

## Special Progress Report

**Mending Fences School**

**April 1, 2014**

### **1. Provide an update on the school's progress revising and updating its mission and expectations**

**Classification:** *In Progress*

There has been significant progress moving Mending Fences School to a revised mission and expectations. In January 2013, MFS Principal Robert Frost presented a plan to the faculty that included 13 areas of need, one of which was the school's mission and expectations. In March 2013, a group of faculty and staff drafted action steps and a timeline for revising the MFS mission and expectations. In June 2013, an open-ended survey was created by several teachers and an administrator and distributed to the faculty to solicit their input. This survey included what the mission and expectations of MFS should be and what we expect students to know upon leaving MFS. Teachers who created the survey worked during the summer of 2013 to summarize the results and reflect on the faculty input. From this, a value-scaled survey was derived and administered to the faculty in September 2013. A subcommittee reviewed the results and is drafting a mission statement and academic and social expectations for faculty review and discussion.

After careful review, revision, and adaptation, this document will be shared with the MFS learning community. Input will be gathered from a wide variety of parents, students, and community members. Next steps in this process include having faculty and staff in each MFS small learning community provide input on the draft and solicit review and input from students, the School Improvement Council, parents and the community. MFS anticipates having a revised mission and expectations document ready for faculty and school board adoption by March 2014.

### **2. Describe the work accomplished to align the curriculum with the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century expectations.**

**Classification:** *In Progress*

MFS has focused its curriculum work on two major areas to address the need for focus and clarity in curriculum. These focus areas include delineating specific curriculum expectations that are clear, consistent, and aligned with the Vermont state standards in each content area. In addition, MFS, in collaboration with district curriculum leaders, is creating improved structures that will facilitate curriculum improvement, delivery, and ongoing assessment of all curriculum areas.

The Maple Sugar Public Schools made a long-term commitment to updated and coherent curriculum when it filled two important administrative positions. The district hired Dr. Ben Sprinkles as executive director of curriculum development in the fall of 2012 to coordinate district goals and the implementation of state standards. In the same

year, the district also hired Dr. Jerry Fudge as the K-12 coordinator for English language arts.

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In collaboration with the Office of Curriculum Development, MFS faculty and district-wide curriculum coordinators worked during the spring of 2013 to align the K-12 curriculum to the Vermont state standards, and to articulate clear learning expectations for students across all grades. This work began with a retreat, co-planned by Dr. Ben Sprinkles, Dr. Robert Frost, and Curriculum Leader Dr. Carl Fisk. This retreat was attended by all curriculum coordinators, directors, and the curriculum leaders. Agreement was reached on essential documents needed to describe and implement curriculum. It was determined that by June 2013 each department would clarify grades 6-8 content area learning expectations that would include references to the Vermont frameworks standards, major topics, themes, and key understandings (what should know and be able to do). It was also agreed that the core of academic learning expectations would be the same for all grades, and that common assessments would be developed as part of the next stage of curriculum development.

Each department met with subcommittees to plan the learning expectations that were then shared and revised by the whole department. Drafts were submitted to Dr. Sprinkles and edited for publication. This step was completed by October 2013. The next steps for most departments include developing a scope and sequences, articulating instructional strategies, selecting instructional materials, and developing appropriate assessments. In some departments, such as science, assessments have already been developed and are in a process of evaluation and ongoing revision.

In the fall of 2013 under the direction of the new superintendent of schools, the math and English language arts curriculum coordinators and their teams of teachers created the first of a series of Quarterly Assessments in reading, writing, and mathematics, which are in the process of being given in grades 2-10 across the district. These assessments are aligned to state standards and will be used by teachers to improve their instruction and evaluate teaching materials. To facilitate these tasks, Dr. Frost put structures in place to improve the implementation and delivery of curriculum. These structures have helped to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the deans of curriculum and the curriculum coordinator.

Dr. Frost and the curriculum coordinators and leaders decided to allocate at least two early-release day meetings per month for the academic departments to focus on curriculum planning. Each of the five curriculum coordinators and leaders will work with an academic department, and this collaboration reinforces the importance of the curriculum work and encourages communication between the curriculum leaders and curriculum coordinators.

At bi-monthly meetings, curriculum leaders and coordinators focus on creating and implementing quarterly assessments, designed a common template for all course syllabi that will be used across grade levels and departments, and provided feedback to the mission and expectations sub-committee. In addition to the bi-monthly departmental meetings, teams have also organized weekly meetings to examine student work, assess

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instruction, and plan for the work in individual courses that are taught across the three grade levels. Science and math teachers are also engaged in weekly meetings to support and strengthen the consistent implementation of a unified curriculum.

A significant next step in the curriculum development process is focused on common assessments. The science department has developed common assessments for each of their grade level courses.

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As part of that process, the English department created a writing prompt that was administered at the beginning of the school year. The collected work will become part of the emerging English languages arts portfolio system.

The next step in curriculum development include: integrating the school-wide academic expectations into all content area learning expectations; determining a district curriculum renewal cycle; and modification of instructional strategies and assessments based on the results of the curriculum renewal system.

**3. Provide professional development programs for teachers to develop a broad range of assessment strategies for classroom use.**

**Classification: Completed**

The Mending Fences professional development plan addresses critical needs in the areas of improving teaching and learning, raising the expectations teachers have for students, developing high learning standards, strengthening each teacher's content area knowledge, on-going assessment of students' learning, and integrating technology into all areas of the curriculum as an instructional tool.

