

«GreetingLine» Improvement Plan

Annual Improvement Plan 2008/2009

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The Dexter Park School Improvement Plan is being submitted under the requirements of Section 596 of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993. The plan is a current assessment of the educational needs of the students and a blueprint for action that will further enhance the quality of instruction at Dexter Park School. At the center of our efforts is a commitment to the knowledge and skills identified in the Common Core of Learning and the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. To help students meet our higher academic standards, we offer a comprehensive program of services that have been designed to meet the diverse social, emotional and cognitive abilities of our student population.

The vision statement of the Dexter Park School is simple in form but complex in nature. We strive to provide every child with the educational services necessary to ensure he/she reaches their fullest academic, social and emotional potential. No child is more or less important and each should be challenged to strive for high standards of academic performance and social behavior. To achieve these lofty goals, an active partnership must be developed involving all those who play a significant role in the growth and development of our students. We promote the implementation of interdisciplinary experiential learning activities and technological advances to stimulate the multiple intelligences and higher level thinking skills. We recognize every child's right to a quality education, and that whenever possible program designs are streamlined to meet the diverse needs of our student population.

To that end our broad educational goals encompass providing a core curriculum that is aligned with the state curriculum frameworks but flavored with enriching and challenging supplementing activities and materials. We strive to develop critical thinking and problem solving while encouraging innovation and creativity. We support individual and team problem solving activities and the exposure of students to the global world thus fostering a better sense of the diverse cultures and beliefs of people living around the world. The world gets smaller with each generation of new learners and the need for a clearer understanding of other people and other lands has dramatically increased.

General building goals emphasize: providing a safe and nurturing school climate that understands and addresses the individual needs of our students, developing instructional models that meet the diverse learning styles and abilities of our students,

generating a core curriculum that is aligned with the state curriculum frameworks, fulfilling the mandates of the “No Child Left Behind Act” as it relates to student performance, parental involvement and qualifications of our staff, promoting the development of age/ability appropriate skill levels in oral and written communication, demonstrating an understanding of math principles and function by successfully applying problem solving skills, reading at or above grade level and displaying a mastery of core curriculum content knowledge in science and social studies.

2008-2009 Goals and Accomplishments

I. Curriculum and Instruction

A. Reading/Language Arts/Spelling

In the second year of our three year BSRI implementation plan, we concentrated on strengthening our understanding of quality learning centers and effective differentiated instruction. The two components are critical in supporting student literacy growth while establishing a productive classroom design dictated by targeted student needs and data driven support interventions.

Teachers attended workshops and seminars on the development and implementation of effective learning centers throughout the year. Workshop schedules were developed by Bay State consultants and teachers attended conferences at Framingham State College on a regular basis. District half-day professional development days were also devoted to learning centers and activities dedicated to successful differentiated instruction. It goes without saying that many of our staff voluntarily sought out and researched numerous other opportunities to enhance their professional skills.

While we have yet to reach our ultimate goal of having 90-95% of our students reading at grade level, we have improved each year in significantly improving the reading performance of all students. Our greatest gains have been with our underperformers who as a group based on standardized testing data, are performing at much higher levels than before. As we go through the growing pains with plusses in some areas and little growth in others, we are confident that we are on the right track. It is hoped that our efforts will soon be demonstrated in state MCAS scores. We are beginning our fine tuning stage in understanding the many integrated components that impact student reading success.

We reinforced and modified other reading instruction elements as well.

1. All students received their reading instruction in their regular classroom with no students meeting reading specialists in separate settings.
2. New intervention programs were introduced to support targeted students with diagnosed reading challenges. Lexia, a phonics development and support program, was introduced at both grades

three and four. The program is on computer software and was made available to all needy students in all classrooms and the computer lab.

A linguistics component of Project Read was added to support student growth in vocabulary and reading comprehension. The upper grade intervention is provided in small group settings on a daily scheduled basis.

The new intervention programs were recommended and funded by BSRI. The materials have been highly effective in enhancing student performance and providing differentiated instruction.

3. We established three two-hour reading blocks to organize the day in a fashion that allows for effective utilization of staff. Without the reading block, we would be unable to schedule reading specialists for all classrooms requiring intervention support. We try to adhere to a no interruption policy as much as possible but building commitments and programs makes a no interruption policy extremely difficult to sustain.
4. Teachers have assumed a much greater responsibility in assessing student progress through a more rigorous participation in Dibels testing. Dibels is a nationally accepted testing tool designed to measure student reading fluency. While it measures reading fluency and speed, it is not as effective in predicting reading comprehension. The area of measuring student progress in their reading comprehension is currently being explored for future implementation.

