



NEWS

Mercer Island School District Volume 8 Issue #2, March/April 2007

This is the second issue of District NEWS for 2006-2007, designed to present information on district and school improvement planning, Student Ends, and other programs. Please continue to check the district web site for the most current information. www.misd.k12.wa.us

Superintendent's Message: Board of Directors approves dates for 2007-08 and 2008-09 school calendars

On March 22, the MISD Board of Directors approved the start date, vacation dates, and weather-related make-up dates for the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school calendars. These dates were negotiated between the Mercer Island School District and the Mercer Island Education Association. The ending date, Learning Improvement Day (LID) dates, and other teacher professional development opportunities are still under negotiation and should be decided before school is out in June.

The primary goals of this school calendar are to increase instructional time for students prior to the administration of the WASL, build in 2 weather-related make-up days, continue to start after Labor Day, provide professional development opportunities for staff, and end school sooner so that staff can participate in summer courses and students can participate in summer sports and academic programs. Finishing the school year earlier is also important in the event that additional weather-related make-up days need to be added to the end of the school year.

374 parents responded to the school calendar survey. 88% of respondents wanted school to start after Labor Day and nearly three-quarters wanted weather-related closures built into the school year. 80% of parents did not want these days taken from Spring Break and parents were split 50/50 as to whether to continue or discontinue Mid-Winter Break. The results of the survey are on the MISD website at www.misd.k12.wa.us. In the years to come, our Board of Directors has committed to providing additional avenues for parent input beyond the school calendar survey.

Changes from prior school calendars include:

- Weather-closure make-up days are placed in March and May. If there is no need for make-up days, these days will become 3-day and 4-day weekends.
- Mid-Winter Break has been reduced to a 4-day Presidents' Day weekend in February in order to finish the school year sooner.
- Spring Break is moved up one week, beginning at the end of March and continuing through the first days of April.
- The Winter holiday is back to two full weeks at the end of December going into January.

The decision to eliminate Mid-Winter Break was a difficult one. Many of our families and staff members enjoy traveling during that week at "off-season" rates and "off-season" crowds. I am personally sorry to see the break end as I enjoyed that time with my daughter skiing Whistler/Blackcomb. The opportunity to add more instructional time for our students prior to the WASL is a compelling one, though, as is ending the school year earlier.

If you have questions or thoughts regarding the new school calendar, please contact me at 206-236-3300 or cyndy_simms@misd.wednet.edu.

Dr. Cyndy Simms
Superintendent

DISTRICT FOCUS: *Transforming teaching and learning through professional learning communities*

**Teaching matters. We must attract
and retain the best and brightest
teachers and faculty for our students,
and reward the best teachers for their
commitment to results.**

Washington Learns
– Bold Reforms for a
World-Class Education
System, November 2006

The fact that "teaching matters" is not a new idea; parents know this, students certainly know this and the Mercer Island community has long supported teachers in the classroom through donations to the Mercer Island Schools Foundation, the PTAs and through volunteer activities both inside and outside of the classroom. The 2001-2006 District Strategic Plan cited "attracting and retaining teachers" as one of the main priorities for the past 5 years; our district provides mentors for new teachers, and compensation for teachers working on committees to improve teaching and learning K-12. But there is something new in this "bold reform" from the state's report on education in Washington today: **rewarding the best teachers for their commitment to results**. What exactly does this mean? At the state level it means providing additional compensation to teachers completing their National Board Certification – up

DISTRICT FOCUS continued next page

to \$3,500 per year for 10 years. Here, it is reflected in Strategy #5 of the District's Instructional Improvement Plan for 2006-2012: Build, implement and support professional learning communities.

Professional learning communities are not about attending conferences (the "sit and get" approach); they are intended to 'engage teachers thinking and be transformative in nature.'

At a recent meeting of the District Advisory Committee (DAC), Dr. Gary Plano, Associate Superintendent for Instructional Services, explained the concept of "professional learning communities." "First," he said, "our goal is to enhance the effectiveness of teachers and administrators so that students benefit. Professional learning communities are not about attending conferences (the "sit and get" approach). They are intended to "engage teachers thinking and be transformative in nature." Examples in the district this year are the elementary Standards-Based Report Card committee and the Mel Levine *Schools Attuned* training. "In the past," said Plano, "teachers have been too isolated from each other and good ideas are not shared enough. Part of the goal is to encourage teachers to become leaders in their school communities and bring ideas to other teachers that will help all students to be successful in their learning."

