

Superintendent's Corner

"A new approach developing at MES"

During Tuesday evening's meeting, Ruston Roberts briefed the Board on the development of a process at Morgan Elementary School designed to help improve student learning. The staff has been working on the process throughout the current school year under the leadership of Principal Laraine Whitear, Ruston Roberts, and Lori Walker. When the entire process is put in place, it will have the potential to make a significant difference in the education of the children at MES.

Common Standards

One of challenges in our educational system is the tendency to teach too much content and thus students can be exposed to a great deal of material without developing a strong understanding of essential concepts. This is especially true for students who take longer periods of time to learn and/or may struggle to reach an acceptable level of understanding.

The teachers at Morgan Elementary School have spent a great deal of time this year reducing the amount of content to be taught into important core concepts or common standards. The belief is that it is more important to reach understanding of a smaller number of concepts than to "finish the book".

Common Assessment

The next step is the development of common assessments that will be used by each teacher at a specific grade level. The development of common assessments means that teachers will be teaching similar content at the same time of the year. Students will be tested on that content to identify those who have mastered the material as well as those who need more time and/or additional instruction. It will also help teachers identify their own strengths and weaknesses and provide opportunities to discuss ways to increase student understanding.

Some grade levels have already started this process. Thanks to a \$5,000 state grant secured by Ruston Roberts, additional work on common assessments will take place this spring and summer.

Time to Focus

It does little good to identify strengths and weaknesses unless you plan to do something about it! One of the approaches being explored by the staff at MES is to identify 20 minutes four days a week for interventions and extensions. Those students who need additional work on the core concepts being taught that week will have that opportunity. The instruction could come from his or her own teacher or it could come from someone who has been extremely successful in teaching that concept in the past.

For those who have mastered that concept, they will be provided an opportunity for extensions, which could include more challenging learning experiences in the same and/or similar concepts. I'm personally excited about this approach since one of the weaknesses that I see in our district is our ability to challenge students who are gifted and/or extremely successful in the classroom. There can be a significant difference between these two groups of students!

This Could Mean a Change in Schedule

One of the most effective ways to bring all this together is to modify the current school schedule by scheduling an "early out" one day a week thus providing teachers with an opportunity to share student scores, structure interventions and extensions, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of individual students, and discuss ways to improve instruction and student learning.

Summary

The concepts outlined above are not new. Many schools have been doing the same thing for several years. If done correctly, the changes can produce a significant difference for many students. I appreciate the willingness of the staff at MES to give up the security of doing things the way they've been done before in an effort to try to help more students succeed. I also appreciate the leadership that Laraine Whitear, Ruston Roberts, and Lori Walker have provided to the effort.

As I told the staff a couple of days ago, we're a very good school district when compared to the entire state. When we compare ourselves with schools that have similar demographics, we're not as good as we should be. The change at MES could help us become even better with regards to helping all students learn.