All students are administered the Dibels in the fall and once again in the spring to measure annual progress. Students falling below grade level expectations and benchmarks are tested more often with frequency of testing based on levels of student performance. High risk students are tested weekly. Test results are utilized to measure student growth and more importantly provide diagnostic reading data that will generate new or modified intervention strategies for needy students. Student plans are developed with concrete suggestions and timely benchmarks for continual review. The testing has a student support purpose.

To measure student comprehension growth, we currently administer the Grade assessment which is a standardized test assessing student comprehension skills and basic vocabulary. This tool is given at the beginning and the end of the year to all students in an annual assessment only.

The importance of testing is in its support of understanding student performance and developing intervention strategies for struggling readers. From objective data, student plans can be formulated that are both short and long term. The more knowledgeable we are the more efficient we should be in generating ideas to help all readers regardless of their individual challenges.

5. Word Wizard

To motivate students to master weekly vocabulary words and to strengthen their comprehension skills, we introduced a costumed Word Wizard who randomly visited classrooms to test students on reading vocabulary words. The students really enjoyed the visit as staff, primarily Mrs. Reilly, pranced through the classrooms. Children loved guessing who was behind the costume.

6. Reading Counts

The final feature that we added was a year long independent reading incentive program. All students were strongly encouraged to read ability appropriate books from the library. Books had learning codes on their binders that indicated the reading difficulty level. Once students finished a book they went on the computer at their leisure and took a general comprehension test on that particular book. Test results were processed by the computer and available to the student and teacher immediately. Scores of over 70 generated classroom credits to an end of year field trip to 202 Sports. Students were given multiple opportunities to retake difficult tests on the same book.

B. Math

Math remains on the back burner but not out of sight as we concentrate on our full time commitment to modifying our reading instruction design.

Curriculum: Minor adjustments were made to the scope and sequence timetable. The changes are based on teacher input/recommendations and analysis of MCAS test items. Each year individual math strands are either over or under emphasized by state testing contractors. In other words, one year may see 10 geometric problems and 15 number sense questions while another year may bring 3 geometry and 5 number sense problems.

It is critical that our math program is aligned with the state curriculum and equally important that curriculum uniformity and instruction is in place. The practice

establishes specific grade level goals and objectives that teachers and students can strive to meet regardless of classroom or teacher designation. Maintaining curriculum uniformity provides staff with a consistent road map to follow, allows for more accurate and timely student assessments and ensures that all students will be exposed to the full core curriculum as established by our building in accordance with state guidelines.

Daily Lessons: Daily teacher lesson plan requirements have been continued. Formal teacher observation forms have been established to evaluate grade level specific objectives. The tools provide a framework for lesson expectations that an administrator can clearly follow and evaluate while still allowing for that much needed touch of teacher creativity and innovation. The central elements include: was the lesson objective clear and related to the frameworks, did the teacher provide lesson clarity, was there sequential lesson development, was there checking for student understanding, were classroom management strategies in place and was there a nurturing and challenging classroom atmosphere.

Assessments: Student performance assessments remain critical to our understanding and development of effective math instructional practices. The teacher developed grade level tests gives us an accurate tool to monitor the growth of individual students, small sub-groups and whole classrooms in a timely uniform fashion. The individual and collective data is highly useful in generating new and differentiated instructional strategies for all students on all spectrums of the academic scale. The standards based assessment tools are given on a quarterly basis and reflect student progress on an ongoing basis. The data also provides credible rationale for planning district professional development activities that are necessary as reflected in student performance results. Sound objective assessments can improve the quality of instruction while identifying the specific needs and remediation strategies for individually math challenged students.

C. Social Studies

We continued to emphasize the work done with the Massachusetts Cultural Arts over the past four years. We made a significant effort to enhance the quality of support material available to classroom teachers. Leveled Readers, brief but content filled paperback books, were purchased to integrate social studies into our reading program. The books are factually rich, aligned with the state curriculum frameworks and serve as strong learning centers for independent student work. So rather than saying, “killing two birds with one stone” lets say, “nurturing two birds with one worm” . . . not sure that sounds better!

