



**Board of Education Open Topics Forum November 12, 2019
Administration & Board Responses to Questions Posed by Community Members**

Elementary Parent Communication

Q. Is there a way to establish more consistency in teacher-to-parent communication?

A. It's extremely difficult for a school district to mandate how teachers manage their parent/guardian communication. The District, Administration, and individual school Principals can and do encourage consistency, but teachers have personal preferences; some like to create email newsletters, while some prefer one-on-one communications with parents via phone or email. Parents should feel free to reach out to their child's teacher and/or school Principal to ask about communication methods and level of frequency they prefer.

Q. At the elementary level, parents are being asked to download and use any number of apps (applications) on a one-off basis. Is there a way to establish more consistency in the use of these apps?

A. The District's Technology Department maintains a list of approved apps and programs. The apps and programs on the list meet the District's criteria for privacy. Any app or program not on the list should not be in use by students or parents. Principals can and do encourage consistency in the use of apps, but teachers often have individual preferences. The list of approved apps can be found on the District's website under the Technology Department tab, or by clicking here:

<https://edprivacy.educationframework.com/Districts/main.aspx?districtid=30348>

Q. Is there a way to establish consistent teacher-to-parent communication about elementary reading level assessments so parents can provide supports at home?

A. There are three good opportunities for parents to learn about their child (or children's) reading levels already in place. Formal reading assessments (Developmental Reading Assessments, or DRAs) are conducted by each teacher with each student multiple times during the year. The fall DRAs coincide closely with the fall (November) parent-teacher conferences, so parents are able to get an update on their child's reading level during conferences. The winter DRAs can be discussed with your child's teacher by request or at the spring (April) parent-teacher conferences. The June report card will reflect the child's reading progress at the end of the school year.

We recommend that parents who are interested in more frequent/regular updates about their students' reading assessment progress reach out to their individual classroom teachers via email with this request.

Elementary Curriculum

Q. I've heard parents discussing hiring reading tutors to give their children phonics instruction. Does the District have plans to add phonics to the elementary curriculum?

A. The District's current word study program is "Words Their Way," which incorporates letter and sound work. That being said, the District is currently reviewing word study, including phonics instruction, similar to the way in which it went through a review and evaluation process that resulted in adopting the Singapore Math-based "Math in Focus" program for the elementary math curriculum.

An elementary literacy committee was formed last February. The committee began by researching essential elements of quality word study and phonics programs and surveying teachers internally to determine their preferences about components of word study and phonics programs. The committee then surveyed neighboring school districts to find out what programs they use and find effective in order to identify word study and phonics programs for a more in-depth review. Members of the literacy committee will be conducting school visits in January 2020, with an eye to identifying programs that we would like to further review, with the possibility of making recommendations for programs to pilot.

Q. The Teachers College curriculum seems to be light on grammar and sentence structure. What can the District do to address this?

A. Please see the answer to the above question. The District is reviewing its elementary word study program with an eye to identifying strengths and areas for improvement. The current writing units of study do have aspects of grammar and sentence structure at the primary and upper elementary level. This will be a consideration in reviewing our program and the possibility of piloting and/or adopting a new word study/phonics program.

Q. What is the District doing to provide teachers with resources to help them with differentiation? It feels as if the teachers spend more time on those students who are performing below level than those who are performing above.

A. As part of ongoing professional development, the District has provided elementary teachers with a number of workshops focused on how to differentiate. The elementary reading program (Readers and Writers Workshop) is entirely based on the individual reading levels of students, and has small group learning and one-on-one ratio student-to-teacher conferencing for all students as part of its curriculum. In addition, our staff developers support work in differentiation with our teachers through classroom coaching and other professional development experiences.

The new “Math in Focus” math curriculum has differentiation components built into the curriculum. For example, there are challenge questions that are designed for high-performing students as part of every unit of study.

The new (as of 2018-2019) WIN (What I Need) period built into the elementary school schedule is specifically designed as a period for differentiated instruction and learning to take place. Students in need of AIS (Academic Intervention Services) reading or math services receive them during this period, while the classroom teacher works with students who benefit from a challenge or additional support in other areas of study.

Q. Teachers College instruction seems to vary from classroom to classroom. What is the District doing to make delivery consistent?

A. As is the case when a District adopts any new curriculum, some teachers progress faster along the continuum than others. The District provides a high level of support to our teachers to ensure alignment and consistency. For example, the District has full-time Literacy Staff Developers who work with individual teachers and teacher teams in their classrooms to support the implementation of Reading and Writing workshop. In addition to our in-house Staff Developers, teachers work with consultants from Teachers College.

RMS Curriculum

Q. RMS 8th grade ELA students are being asked to engage in a “Battle of the Books” this year. Many of the books on the list skew towards social justice topics versus classic literature. Why is it mandatory, and what can be done to better balance the list?

Battle of the Books is a program that has been adopted in schools across the country with great success. The goal is to help our students become better readers by giving them ample time and encouragement to read texts they find engaging. It is intended to inspire excitement for reading by offering choice,

variety, and light competition. The texts students are invited to read include digital texts, Ted Talks, and both fiction and nonfiction works (including short stories, poems, novels, essays, articles, etc.).

