

SIGNAL MOUNTAIN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Over 3 years, 98.2% in Language Arts and 97.4% in math scored proficient or advanced; in both categories, more than half scored advanced. Honestly, how can we improve? The rhetorical question stems, hopefully, not from arrogance but from two sources of frustration: first, that, in a context of clearly standardized curriculum and high-stakes multiple-choice testing, stimulating and nurturing growth in students who already perform highly is difficult; second, that federal and state standards represent at best proficiency and certainly not excellence. The sources of frustration also make the question genuine not rhetorical. The first question reflects a consistent trend in SMMS's data: across subjects and grades our below-proficient and proficient students grow as would be expected, but our 3rd, 4th, and 5th quintile students often grow less than they should in a given year, and our less than acceptable TVAAS scores evince that trend. The second question shows us that correcting this problem involves motivating our students toward excellence not proficiency. In sum, we are certainly a proficient school, and probably a good school, but through the implementation of the Middle Schools for a New Society project, we will become an excellent school.

As we surveyed parents, students, and teachers and learned from school visits, MSNS meetings and educational research, our own deficiencies became glaringly clear. Our curriculum was already fairly rigorous, but the SMMS educational experience included little personalization and almost no flexibility: the things which make the rigorous curriculum accessible to more students and which encourage growth and exploration for advanced students. Likewise, making the curriculum more accessible and improving advanced kids were exactly the areas on which our data required us to focus. As a result, we have decided to increase personalization, flexibility and transitional success in order to achieve excellence in literacy and math. We will measure our success by measuring growth among the 3rd, 4th, and 5th quintile students, the number of students scoring advanced rather than proficient, and the attitude students demonstrate toward academic activities. **Over four years, we will create a school full of students who make real, meaningful academic choices, who form powerful, significant relationships with adults and each other, who have a passion for academics, and who demonstrate literary and mathematical excellence. Our 2006-2007 plan represents the first step toward creating "A PASSION FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE".**

The first major element in our plan involves transforming our school schedule to allow for flexibility, personalization, and enrichment and remediation in math and literacy. To that end we will begin moving toward block scheduling, starting in the first semester with a two-day modified block schedule to allow longer blocks of time with specific groups of students. In the second semester, grade-level teams will decide whether or not to move to a four-day modified block schedule. We will also eliminate our current study hall and replace it with an Eagle Block period, which will meet every day. During this first semester, most Eagle Block periods will continue to be study hall periods, but a few will be targeted remediation in math and literacy for the lowest 15% of students. At the same time, all teachers will design literacy and math enrichment classes based on student interests; these classes will be offered in the second semester, and in subsequent years. We will collect data on the effectiveness of these classes during this first year and use that data to revise offerings in subsequent years. These enrichment and remediation classes constitute advisory groups, and provide students academic flexibility and personalization.

The second major element is the creation of a peer tutoring program. In this program, students who have demonstrated mastery of certain skills will tutor others who are not proficient; the opportunity to tutor will be open to all students, as mastery in specific skills, not GPA, will determine eligibility. Teaching will benefit the tutors, and working with their peers will improve the performance of the non-proficient. We will research existing tutoring programs, create our

program, and pilot it the first year. Revision and full implementation of the program will continue in the second year of the grant and following.

As we push toward personalization and flexibility, teachers will need to work together to understand gaps in student achievement and to coordinate the improvement of individual student performance. To accomplish this, we will have several days throughout each semester dedicated to vertical teams meeting to examine data, develop school-wide procedures for pretesting, and create instruction based on performance data. The data used will include classroom tests, as well as P.A.S. tests and TCAP data. Similarly, both at a summer retreat and during planning periods throughout the year, grade-level teams will meet to develop integrated content units, which will help students make connections across disciplines and make our curriculum more relevant and engaging. As we move into '07-'08, assessment will increasingly drive and personalize instruction, and curriculum will involve more and more relevant, engaging integrated units.

Obviously, in order for all of these changes to be successful, SMMS staff capacity will need to be increased. Specifically, teachers will need development covering teaching in the block, effective teaming, integrated units, and the relationship between assessment and instruction. Throughout the year we will bring in specialists in these areas from other schools, Hamilton County's Central Office and outside the county. Some of these specialists will present during staff development days, while others will come to meet during team meetings on academic days. In addition, SMMS staff members will make off-site school visits to schools strong in particular areas as identified by nationally recognized programs such as Schools to Watch. By the end of this year, SMMS staff members should demonstrate significant improvement in the way they teach in the block, use assessment to drive instruction, and work together on integrated units. We will continue developing this capacity throughout the next three years.

Developing capacity and programs is hard, time-consuming work. It will require considerable expertise. To that end, we will hire an Academic Facilitator, a new four-year position dedicated to capacity and program development. Funding this will constitute our largest allocation of MSNS funds. First and foremost, the Academic Facilitator will examine all manner of data including standardized testing, student surveys, classroom assessments, classroom observations, etc. and identify extremely specific gaps in curriculum and instruction. He/she will then create school-wide and subject/grade specific strategies for improving student achievement. In addition, he/she will develop the peer tutoring program, assist in its application in academic classrooms, refine and continue the existing literacy plan, facilitate various staff development opportunities, particularly the day-to-day examination of data and the development of integrated units, facilitate the vertical team meetings, and aid in the creation of Eagle Block classes. In '07-'08 and subsequent years, as Eagle Block classes, integrated units, and data based instruction are utilized, the Academic Facilitator will critique their effectiveness, modify them appropriately, and suggest new initiatives as they are needed. By the end of the four-year period, SMMS staff capacity will have been developed sufficiently for the programs to continue without the Academic Facilitator.

By spending MSNS funds primarily on the Academic Facilitator and staff development, we will build staff capacity to personalize instruction, make education more flexible, and use literacy and math testing data to drive instruction. These changes will, in turn, improve performance in literacy and math, particularly among the highest three quintiles who currently grow the least, and allow us to define what Douglas Reeves calls "antecedents of excellence" which we can then share with other schools in the system. As students experience personalized education and as they have more real control over their own education, students will excel rather than simply achieve. Our rhetorical question will become real improvement, and, by the 2009-2010 school year, we will have birthed a climate, a culture, and indeed a school of excellence.