

Parent Communications
November 5, 2015

Our monthly Parent Communications meeting was held on November 5, 2015, with 21 Parent Representatives / Ambassadors attending.

Agenda Item: CMCSS State Report Card 2014-2015 Academic Year was presented by Dr. Kimi Sucharski. Dr. Sucharski explained this report card is a state requirement and focuses on achievement and growth. She also talked about what the grades mean. In grades 3 – 8, “A” or “B” indicate the students performed above the identified target. The score of “C” means performance was at the expected target and “D” or “F” indicates the student’s school did not meet the expected target. High schools do not receive letter grades but instead status grades which are based on predicted achievement and expected growth created from prior performance on state assessments. Dr. Worthington asked the group to recall years ago when the proficiency to get a “C” was in some areas 33%. The State Report Card is very different now. The cut off score is around 80% and at the same time being proficient with it and also applying the knowledge. This is a result of the TN Diploma Standard with a little bit of Common Core in the mix last year.

In high schools 2014-2015, the State Report Card in Algebra I and II, English I and English III indicated “Above” which means students exceeded what was expected. In Biology and English II students were scored “NDD” (No Detectable Difference) and meeting their targets. Chemistry was not scored because we are only in the second year and requirement is 3 years of data. US History was not scored because we again piloted the test. As a side note, English III and US History II are subjects where we typically have advanced placement students and these are not included in those numbers. The state legislation says students only take assessments aligned directly to the course. In other words, if a student is taking AP English, that’s not the same course as English III.

In reviewing graduation rates, under the Department of Education, all students have 4 years and a summer to graduate from high school. Graduation for our district this past year was 96.5% which is a tremendous graduation rate and the second highest rate in middle Tennessee. The other 3.5%, however, does not mean drop out. Clarksville-Montgomery County had only 28 drop outs from 2,040 in the cohort. In the non-graduation category, some students return for a 5th year of high school (high mobility, ELL, students with disabilities) so that a regular education diploma is obtained. Note that these students do count as a graduate with the school but does not count in the 96.5% graduation rate because they were only provided 4 years and a summer to do their work. The SPED diploma is the only diploma that can count in the numerator which is essentially considered a regular education diploma. If a student moves from the district and goes elsewhere to receive their GED, that will count against our district as a GED. There were several students that went into the military or adult high school and received GED’s which again counts against our district.

In comparing Tennessee large districts report card, there are 15 districts out of the 145 that are over 10,000 students and only 8 that are over 20,000. CMCSS was averaging last year around 32,000 which is just under Williamson County.

Agenda Item: Social Studies Curriculum. Nancy Dye, Social Studies Consulting Curriculum Teacher, addressed the concerns some parents have with Islam in the Social Studies curriculum. Ms. Dye explained this is nothing new with Islam and/or other world religions in the Social Studies standards for the state. In fact, in the previous set of standards Islam was taught in two different grades (6th grade from the historical aspect and in 7th grade geography) as one of the world religions because religion is one of the factors of culture and huge components of geography and history. The State of Board of Regents that controls the colleges in Tennessee made it plain they wanted high school students to graduate with a year of World History. Under the old standards/curriculum, a student could go through high school and never take World History. The universities were concerned that students would be entering college without World History which is why it is now a requirement. In kindergarten, students learn about pilgrims and how they came here for religious freedom. We don’t really teach any religion except Christianity until 6th grade. Between grades 6th and 7th, the B.C. era is taught and students will see it again in 9th grade World History. Some references to Islam are during the Ottoman Empire in 9th grade going into World War I. All exposure to Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam is going to come in the 6th and 7th grades along with Confucianism and Shintoism. There are a lot of religions because they are all a part of the cultures of the places in the history that children study. The Ten Commandments are taught in our 6th grade textbook. There are 2 or 3 standards that are specific to Islam religion.

Otherwise, the remaining standards are things like, what the Muslims did in architecture, what did they do in medicine, what were their scientific achievements or how did they establish trade across different continents. Our 7th grade textbook has from the Koran exactly 2 ½ lines of text and it doesn't say students have to read this. Our standards in 7th grade in the state of Tennessee say that the Koran is a text to consider however not mandatory unlike the Ten Commandments. From kindergarten to 12th grade, approximately 10 – 15 days are spent on a civilization that arose in the 500 – 600's and their accomplishments. Basically, the only other time students hear about Islam are the political things that go on with the Ottoman Empire and later on when we study 9/11 in high school US History. It's important to remember it has always been there. If students have a strong objection, they are allowed to opt out of these teachings and extend their studies in other areas during this time. However, public schools are held accountable to a state test that may have those questions and we want the kids to be prepared.

Ms. Dye was complimented by some of the parents at the meeting for her in depth explanation on this issue. Some commented how a better understanding of the overall process of the Social Studies curriculum (including the all religions) was a huge benefit. Ms. Dye concluded that it is important to remember this curriculum is driven by the state in an effort to prepare students for college.

Agenda Item: Textbook Selection details were given by Emily Vaughn, Curriculum Director. Ms. Vaughn began by explaining a list of approved textbooks and resources is received from the state. From that we form committees at the district level with representatives from schools across the district including teachers, parents and community members to review all resources. It is a lengthy process as they have to look at what is being offered by the textbook companies. Some resources are online which is a big change from what we have had in the past. Textbooks must be associated and aligned with the standards. All of this is a big piece of the work the committee does. In the past, we had to go with one set of textbooks. This past year, because of the unsettling of the standards, the state gave us leeway meaning we could adopt multiple publishers. This was a great option for us because some publishers align better with different grade levels. The committees then present their recommendations to Dr. Worthington and those materials are adopted. Adoption, however, doesn't mean purchase. We are required to "adopt" textbook materials but are not required to "purchase" them which is a separate process that must happen. As an example, we did not purchase math textbooks last year. Instead we did "adopt" them because we didn't know where the standards were going to land. We are very fortunate to have some great resources and materials that are not necessarily textbook driven that our teachers use for instruction. If you recall a few weeks ago, Dr. Johnson gave a presentation on the process of blending textbooks over into technology and meshing the two together. Textbooks can be a \$3M - \$4M purchase whereas technology purchase could be \$4M - \$6M so we are trying to find out a way to blend those together. That is a cultural change for parents because some feel their child needs to have a textbook when they come home.

