

When it comes to the transition from sixth grade to middle school, the Council Rock theme is, “It takes a village.” Citizens got more information about this topic during a recent meeting with Joy McClendon (Director of Elementary Education/Curriculum Services), Kristin Weand, (Richboro Middle School teacher), Wendy Nelsen (Richboro Elementary School teacher), Albert Eckelmeyer (Newtown Elementary teacher), Mary Sanders (Newtown Middle School teacher), Sandy Kopel (Hillcrest Elementary School teacher), and Dr. Julie Eastburn (District Mathematics Coordinator).

Sixth grade students are recommended for either Honors or Academic level of instruction for 7th grade. Students with special needs may also be placed into Inclusion or Foundations classes for additional specialized learning, supported by an IEP. Determining which level is appropriate for each student, in each subject area, is a yearlong process, with much of the communication to parents and students occurring in March.

Behind the Scenes

The flow of information about curriculum content occurs through vertical teaming throughout K-12. Teachers and curriculum coordinators meet to discuss what benchmarks are expected at each grade to ensure readiness for the following year. There is also emphasis on textbook continuity, to ensure the texts used at the elementary level align and properly prepare students for the texts used in the middle school. For example, the enVision Math textbook, used from K-5, is an excellent precursor to the McDougal Littell Math Course 1 used in 6th grade and the McDougal Littell Math Course 2 used in Academic 7th grade classes.

In the past few years, the teachers have also had visitations where the 6th grade teachers observe 7th grade classrooms and 7th grade teachers go to the elementary schools to observe the 6th grade. All 6th grade teachers also receive the first marking period report card of the 7th graders from their school as feedback for how well their former students are doing in their placements. The 6th grade teachers also meet with the middle school guidance counselors.

Factors in Determining Placement.

There are different factors used to determine placement in each subject area. This includes tests, district tests, quizzes, projects, papers and the 6th grade assessment project. A Pennsylvania Writing Rubric system is used to evaluate the quality of a student’s work. State standardized tests and SRI (Scholastic Reading Inventory) are considered too. There are also intangibles, such as class participation, ability to work independently, enthusiasm for the subject, willingness to ask questions, as well as any significant changes that might be occurring for the child outside of school.

There are specific guidelines for recommending a student for honors classes, depending on the subject. In math, a student is expected to have a minimum 95% class average. There is also a math placement test given in the early spring. In the past, there was a strong connection between math and science; Honors Math was considered a requirement for being recommended for Honors Science. That is no longer the case, as teachers feel that students can get the math education they need for high school science (specifically chemistry and

physics) in accelerated classes, which is another level of rigor offered at the high school. In the other core subject areas, teachers analyze reading and writing ability, the results of the SRI and the other determinants listed above.

One issue that was discussed is the ramifications of course choices for 7th grade as a general blueprint for the rest of their secondary education. This is true specifically for math and science. If a student is not on an honors math and science track in 7th grade, it is very difficult to transition to the honors level in future grades. Citizens For Education thinks this is information that should be communicated to the 6th grade parents as they go through the course selection process.

Parent Communications

Parents have an opportunity to attend a middle school orientation in March of their student's 6th grade year. The presentation includes an introduction by the principal, as well as teachers in each area. After the presentation, parents are invited to walk around and speak to the various curriculum coordinators to get a better feeling about the rigor of each subject. While no elementary school has specific parent meetings set up in the spring, any parent is welcome to request a meeting with their child's 6th grade teacher to discuss class recommendations. Parents are also allowed to override teacher recommendations. At the middle school, teachers do not look at the override list until after the first interim report. At that time, if a student is not performing well, they do look at the elementary file to see if an override is a factor.

Transitions

All 6th grade students visit their respective middle schools in the spring. In addition, each middle school has their own activities to help ease the students' transition. For example, at RMS, there is a pen-pal program, where a 7th grader writes a letter to a 6th grader. At NMS, the 7th graders do a Power Point presentation about going to the middle school, which their feeding elementary schools can view. They also have a reading program in which the 6th graders and several 7th graders read the same novel. The 7th graders then visit the elementary schools and lead a class session about the book. At the beginning of 7th grade, there are also many social events planned to help the students adjust and make friends. Different activities occur at each school.

Much time, attention and careful consideration are given to making sure that sixth grade students are appropriately placed in their middle school classes. Citizens For Education appreciates the diligent effort and collaboration that teachers and administrators put into ensuring that the transition from elementary school to middle school is a positive experience for every student.