We also worked on adding to the social studies kits we developed. The kits cover a wide variety of topics and are frequently signed out of the library by individual classroom. We have taken great care to develop an inventory of materials that highlight the rich and significant history of the North Quabbin region.

A final piece of our efforts was the collection and organization of quality historical audio-visual material. The materials were collected from teachers, students and community members and are now housed in the library. The array of materials has been a nice addition to our instructional arsenal.

D. Science/Technology

An ongoing effort is the conscientious commitment to supporting and modifying the curriculum. While we are currently not assessed at an MCAS level, we are responsible for the state curriculum frameworks. Being on target with the content and scope and sequence of science units building wise and district wide is extremely important.

On a real and student active level, Seeds of Solidarity once again provided a rewarding hands-on experience for our students. Their technical support and on site visits enhanced student understanding of gardening and an appreciation of the life sciences. Teachers and students alike comment on how much “fun” and informative the gardening projects are. Thanks to Seeds for bringing gardening to Dexter. Dr. Deb Habib and her wonderful staff are a pleasure to be associated with. We are still entertaining thoughts on how to integrate the values of gardening into our social skills strategies. They seem a perfect match at many levels.

As in social studies, we have been working hard to collect a variety of diverse resource materials to support our science instruction. We have gathered a nice collection of audio-visual materials available to all classrooms and have housed them in the library for efficient classroom utilization. Leveled Readers as well have been purchased, which integrate science into our daily reading program.

E. The number one priority we have is to ensure the physical, psychological and emotional safety of our children. A perfect curriculum delivered by perfect teachers is useless if students are not focused, secure and comfortable in their environment.

Making the building and grounds physically safe is a never ending focus. Up until recent years, clear, fair and consistent rules enforced by building staff and the building Principal generally took care of most issues. Today, however, times have changed and keeping children safe is not as easy as just changing a playground rule. Difficult social problems are impacting many families and influencing children in a negative manner. Too many spend more time worrying than studying and playing. World events have made our country, community and schools feel less safe. As a result we must be very cognizant and vigilant of the challenges our students face and adjust our schools accordingly within the framework of shrinking financial support.

We annually review our emergency plans thinking out all possible scenarios that our schools and children could face unexpectedly. In place are plans that react to varying levels of school distress; code blue, code yellow and code red. The building reactions range from a lockdown to bus evacuations. The plans are integrated with other schools in our district, Mahar and community

health and safety departments. While we are prepared, no plan is a guarantee merely an outline.

One of the great obstacles to student growth and performance is emotional distress brought on by social factors that are sometimes known, too often not. Whether students are experiencing ongoing trauma or severe distress, it severely negates their capacity to be happy and involved learners. The concerning socio-economic indicators of our community require us to be aware and be ready to act on behalf of a growing number of students who are emotionally challenged, feeling overwhelmed or just “not happy”. That is a phrase we often hear because students are not always able or willing to verbalize what is on their mind.

To address this growing problem we continue our “buddy system”. It is a casual and personal program that assigns individual building staff to identified students to formally yet in an informal way “check in” with students in a friendly and supportive manner on a regular basis. Building adults, serving as positive role models, make themselves available in a non-judgmental manner to needy students. The program has proven to be very successful in supporting and redirecting at-risk students. A kind word, or words of sincere encouragement are quite often the difference between a disruptive explosion and a B+ on a spelling quiz. This layer of student support is both personal and meaningful but also another layer of building security. Input from the staff has been most positive and they are most eager to “buddy up”.

F. We have completed our third year with our alternative program designed to meet the needs of district students demonstrating extreme compliance difficulties. The Transition Room has had a successful history of supporting and returning to the mainstream students who had disappointing school experiences. Over the course of the year, four to five students were enrolled in the program with measurable growth demonstrated by all. The classroom is staffed by one certified behavioral specialist and one paraprofessional. Aides staffing on a temporary or one on one status is scheduled as needed. Students attend regular classrooms for all subjects on a level that meets the needs of the students and the structure of the accepting regular classroom. We have been pleased with the academic and social growth of our students. This program is crucial in servicing challenging students in the district, alleviating regular classrooms from chronic disruptions and saving the district money from avoiding out of district placements.