A great resource for parents to help their kids with the blended learning is on our website. Under "Parents" there is a curriculum link which will show the standards being taught in a particular grade level. Another resource on the website is Khan Academy (go to: "Parent Engagement" and then "Family School Connection"... www.khanacademy.org) which has some informative videos for parents that illustrate exactly how to look at a particular math problem or whatever the subject may be. Most classrooms in lieu of a textbook keep notebooks or journals. Teachers are very intentional about including helpful information so parents should ask about those resources and there are notebooks student can bring home. There is also a Homework Hotline for all subjects and in many languages that provides free tutoring by phone for any Tennessee student. Call (615) 298-6636 or Sonic toll free (888) 868-5777 Monday – Thursday from 4:00 – 8:00 pm. If you have a computer and an internet connection, they can also Stoodle with you.

A parent concern was mentioned regarding in-class work and how it is assessed since it makes up approximately 40 % of the grade. Mom went online and reviewed the standards, but still unclear how this will be assessed and worried the assessment may come before mastery. The student's in-class work grade is not favorable even though the test scores are good. Parent has met the principal and teacher. Is there guidance for the parents to know what the teacher is looking for as there seems to be a disconnect? Ms. Vaughn suggested meeting with the teacher again. An important piece would be for the classwork to be coming home so the parent can see what kinds of problems are included in the classwork before the assessment. If not, that could a big part of the problem. There are some textbook online versions of classwork in some subjects and teachers can definitely give more information regarding this.

Another parent inquiry referenced spelling. Parent of 3rd grader, child comes home with list that is different from other students and, in addition, he gets extra words. Ms. Vaughn responded to think about spelling tests in 2nd and 3rd grade. They get a list of words, they study that list of words and they test on that list of words. The list of words follows a pattern or skill and they study to learn that skill. It could also be that students know a set of words well and teachers are going beyond that and give them a different set of words following the same pattern but more advanced words.

Parent question regarding different methods of teaching. If a student is having difficulty in learning a problem by a particular method being taught, are the teachers allowed to show them a different way to solve the problem? Ms. Vaughn responded that teachers are not required to teach only one method, however, they will always build from the conceptual understanding using concrete material up to the abstract. It all depends on where the child is in that spectrum of learning. Lots of strategies are used to help students if they do not understand one particular method of instruction. A standard is a standard but the strategy on how they get there can change. A standard is what you want them to be able to do but as a teacher you have a bank of strategies to get the student to that standard.

Agenda Item: Parent Information on TNReady Assessments Ms. Vaughn talked about how we are going to assess math and reading this year. We had a previous set of standards, TN Diploma Project, and with these standards, we were assessed with the TCAP but not aligned meaning one set of standards and one assessment. Last year we were on both sides of the fence with the TN Diploma standards where we were using Common Core standards for reading and math but yet we had an assessment that only assessed the TN Diploma standards. Teachers and students were balancing both standards but being held accountable to one set of standards. This year for the TNReady assessment we have both. We still have TN Diploma standards for science and social studies but those Common Core standards (now called TN Education standards) will assess reading and math. Now the standards and assessments are both aligned which is what we want for our students. When we talk about the transition to TNReady, we know that to develop the skills needed for college and career (which is really the focus) we need to allow students to show what they know in different assessment type items. Parents will receive better information about what their child knows and what they need to work on with the new reports this year for math and reading. We also know this promotes real-world problem-solving. Looking at math, the TNReady replaces the TCAP test which is given in two parts and online. In English language arts, it replaces the TCAP also in two parts and online. Social studies, even though we are still in the TN Diploma standards, is much more rigorous and challenging than before as is the assessment and is given in two parts. In science, the standards and assessment have not changed and this will be a one-time test in late April.

In speaking to the amount of time students are spending taking tests, we have talked about two parts. When we look at it overall, the time turns out to be very close. The previous TCAP test was a much longer test and now, even with the two parts testing, there is very little difference in the amount of time it takes to administer the test. Testing now is shorter and fewer items but students will have more time to take the tests and more at the application level.

At the district, our work has been to ensure we align our documents that the teachers use with the curriculum and that they have the assistance needed to support their students. Our students are participating in resources that are provided by the state called MICA which is a practice site for them to experience the content that will be presented on the assessments in February and April. (MICA) TN Ready -<http://cmcssfocus.net/2015/11/02/preparing-for-the-tnready-assessment> . It's a tough year for teachers, administrators and students because everything has changed.

Agenda Item: Calendar Criteria Dr. Worthington commented that work has started on the calendar for 2017 – 2018 and that feedback would be requested from parents, teachers and students. Another topic that needs attention is parent-teacher conferences. An extra emphasis will be placed on finding resolutions for better coordination to maximize time and content. There is currently a group working on ideas and we will be reaching out to the parent groups for input as well.

In January, the next question for input is “Does the current student code of conduct reflect our community’s values and expectations for ethical and lawful conduct and responsible citizenship? If no, what should be included or eliminated?” Parents or guardians may submit their input in the question box located in each school. Please send any comments or questions you receive to Deb Cummings (deborah.cummings@cmcss.net)