

**Oak Park and River Forest High School
201 N. Scoville
Oak Park, IL 60302**

**An Instruction Committee of the Whole Board
March 13, 2007**

An Instruction Committee meeting of the Whole Board was held on Tuesday, March 13, 2007, in the Board Room. Ms. Fernandez opened the meeting at 6:30 p.m. Committee members present were Barbara P. Fernandez, Valerie J. Fisher, Dr. Dietra D. Millard, and Yasmin A. Ranney. Also present were: Dr. Susan J. Bridge, Superintendent/Principal; Jason Edgecombe, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources; Jack Lanenga, Assistant Superintendent for Operations; Philip M. Prale, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction; Amy Hill, Director of Instruction; and Gail Kalmerton, Executive Assistance/Clerk of the Board.

Visitors Included: Dr. Steven Gevinson, Devon Alexander, Peter Kahn, Sue Donohue, Catherine McNary, Pat Staszak, Kathryn Gargiulo, Naomi Hildner, Glynis Kinnan, Gini Williams, Sara Rosa, Laura Young, James Bell, Bill Lovaas, Jay Lind, Liz Kaufman, Lauren Lee, Kathy Tsilimigras, and Bernie Heidkamp, members of the English Division.

Dialogue with the English Division

Mr. Prale began the meeting by explaining that every other month for the last two years the Board of Education has had conversations with individual divisions. Mr. Prale invited the members of the English Division to talk about what was important to them.

Each of the division members in attendance introduced themselves and shared what classes they taught.

Dr. Gevinson presented the Instruction Committee members with the curriculum document that the English division created three years ago. First drafted by Bernie Heidkamp, it was then reviewed the following year by Bill Lovaas, Jeff Currie, and Gini Williams, members of the Curriculum Committee. This document is a guide for new teachers and continues to lead the division's curriculum work. The division is very excited about the alignment of its classes, as it has brought about some coherence for the last three years. Past English Department Chair, Bob McBride began the realignment of curriculum, which led to this document. Dr. Gevinson went on to explain the different courses offered to freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

Dr. Gevinson continued that this was the first year students were being prepared to take the AP English Language Exam in their junior year. The basis of the language and composition exam is rhetoric, non-fiction. The teaching of nonfiction has been combined with the American Literature Honors Course of which there were 17 sections in the junior year and 14 sections of the senior AP class. He believed as many as 600 students

could register for an English AP test combining junior and senior students enrolled in AP English courses.

English teachers were exploring PBIS (Positive Behavior and Intervention Strategies) as a Learning Team objective. It is a grass roots discussion for the English Division. The Division feels PBIS could be a school-wide initiative and this team has been eagerly and energetically pursuing it.

Dr. Gevinson noted that the English Division might try to incorporate a pilot next year of portfolio assessment; which would involve a writing program for the freshman and sophomore courses and, perhaps, American Lit AP.

The Poetry Learning Team meets with a professor from DePaul who has offered his services to help take a book of poems of the same theme (biographical) and to then to teach that poetry like a novel, in the sense of continuity.

Dr. Gevinson then listed the English Division's initiatives to narrow or close the achievement gap:

- 1) Project Scholar. This program supports identified students in honors courses. Mr. Alexander assumed the position of Project Scholar English teacher from Naomi Hildner.
- 2) College Prep Scholar. This program supports those students who would have been placed in transition classes in the college prep courses.
- 3) Spoken Word Poetry Program. Students competed in the Teen Slam and finished second for the third time.
- 4) Freshman Learning Support. Five sections are manned. A committee, chaired by Lauren Lee, is contemplating ways to improve this program next year.
- 5) The Literacy Committee. The Committee is chaired by Ms. McNary and its membership is mostly of English Department teachers. It has come up with an innovative proposal for next year. The teachers teaching transition students will have the same students and the same planning period, i.e., a school-within-a school design. Students will not realize they are part of this experiment.
- 6) C.R.I.S.S. Training. Ms. McNary is the main C.R.I.S.S. trainer. She and Marsha Blackwell are also the literacy coaches.
- 7) Summer Reading Committee. Ms. Hildner chairs the Committee whose purpose is to assign students reading assignments over the summer. Discussion of what books to assign is continuing.
- 8) SILC. A SILC committee was formed to rethink senior year. Some English members are a part of this committee.

Dr. Gevinson is in awe of the remarkable teachers in the English division. There is also significant drama talent; Mr. Noble was rehearsing a play in the Little Theatre and Avi Lessing and Ellen Boyer had both directed their plays earlier in the year.

Ms. Fernandez asked how continuity was achieved in the department. Were the freshman English teachers starting together and ending together? If one student withdrew from a class and enrolled in the same class with another teacher, would that student be able to pick up at the same place in any particular book. Dr. Gevinson stated that it varied from course to course. The type of continuity Ms. Fernandez described would be most likely to happen in AP College English, because the six teachers plan together. Sometimes they are off by a week in their schedules. This collaborative group meets regularly to talk about books and teaching. The junior honors course has just produced a common syllabus, which will be submitted to the College Board for approval. While that course outline has four units with the same theme, teachers may choose to use different textbooks. Everyone would teach the *Odyssey*, *Romeo and Juliet*, etc., however. There is not the need for the same type of continuity necessary for courses such as math.