Mercer Island is now a "clock-hour" granting school district

Another part of the professional learning communities initiative is the notion of "clock-hours" (continuing education credits) for teachers. Clock-hours can be used to maintain certain teaching certificates and to advance on the state salary schedule. In addition, teachers earning National Board Certification spend more than 300 hours of intense course work, written reflection, and tests, all outside of the regular teaching day. Through a partnership with Seattle Pacific University, the district is offering many of these classes on our own campus, during the evenings and on Saturdays. Some committee work also qualifies for continuing education credits. "We have always compensated teachers for their work outside the classroom," said Dr. Plano, "but now we are adding course credits. We want to support our teachers, not add more to their already full plates."

How do professional learning communities support Student Ends?

All five strategies in the District Instructional Improvement Plan are designed to support Student Ends, but Strategy #5 is the "glue" that holds it all together. E-2 Academic Achievement states that students will achieve in 7 content areas, "at individually and appropriately challenging levels of increasing complexity, demonstrating the higher order thinking skills of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation." For teachers, the key words are "individual" and "appropriate". While Mercer Island is not big by public school district standards, we are still a community of over 4,000 students with different learning styles in classrooms of 25 or more students. Secondary teachers work with 150 students in 5 or more classes and elementary teachers are asked to be "experts" in math, reading, writing, science, social studies and art. All of our

teachers spend countless hours outside of their school day working on professional staff development and school improvement planning. Can we really know every student and adjust our teaching to meet their needs?

According to Patti Weber, Director of Curriculum and Staff Development, "Teachers are humanists by nature. They care very deeply about the needs of students and want them to be engaged and confident in their learning. But if I ever hear frustration from teachers it is that they do not have enough time to truly know their students. That's why we as administrators must be very proactive and deliberate on helping to focus teacher time on tasks that will make a difference for students. We believe that professional learning communities are an effective way for teachers to learn from each other, receive clock hours and compensation for their time, and ultimately, bring best practices to the classroom so that *all* students can be successful."

Mercer Island School District Strategic Instructional Initiatives for 2006-2012

- Strategy #1:** Implement and support a Standards-based Teaching and Learning System
- Strategy #2:** Use formal and informal assessment data to guide instructional practice and improve student learning
- Strategy #3:** Implement and support appropriate academic programs to meet student needs based on formative input from staff
- Strategy #4:** Implement and support student-centered programs designed around Citizenship and Personal Development
- Strategy #5:** Build, implement and support Professional Learning Communities

Boeing supports MISD science education

The Mercer Island School District has received a grant from The Boeing Company to improve science instruction K-12. The grant for \$7,000 is from the "Flight to the Future" program initiated by former President and CEO of Boeing Commercial Airplanes Alan Mulally in 2001. The grant will be used to provide staff training, assessment tools and instructional materials to support K-12 teachers to effectively deliver science curriculum. This effort is part of our district's overall goal to improve science instruction K-12, preparing students for advanced coursework in science at the college level, and mastery of the state WASL in science at the 5th, 8th and 10th grade level.

The Boeing Company is a consistent supporter of the Mercer Island School District through the Flight to the Future program, a 2004 grant to support Board Governance training, and as a "Breakfast of Champions" sponsor for the Mercer Island Schools Foundation. According to Superintendent Cyndy Simms, "We are so very grateful for the support of The Boeing Company. Together we are making a difference for our students and our state."

Mercer Island School District featured in *All Kinds of Minds* newsletter

All Kinds of Minds, the national and international newsletter on the work of Dr. Mel Levine, features an article about Mercer Island in its February issue. www.allkindsofminds.org/newsletter/february2007/ The article cites Mercer Island's commitment to "providing teachers with training so they can provide differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all learners" and applauds the efforts of The Mel Levine Planning Committee, which raised \$80,000 during the spring of 2006 to fund the attendance of 65 staff members, including all administrators at the district and school level. Since then, the district has held two practicum sessions. One elementary teacher is quoted as saying: "School Attuned is a wonderful opportunity to work with colleagues and share insights on how we can all better meet the needs of our students. It was an empowering time that reminded me of all the tools, support, and strategies that are at my disposal to be a stronger and more effective teacher."

Mercer Island Schools Foundation raises record funds to support teachers at 4th annual *Breakfast of Champions*

Tremendous Community and Business Support Key to 25% Increase in Giving at Breakfast Celebration Honoring Teachers and MISF's 25th Anniversary

The Mercer Island Schools Foundation (MISF) recently announced that its fourth annual Breakfast of Champions raised over \$200,000, more than 25% above its previous record.

"The business and Mercer Island community continues to invest in our schools and teachers ensuring we can deliver outstanding education to all students in our district," said Dr. Cyndy Simms, MISD Schools Superintendent. "This incredible outpouring of generosity will continue to help us attract and retain the best teachers possible."