The faculty is involved in a four-year professional development plan that involves intensive training in the principles of the Efficacy, Research for Better Teaching Institutes, and looking at students' work using the Education Trust Protocol. Teachers have been trained in different instructional methodologies and theories of cognitive development. Teachers have also been trained in how to look at student work and assess the work against rubrics developed specifically for each performance task. During the March 2013 professional development program, the Mending Fences staff joined the faculty from all Maple Sugar schools to get a better understanding of creating and using rubrics and in developing and evaluating standards-based curriculum units. The teachers have been using student assessment data and applying the data to what they have learned about pedagogy, development, and assessment, and then refining their teaching strategies to reach the learning styles of all students.

Teams assess student work often and then develop a plan identifying student needs in order to improve teaching and learning. The criteria used to assess student work are varied throughout Mending Fences School, but there are some which are consistent throughout the content areas. Student work is on display throughout the building and the display includes the task description outlining the criteria for the assignment. Student awareness of the criteria for each product they complete is dependent on the teacher but it is our impression that most teachers give students a copy of the task description along with the assignment. In addition, the task descriptions usually have an accompanying "Did I..." sheet which is designed for student use to check their progress toward mastery of the task.

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The English Language Arts standard essay task description is used by both ELA and ESL teachers to assess student work and was also used, in a slightly modified format, to assess a school-wide baseline writing prompt. There will be one more writing prompt given this year in order to assess our school-wide writing prompt. There will be one more writing prompt given this year in order to assess our school-wide progress toward improved literacy. All teachers use the task description to assess the writing and discuss which areas or specific criteria should be the focus of our literacy efforts. Teachers are quite familiar with this set of criteria and many have adapted this task description for use in their own content area. The Mending Fences School Improvement Team which comprises teachers, administrators, and parents debated the list of focus areas recommended by each team and created a list of school-wide focus areas. These common practices are highlighted in poster form throughout the school. The common practices are: a) organization: organize a paragraph around a main idea with a topic sentence, supporting details, and a concluding statement; b) conventions: proper sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, spelling, capitalization; c) student accountability: proofreading and editing each piece of writing before you hand it in.

MFS is also implementing the following priorities:

- ◆ define an instructional focus for the entire school (literacy)
- ◆ provide faculty time to look at student work in small groups, defining standards for quality work, making these standards public and accessible to students, and readjusting instructional practices based on what is learned from the process of scoring student work across disciplines
- ◆ collect baseline writing data on each student with subsequent benchmark data to monitor student learning
- ◆ provide feedback on the success of instructional practices

The school district also provides leadership for a group of Mending Fences teachers from various disciplines. The group meets weekly to examine data collected in the classroom that will help teachers answer the individual inquiry question they have posed. The school district also sponsors network-wide opportunities for staff from all 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools to participate in Looking At Student Work training and to share experiences on Instructional Leadership Teams.

Seminars and classes have been offered to teachers of the different instructional areas such as courses in “Literacy with New Tools”, and the integration of new software and physical models into the math classrooms. More general courses have been offered on the use of education software. Many of these programs are ongoing. This year teachers have the opportunity to receive professional development support during common planning time. This has allowed individual consultants to address the specific needs of the different teams. For example, with support from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century coach, teams have been looking at student work together and developing rubrics to guide and evaluate students’ work. Our goal is to develop in-house capacity for student-centered instruction. Presently a group of teachers and administrators are involved with the “Accountable Talk” strategies in the “train the trainer model.”

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**4. Describe and assess the adequacy of steps taken to provide the principal with much-needed autonomy.**

**Classification:** *Completed*

Dr. Frost receives strong support from the district's new superintendent, who publicly stated in September 2013 that one of her five goals for the district is to support the high school principal in strengthening the MFS educational community towards a goal of student achievement. In making him accountable as the educational leader at the high school, she reminds all staff, including central office administrators, that they are service providers to the MFS principal in his mission to help students learn. Dr. Frost has the authority (and the superintendent's support) to employ staff, develop a strategic plan with the staff (now in the final stages), reorganize (the teams) and is clearly the person in charge and leader of the school. With this support, the backing of his leadership team and the endorsement of the district's school board, the principal now has the autonomy and support he needs to bring curriculum, teaching, assessment, discipline and institutional leadership into alignment across the school.

**5. Devise and implement an effective and all-inclusive vehicle for faculty involvement in the decision-making process regarding the school's structure, direction, and procedures.**

**Classification:** *Completed*

One of the strengths of the current administration has been its interest in and respect for faculty opinion. As noted earlier in this report, the faculty was instrumental in crafting the mission and expectations. Dr. Frost heard from them on the future of the teams and on whether to reintroduce some homogeneous grouping. He benefits from a passionate, resilient, and highly professional staff of teachers and understands the value of their insight on issues impacting the school and student learning. When early in his tenure he identified 13 areas of concern at the high school, he also looked to the faculty for finding responses to these problems. All 13 areas have since been addressed, but the process of faculty involvement in solving policy decisions proved so successful, some of the participants began to explore how to formalize this working relationship.

To this end, a planning group was formed in the summer of 2013 to explore creating an elected body to represent faculty opinion on school-wide issues. Faculty representatives drew up a document outlining the purpose and goals of such an elected group. The group created guidelines that called for eight elected positions to be held by faculty representatives from each of the small schools, guidance, support staff, and one representative nominated by the principal. Dr. Frost attends monthly. Meetings are open to staff, although representatives alone have voting privileges. The group hosts a web site where agendas and minutes are posted. Suggested topics for discussion may be entered on the list serve or in binders around the school. Meeting twice monthly, the group has covered such topics as the NEASC report (where we are going, how we will get there), small school consolidations, and scheduling. While the group has no power

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to implement policy, it does serve as an important conduit of information, opinion and ideas. Dr. Frost appeals to this group as an important resource in the leadership of the school.