 251 students (15%)
Newtown Middle	63 out of 409 students (15%)	89 out of 430 students (21%)

*Includes students with IEP’s

Complementary Components of the Literacy and English Curriculums – Grade 7 students benefit from having two 44-minute class periods each day to learn all the elements of the RELA program. By using two classes and two different teachers, students are given the opportunity to learn from unique sources and multiple teaching styles. In the team-teaching middle school environment, Literacy and English teachers work together to ensure continuity and complementary subject matter in both classrooms.

The RELA components include study skills, critical thinking and analytical writing. The Literacy classes teach the “how” of reading and writing, while each student’s appropriate track English class teaches the “what” of literacy. Students build skills by learning vocabulary, recognizing context clues in text, developing skills to analyze novels, and writing in their journals.

Assessments – The district uses a variety of reading assessments including:

- PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment)
- Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI)
- Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI), which measures accuracy, phrasing, re-telling and the rate of a student’s ability to read aloud.
- Woodcock Johnson 11 Diagnostic Reading Battery, which tests a variety of reading components including comprehension, word attack (strategies used when reading an unknown word i.e. breaking it into syllables) and vocabulary

The PSSA is the primary tool used to verify the success of the RELA program because it is the assessment used to judge if a school meets the requirement of the federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation. In 7th grade, the percentage of students achieving at the advanced level has increased from 59.3% in 2005-2006 to 65.2% in 2008-2009.

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(Middle Level Literacy—continued from page 12)

In 8th grade, the scores in Advanced and Proficient ranges have seen an improvement from 2005-2006 from 86.9% to 93.5% in 2008-2009. The improved performance from 7th grade to 8th grade is noted in the following chart:

<u>7th to 8th Grade PSSA Data</u>		
	<u>7th Grade</u> 2005-2006	<u>8th Grade</u> 2006-2007
Advanced	59.3%	72.8%
Proficient	30.4%	19.5%
Basic	7.2%	4.4%
Below Basic	3.1%	3.3%
	2006-2007	2007-2008
Advanced	60.7%	76.8%
Proficient	30.0%	16.7%
Basic	6.2%	4.0%
Below Basic	3.0%	2.5%
	2007-2008	2008-2009
Advanced	60.0%	76.4%
Proficient	29.7%	17.1%
Basic	6.9%	0.8%
Below Basic	3.4%	3.0%

At both grade levels, scores in all four levels - Advanced, Proficient, Basic and Below Basic - are better than state averages.

The district began administering the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) to all 6th, 7th and 8th grade students in 2005. The assessment is given at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year and is norm referenced. Norm referenced tests compare a person's score against the scores of a group of people who have already taken the same exam, called the "norming group." The SRI is tailored to adapt to the individual student; depending on the student's response to a question – correct or incorrect – the next question is determined, and so on. This test is used to gauge students' progress throughout the year, and to help with course placement recommendations.

Students' Course Placements - To determine in what level incoming 7th graders should be placed, the teaching staff considers a number of different criteria. SRI and PSSA results, as well as the recommendations of the teachers and literacy specialists are considered. The 6th grade staff will administer additional assessments as needed to properly place the students in the Middle Schools.

For placement in 8th and 9th grades, the same considerations are used as above, as well as samples of writing prompts administered in the classroom. In addition, the middle school staff uses the results of Teen Biz and the Woodcock Johnson assessment (as needed) in both grades.

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(Middle Level Literacy—continued from page 13)

Differentiation – In both Literacy Learning and Literacy Skills there is a wide range of reading levels in the classrooms, and differentiation of instruction has become a necessity. First and foremost, students, guided by their teachers, self-select appropriately leveled texts. In the Literacy courses, it is not necessarily the grade level of the classroom reading selections that is important, but the lessons learned from those selections such as genre, setting, style etc.

The Best of the Best – Citizens raised the issue that students at an advanced reading level, who are already prolific readers, might be better served in an Honors level classroom, or even starting World Language in 7th grade, rather than taking the year of Literacy Learning. However, according to the Reading teachers we met with, who represented all three middle schools, they believe that the area of greatest improvement for advanced students is in their writing ability.

Citizens thanks the following teachers and staff for their dedicated time and effort in RELA, and for the time they took to explain the program for our article:

Mary Loikits and Mary Sanders - Newtown Middle School
Maureen Flynn – Holland Middle School
Lorraine Tolbert – Richboro Middle School

Citizens also thanks Peggy Walsh for the pages and pages of information she provided us on this topic, and Joy McClendon, Director of Elementary Education/Curriculum Services, for her dedication to providing Council Rock students with quality curriculums.



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