Ms. Ranney asked if there were tutoring tables for English, similar to the ones provided for math. She learned that Ms. Tsilimigras coordinates tutoring with people from within the community. Some students meet with the tutor during the student's Learning Resource Course or additional help may be coordinated at another hour during the day convenient for the student. Ms. Staszak noted that the teachers make lesson plans for tutors of homebound students. Ms. Ranney asked who dealt with the students that did not have appropriate English skills. She learned that it was mainly the Learning Support teachers and everyone else.

Ms. Ranney asked if tutoring were working and if more aggressive help were needed. Ms. Hildner had considered the loss of the Tutoring Center huge. The center was relocated to a small room in the library. Many teachers recommended their students meet with English teachers in the Center on a regular basis. It was an informal, relaxed atmosphere. ID's were not required. Food and talking were allowed. Many students study best in this type of situation. However, other people from the outside would look at it and find it problematic and disorderly. So to make it more orderly and to fit some image, it was downsized and it virtually disappeared. Ms. Ranney asked if they wanted it resurrected. The response was yes. Dr. Gevinson suggested changing the school day to an eight-period day, which would provide one-half period of tutoring during lunch. Peer tutoring would also be beneficial. The Tutoring Center was available to all students and it was used. Some students even received extra credit for using it.

Ms. Fisher was impressed with the Division's alignment of the curriculum, bringing in electives, and giving students an opportunity to take classes they would not have been able to do so previously. She asked to understand whether these things led to a wider utilization across the grading scale. Did some of the changes lead to getting away from that or a reduction in grade inflation? She felt these changes were great and positive. She wondered if that was a noticeable outcome or were there other things to which could be pointed. Dr. Gevinson did not feel the realignment had any affect on the number of A's and B's given. He offered an example of how the division worked. Several teachers could teach the same course. In the case of one teacher, there may be four or five A's out of 24 or 25 students. With a different teacher, teaching the same course, there could be 20 A's. The Division does not enforce the percentage of A's anyone is required to

assign. Different grading philosophies are accepted with the understanding that nothing has been done incorrectly. The Division has had this discussion. He remembered when the grading committee proposed that grades should fall on a bell curve. That philosophy died a natural death. The current Philosophy of Grading Committee has not produced any special guidelines to follow, so there is both the tradition in the school of teacher autonomy and creativity at the same time. Sometimes that combination produces unusual looking percentages.

Ms. Fisher stated that in the past meetings with other divisions many things were highlighted. She asked if there were things that the English division members wanted the Board of Education to focus on or to discuss.

Sara Rosa teaches the College Prep Scholar course. She has the students in her class for two periods each day. A review of the past three-years of the results in this course shows impressive trends. There is improvement in reading, writing, and overall student success. Students' writing has progressed well; these students were in the below 30 percentile in reading and writing, which is equivalent to a fifth or sixth grade level. The mean is about ninth grade four months, about half the level they should be.

Ms. Rosa works on studentship, behavior around discipline, attendance, etc. Ms. Lee reported that Ms. Rosa has had three such classes. Ms. Lee and Ms. Kinnan felt having the extra period to work with students essential. Ms. Rosa is very caring of the ten students in her class. She helps them to feel confident in the school, which is crucial. Mr. Kahn and Ms. Kinnan concurred. Ms. Lee felt that the atmosphere created by Ms. Rosa could be replicated. Ms. Rosa communicates with the students other teachers as well. Ms. Ranney attested to Ms. Rosa's reputation and thanked her for the work she did.

Ms. Fernandez asked how teachers insured students were learning, engaged and excited about in English. Mr. Heidkamp felt it was reflected in the curriculum document. His continuum is not on the subject, but on the students and their own development. He determines how a book might help students sort through complications and issues in their own lives. The spirit of this document is about developing studentship; students developing their own identify. It is the duty of English teachers to expand the students' perceptions of the world. For the subject matter to be about their world and their lives makes it both meaningful and exciting.

Discussion ensued about the success of the C.R.I.S.S. training, which uses strategies to give the learning back to the students. This has been effective for all levels of teaching. TESA was also very helpful in respecting students as people. How a student connects with the outcomes is the most important objective—how students begin to own the lesson.

Ms. McNary admitted that sometimes, no matter how much she tries, she is not always successful. If someone asked if the students were always engaged and learning, the answer would be no, but she tries to engage them to the best of her ability. It is important for her for the students to be able to take literature and transform it into something that is

important to them. She teaches regular and basic students. A novel that has been very effective with this group is *Their Eyes are Watching God*.

Faculty members felt strongly about PBIS and its philosophy that connections must be made with students. Working class students feel often times that they have obstacles that maybe other members of the community do not have. Some of their parents work until ten o'clock at night. Teachers then function as advocate for those students. English teachers know that "men die every day working from what poetry gives them freely." Ms. Ranney noted that concept resonated in the document. Dr. Gevinson stated that the cover of it graphically illustrates what teachers teach from freshman year on and helps students to grow through English.