II. Parental Involvement

The Orange Elementary Schools has a long and rewarding history of open and collaborative relationships with parents, community agencies, town departments and community members. Parental involvement is encouraged and welcomed, driven by the simple approach “that we are in this together”. If we are to truly succeed, we must continue to develop working collaboratives that are active, meaningful and open to all who would like to participate.

Joanne Woodcock, serving as our Home/School Liaison, is a supportive bridge to many families in crises and transition. Working silently behind the scenes, she supports multiple families and children in dealing with numerous daily living stresses from transportation to filling medical prescription. Funded through grants and working closely with area health and human service agencies, Mrs. Woodcock is often the only “working” lifeline our growing number of homeless families can reach out to. The present economy is putting heavy stresses on all families but particularly the at-risk.

The schools and district provide ample opportunities for parents and community members to be active participants in school events and activities. Parents are mandated and welcomed to be full participants on district and school councils and committees including: School Improvement Council (mandated by the Education Reform Act), Title I Advisory Council, Special Education Advisory Council and Community Partnerships for Children Council. On a more informal level we have multiple activities for parents to choose from filling their interests and busy schedules. The list includes: September Open Houses, October Harvest Family Barbecue, fall and spring parent conferences, PTO sponsored events, Family Basketball, Community Reader Day. Walk Your Child to School Day, Grandparents Breakfast, school programs, classroom volunteers and field trip chaperones. More importantly, parents are always welcome to vent and chat with school staff. Our doors are always open.

III. School Safety

Building Maintenance:

We continued to have few if any complaints about the general air quality of the building. The combination of moving “air sensitive” staff to non-carpeted classrooms and the adjustments we made last year seem to have done the trick. An old system will never be perfect, but from my experience old is not always bad when the new is incredibly inefficient.

There were no major maintenance projects initiated during the school year. General cosmetic efforts, painting etc. were undertaken as usual. The Siemen’s Project is a welcome sight for the town and Dexter Park.

2009-2010 Goals

The following items will be significant points of emphasis for building study, modification and improvement:

- 1. Math**
 - a.** Monitor alignment of the curriculum with the state frameworks.
 - b.** Touch up and tweak quarterly grade level assessments to make sure they remain effective measures of student growth.

- c. Review the current scope and sequence of mathematic strands to ensure that the timetable adequately addresses the curriculum frameworks in a timely and qualitative manner.
- d. Review MCAS results for classroom and individual student performance levels and trends. The data collected will support intervention strategies and future professional development.

2. Reading/Language Arts

- a. Evaluate the effectiveness of our BSRI program implementation with particular emphasis on:
 - 1. Student performance based on Dibels and Grade testing results.
 - 2. Classroom performance based on Dibels and Grade testing results.
 - 3. Growth levels of consistently underperforming AYP subgroups – Special Needs and Low Income.
 - 4. Quality of learning centers.
 - 5. Effectiveness of our intervention programs:
 - a. Project Read
 - b. Read Naturally
 - c. Lexia
 - 6. Improvement of classroom teachers in organizing daily classroom routines that reflect quality differentiated instruction and extensive small group explicit direct teaching.
 - 7. Successful utilization of building staff during assigned reading blocks.
- 3. Review the implementation of our new report card system for modifications.
- 4. Explore opportunities for teachers and paraprofessionals to broaden their instructional skills through the scheduling of professional workshops that address identified district needs.
- 5. Strive to expand and sustain community involvement opportunities.
- 6. Continue “Adult Buddy System” to provide student support and positive role models.
- 7. With the continuing downward trend of the economy, intensify our efforts to support students and families who may be experiencing increased stresses and emotional distress.

- 8.** Introduce a new writing curriculum to support grade level uniformity and adherence to state curriculum frameworks.
- 9.** Continue to establish and encourage active home/school partnerships and develop new activities that will entice less active parents to become more involved.
- 10.** Review our staff utilization practices to identify strategies that will better directly service the diverse needs of our population.
- 11.** Insist that the school environment continue to be welcoming and nurturing.
- 12.** Carry out frequent mock run throughs of our emergency planning strategies to ensure the safety of children and staff.
- 13.** Increase the awareness and application of wellness practices for all students and staff.
- 14.** Explore the possibility of child development training programs for preschool children.
- 15.** Begin initiatives to develop financial support for our after school programs beyond state and federal grants (short life expectancies).