Over 400 people attended the breakfast fundraiser held on Tuesday, March 27, 2007 at Mercer Island High School. Rob Sexton, RVP of Wells Fargo, gave the keynote speech addressing the importance of education for all communities and businesses.

The Foundation honored the district's teachers who have earned National Board Certification, a prestigious distinction for educators who demonstrate standards-based excellence.

"Business sponsors, donation-matching angels and community attendees were key to breaking our fundraising records", said Dirk van der Burch, president of the MISF board. "And we are delighted to give 10% of the funds raised to Bailey Gatzert Elementary School in Seattle where there are fewer community resources."

Funds raised are used to attract and retain excellent teachers, provide tremendous training and development opportunities including national board certification, as well as support key core and elective class support for all students in all grades and in all schools.

"We know that good schools are good for business," said Penny Yantis, MISF Executive Director. "This year, we celebrated 25 years of amazing community support – while providing a path for an even greater future for our students, staff and community".

About the Mercer Island Schools Foundation

The Mercer Island Schools Foundation is a 501(c) (3) public service, non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing the quality of education provided to all students of the Mercer Island School District by obtaining contributions for the public schools.

For more information about the Mercer Island Schools Foundation or to make a donation, please visit www.mercerislandschoolsfoundation.com or call MISF at 206-275-2550.

Program Highlight: Career and Technical Education (CTE)

CTE, once known as Vocational Education, or Occupational Education, is gaining national attention as a program that not only includes career awareness and leadership skills, but is also now emphasizing the three R's (Rigor, Relevance and Relationships) in all CTE programs. MIHS students are required by the State to take 1 year of CTE courses. According to CTE Director, Jerry Bennett, "We have an advisory committee made up of parents, teachers and industry leaders to advise us on developing programs to meet state standards and industry expectations for each of our program areas. Over the past 4-5 years Bennett has been working to integrate more math, writing and reading skills into the curriculum. "Sometimes it helps students to understand math when they see it applied to what they are doing – learning about the metric system in small engine mechanics, or computer editing in video arts." Mercer Island is a member of the Northeast Vocational Area Cooperative (NEVAC), a consortium of 9 school districts in the area offering a wide range of CTE courses. "Students can take Culinary Arts at Newport, Welding at Interlake, or Auto Mechanics at Bellevue. Many students come here for our Radio Broadcasting and Technology program." The Tech Prep program offers college credit for some CTE courses. "Some people refer to Tech Prep as the AP of CTE," says Bennett. Next year NEVAC hopes to begin the process of adding a skill center in our area. The NEVAC directors are also working at developing a stronger program in health care careers to meet the needs in that industry in the Northwest. "We want students to know that there are many different pathways to graduation – and to success in life."



On Common Ground at Fine Arts Showcase

The 28th annual Fine Arts Showcase on March 20 and 21 “filled the house” with enthusiastic supporters of the arts in the Mercer Island School District. From the Tuesday evening Art on Display with craft activities directed by the MIHS art club and art honor society, to Wednesday night’s music, drama and dance performances, Showcase guests were treated to outstanding examples of drawing & painting, photography, ceramics, dance, choral performances and music from students of all ages. As MIHS principal John Harrison quoted in his opening remarks, “If we omit the arts from the curriculum, we are in effect shortchanging the mind.” (Howard Gardner). Judging from the overwhelming response to Showcase, the arts are alive and well in the MISD. Special thanks to the Fine Arts Advisory Committee for planning this event and providing support to our students and teachers.



Osprey sightings

Just above the press box on the MIHS sports field is a lighting pole with, of all things, an Osprey nest. For some reason, these birds have decided that MIHS is their home; they have been returning to their nest on the pole for the past 5 years. This year, Harry Leavitt, who coordinates the high school’s *Committee to Save the Earth* program, overheard district staff Mike Lein and Tony Kuhn saying, “Wouldn’t it be great to have a camera up there so we could watch the eggs hatch?” So – the ASB Student Council has decided to use the proceeds from the Recycling Center to do just that. Lein, Kuhn and crew installed the camera in early March and now everyone within the district will be able to log in and watch and learn all about Ospreys right here above the press box. Thank you ASB Student Council and everyone who recycles on Mercer Island!

Congratulations!

To the high school boys’ swim team for winning the State Competition for the 2nd year in a row and coach Jeff Lowell for being named WIAA Coach of the Year.

To the high school Chess Team for achieving their second State win in row with their coach Larry Bencivengo.

To the MIHS Wind Ensemble for being selected as the WIAA 3A Washington State Academic Champions for 2006-2007 for having the highest average GPA.

Mercer Island Schools
4160 86th Avenue SE
Mercer Island, WA 98040

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