The Battle of the Books program is mainly to encourage outside reading. Reading of the classics, including works by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allen Poe (in November/December) and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (in January) is, for the most part, taking place as part of teacher-guided and in-class work because students often need more guidance with these kinds of texts. There are some classics on the Battle of the Books outside reading list, including George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

The Battle of the Books is mandatory; however, the grading of this is so minimally weighted as to be almost negligible. The assessment is done in one of two ways: students either keep a notebook to track their reading and notes/ideas or they complete a graphic organizer at the end of each quarter. The assessments count as either a small quiz grade or a homework grade.

Parent Involvement

Q. What is the District doing to increase parental involvement in the District on as many levels as possible?

A. The District places great value on parent involvement in all aspects of school life. Parents can be involved in the District in lots of ways. Attending school events, lectures and workshops and PO/PTO meetings helps parents feel connected to their childrens' schools and to other parents. Additionally, we encourage parents and community members to attend Board of Education meetings, held every other Tuesday evening at the RMS Multipurpose Room, to hear and participate in discussions on curriculum, facilities, budget, and a wide variety of other topics which impact teaching and learning in the District. Events are publicized in the school newsletters, posted on the school calendar, and via the District's communication system.

For those parents so inclined, there are any number of volunteer opportunities available, including through the individual school POs/PTOs, or by serving as class parents (at the elementary school level). Parents or guardians looking to be more involved in the schools should reach out to their PO/PTO co-heads. At the broader level, Friends of the Rye City School District and the Rye Fund for Education are both always actively soliciting new members.

Q. Is the District giving any consideration to the notion of switching from from a PTO to a PTA structure?

A. Some schools in New York City, Washington, D.C. and other cities have gone this route so that parent organizations can fund salaries for staff developers, classroom aides, or other school personnel. This is not legal in New York State outside of New York City.

That being said, the subject has been discussed. Historically, there was a concern about dues and restrictions placed upon local PTAs by the national PTA organization. PTOs are independent organizations. The ultimate decision would be up to the Parent Organization Co-Presidents.

Elementary Experience

Q. It feels like there are fewer elementary field trips than in the past, and that fewer parents are being allowed to come along as chaperones. Who makes the decision about field trips? Is there consistency across the district?

A. Field trips, including decisions about field trip destinations, frequency of trips, means of travel, and budgets are handled by the Principals and PTOs at the individual schools.

Sheryl Goffman, the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction surveyed the three elementary schools last year in order to gather detailed

information about the frequency of field trips. She found that the number of field trips was fairly equitable across the schools, but that some grade levels at some schools were not having an annual field trip. As a result, the District has now asked that every grade at every school have at least one field trip per year (with either walking or bus transportation), and that the field trip be purposeful: adding value to the school experience while directly connecting to the curriculum.

The number of parent chaperones allowed to accompany the students often depends on how many seats are available on a bus or how much funding is available for chaperone tickets on any given field trip. This decision is also made at the individual school level.

Q. It feels to parents like the fun is being squeezed out of the elementary school day. Is this the case?

A. Those of us who spend time in the schools regularly don't see this as the case. We see the children having lots of fun on a daily basis. Students still enjoy a half hour of recess per day (more time than many local school districts allow), gym twice a week, and art and music once per week. That being said, as a District, we have been moving towards having more instructional rigor in the elementary day, partially because we are required by the State to provide a set number of instructional minutes in core subjects each day.

What we have tried to do is to connect the fun in the school day more closely to academics. So children might be playing word or math games that are reflective of the learning. Anecdotally, we are hearing that the students are really enjoying the new "Math in Focus" math curriculum because it has a fair number of math games incorporated into the units of study. Active Learning and Project-Based Learning, both of which are increasingly in use at the elementary schools, serve to create a more "fun," engaging learning environment.

Other

Q. Could the District conduct training for substitutes around the issue of bullying?

A. The District does train substitute teachers about bullying, in a very similar way to how it trains full-time teachers. The District advises all substitute teachers of their requirement to complete on-line training videos. Among the modules they are to participate in is a module on Dignity for All Students (DASA) and bullying specifically. DASA (which comes out of the Dignity for All Students Act, and became law in NY State in 2012) dictates a standardized protocol that must be used by New York State public schools in instances of accusations of bullying. The District handles all bullying complaints/infractions through DASA protocols.

In addition, the Assistant Principals from the three elementary schools have been working together to develop a comprehensive training plan around conflict prevention for both teacher aides, teaching assistants and recess supervisors. This could be used with substitute teachers as well.

Q. Would it be possible to turf the back field at RHS/RMS?

A. It's not out of the realm of possibility, but at this time the District has no plans to turf the back field. If the District were to consider such a plan in the future, it would have to go through the process of obtaining the proper permits and identify funding in order to do so. Of course, there are also environmental considerations, and obtaining community approval would be part of the process. The community voted to approve monies to replace the turf field at Nugent Stadium in the capital bond vote of June 11, 2019. A similar process would be necessary to turf the back field.