Ms. Ranney, noting that she comes from a different culture, agreed that it was important for students be exposed to multicultural literature and differing points of view; it is integral to what educators do. In her tenure as a Board of Education member, she had reviewed many books and she observed that there seems to be an overwhelming preponderance of authorship from different cultures, including India. She asked if anyone felt that, perhaps, the District was tilting the balance in the other direction and not giving as much time to the classics. Ms. Lee felt everything could be done effectively. As teachers get more proficient through the mastery of C.R.I.S.S. and literacy training, they can do more and they are doing much more than before. They are making students better readers. She is very excited about this. When the question was asked as to how teachers got students to be excited about English, Ms. Lee's response was because the teachers were excited. The English department is collegial and geeky. They all share with each other, read, really like the students, and like to learn from the students.

Mr. Heidkamp stated that the more diverse teachers are the more students are prepared for college life. Teachers teach traditionally classic literature, but it goes back to the foundational values of the department. Teachers are not teaching the text, they are teaching their students. They are not only looking to get students from point "a" to "b," but to think about the world in a particular way. Often that is finding new text to reach the students and meet them at their level. Classics are taught in Naomi's humanities class anticipating the history department's Middle Eastern course. Human beings are storytellers. For example, both Dante and Miller are good storytellers.

Ms. Fisher asked about writing as an everyday tool to communicating. Was the division hoping to be vertical? Ms. Williams said that English teaches students to write in various forms, personal essays, narrative and AP language course based on rhetoric, but it is a model that involves the writer, the audience and the text. In a way, they write informally—writing that would be similar to articles one might see in today's magazines and journals. She tries to teach students to write in their own voices. Students' voices are filtered out in other departments in the building. It is interesting and rewarding to read student writings that sound like the student. Ms. Kinnan added that teachers teach much writing. Students write more in this high school than they do for many university classes. Ms. Hildner stated that C.R.I.S.S. and the Spoken Word Program have done much to help students speak honestly in their own voice. She felt it would be helpful for

all teachers to have this training, make it mandatory. Mr. Heidkamp stated that teachers have taken on the role of oral literacy since the speech class was eliminated. He teaches juniors in college prep classes and he is amazed that by junior year when he tells his students that they are going to read poems and start with expressive readings or passages; they have no fear. It is because of Spoken Word. Members of Spoken Word have taken the leadership of those activities in the classroom.

Ms. Lee added that students getting in front of other students and reading also includes the process of who is in the classroom with them. Ms. McNary's ninth grade class has the experience of being an audience for both sides. Because she does not teach honors classes, the level of writing she encounters may not be as fluid. She starts at the point where the child is in order to increase fluency. There are no preconceived notions. That methodology has been astonishingly positive. Ms. Lee stated that writing is taught as a process and graphic organizers are used in this process. All teachers give students several writing assignments per semester.

Ms. Hildner spoke about the writing portfolio assessment. The Learning Team has been exploring how to move students to their own deficits in writing, by either addressing them on their own or getting the resources with which to fix the areas in which they struggle. She started using writing portfolios at the beginning of the year. There have been some bumps to navigate students from writing for a grade to the practice of making their skills and writing better. The success has varied, but she has never had students who were more articulate about their deficits. Ms. Fisher asked if some had a fear of writing. The answer was yes. Much of this comes when they are building a portfolio and addressing their status. This portfolio allows them to say, "This is where I am and I have to progress from that level."

Dr. Millard confessed that this discussion made her want to go back to high school. She continues to have a fear of reading and cannot read fast enough. She often wonders what she could have done earlier in her learning to read faster and feel comfortable in knowing that she could read as much as she wanted. She asked if this feeling were unique. Ms. Lee said that reading books was like driving down the street. One concentrates on the street, not what is on the porches, etc. In a complex world, one has to become comfortable with not being able to know everything. If one is uncomfortable with that, reading will be difficult. Learning involves retroactive semantification. Will one stop reading because of that obstacle or wait for the clarification? Dr. Millard asked if this were a problem for the students. The response was yes. One must learn to enjoy just one paragraph. There are different kinds of reading and that is what teachers must get across to students.

Ms. Staszak said that the C.R.I.S.S.'s learning strategies made a difference in her teaching life. Ms. Lee attested to the fact that it helps to get the students engaged and helps them to feel comfortable. As much as she would argue that the teachers teach reading, students read in all classes. She echoed the need for C.R.I.S.S. training for all teachers.

Dr. Gevinson stated that literature is not a blockbuster novel; it is to be read slowly, savored, and read for a second and third time. Because students are so busy and involved and the fact that the non-print media is more dominant, it is difficult for them to complete their assignments. It has resulted in more academic dishonesty, plagiarism, reading the *Spark Notes*, etc.

Ms. Fernandez hoped that the faculty was pushing the summer enrichment program by reminding African-American students to apply. The Alumni Association wants the students to fit the profile of need for financial support.

The Committee members thanked for Division for coming and sharing their thoughts.

Adjournment

The committee adjourned at 8:06 p.m.