

School Committee Curriculum Subcommittee

Wednesday, June 19, 2019

2:00 PM-4:00 PM

Room 111, 1st Floor, Town Hall

Curriculum Subcommittee Members Present: Barbara Scotto (Chairman), Helen Charlupski, Susan Wolf Ditkoff, and Suzanne Federspiel.

Other School Committee Members Present: Jennifer Monopoli and David A. Pearlman.

Staff Present: Nicole Gittens, Casey Ngo-Miller, Kalise Wornum, Mary Brown, Vicki Milstein, Regina Watts, and Robin Coyne.

Others Present: Paul Harris, Town Meeting Member Precinct 9; Martha Farlow, Town Meeting Member Precinct 4; Ben Kelly, Runkle parent; John VanScoyoc, Town Meeting Member Precinct 13; Clint Richmond, Town Meeting Member Precinct 6; Karine Gibbs, Runkle parent; and Tanya Paris, Runkle Teacher.

1) Approval of Curriculum Subcommittee Minutes

On a motion of Ms. Ditkoff and seconded by Ms. Charlupski, the Curriculum Subcommittee voted unanimously to approve the minutes of the June 12, 2019 Curriculum Subcommittee meeting.

2) Reports on Kindergarten Visits

Subcommittee members reported on their observations during recent visits to some kindergarten classrooms: some classrooms had specific times for activities such as reading while others took a more integrated, embedded approach; student work was visible in some classrooms; manipulatives were visible and easily accessible in some classrooms; and students in some classrooms seemed very engaged and challenged. It was noted that this was a snapshot of what is going on in the classrooms and that observations might be different on another day or time.

The Subcommittee discussed the Social Studies curriculum on the neighborhood, which was initially developed by Curriculum Coordinator Geoff Tegnell and then revised by the kindergarten teachers. Because some teachers helped develop the curriculum and materials, they may have a better understanding of its implementation, purpose, and expected outcomes. This led to a discussion of professional development. It was noted that there used to be more opportunities for kindergarten teachers, as well as teachers of other grade levels, across the district to meet and share information about methods and possible approaches to the implementation of their curriculum. In the upcoming year the Subcommittee intends to look at the professional development structure in the district. Questions may include the following: What are the time increments? Relative to other districts, do we have more or less time for professional development? Who “owns” the time and schedules it? How much of the available time is district directed and how much is teacher directed? What other structures exist (e.g., large block of time each week) and what are the advantages and disadvantages?

Subcommittee members referred to the concerns some kindergarten teachers and members of the community raised in letters, emails, and public comment. Some teachers feel that the district is requiring them to teach specific subjects for a certain amount of time at the expense of play time and play-based learning. Teachers want some flexibility and autonomy. Administrators had

several comments (the central office has not sent out time allocations for the past two years; literacy happens all day long; in some cases, a subject may be scheduled for the full class when student(s) are receiving extra supports in that subject; are thinking about time allocations; ability to bring all kindergarten teachers together would help with communication; schools use choice time in different ways).

The Subcommittee discussed concerns regarding expectations that children will be able to read at a certain level by the end of kindergarten. Some teachers and parents/guardians feel that this has led to increased stress and anxiety and loss of enthusiasm for reading and learning. Some Subcommittee members expressed the view that not all children are developmentally ready to read by the end of kindergarten; that there should not be expectations and implicit pressure to reach certain levels by the end of kindergarten; and that children can gain literacy prerequisite skills through play-based learning. Some teachers feel that the district is pressuring them to reduce or eliminate play and play-based academic and social emotional learning in order to make sure that students reach a certain reading level by the end of kindergarten. Administrators said that this is not the case. The district should provide support to teachers in how to communicate with families. The teachers should not focus on levels, but rather should note whether there are specific areas of strength and challenge and what families can do to support their child. At the same time we need to have standards and measures so that we can provide supports to children who are struggling in literacy skills. Some students don't have the same rich experiences and exposure to literacy at home. Reading is a leverage skill. There is a continuum of learning.

A significant percentage of Public Schools of Brookline students who enter 1st grade require reading interventions. Students of color and students from low-income households are overrepresented in the group needing interventions. The amount of leveled literacy intervention varies by school. Most of the country and almost all of the districts in the state adopted common core standards established in 2012 that exceed the Brookline standards. There was a meeting with kindergarten teachers to discuss the research and a possible shift to align with the vast majority of districts in terms of expectations. There were variable reactions from the teachers. Nothing has changed at this point.

Ms. Milstein referred to standards developed by organizations such as the National Association of Education for Young Children (NAEYC). We all want to provide children with engaging, positive learning experiences and do not want children to feel that they have failed.

Subcommittee members requested any data that indicates that students would be better served by a change to the new benchmarks. Members noted that the district's philosophy and practices (e.g., interventions when students are beyond a certain range) are different than Learning Expectations. Learning Expectations are under the School Committee's purview. A suggestion from the Subcommittee was that next year there be a study of Kindergarten (perhaps with PreK) that involves the teachers. Members stressed the need to communicate with teachers. Other suggestions from members of the audience included that there be a moratorium on scheduling (i.e., allow the teachers to determine their schedules); and that there be a suspension of the benchmark (i.e., that there not be an expectation that kindergarten students should be at a certain reading level at the end of the year; provide ranges rather than a specific level).

Members of the public thanked the Subcommittee for their thoughtful consideration of this issue, stated that teachers want more time to collaborate, and suggested that there be more communication between Brookline PreK programs and Kindergarten (it was noted that some of this was lost as the PreKs were moved out of the schools).

The meeting adjourned at 4:00 PM.