

Dear Parents and Guardians,

The District Steering Committee (DSC) is comprised of parents, teachers, administrators, and a Board of Education member that has “the broad purpose of shared decision-making to improve schools in a framework of trust and collaboration between the various stakeholders that make up the school community.”

To this end, it was important to us to discuss the New York State Focus District designation which has been argued, challenged, appealed and rejected. Although the appeal had some valid arguments relating to the designation, it still doesn’t change the facts. New York Mills was identified as a Focus School because its subgroup – students with disabilities – did not meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) in ELA for at least three years in a row. When a school doesn’t meet the required 95% participation rate, New York State Education Department (NYSED) reaches back one or two years in order to base the AYP calculation on a reasonable size that most closely approximates 95% of a tested population. NYSED looked back to 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 in order to gather enough student data to make a reasonable three-year calculation. New York Mills all student participation rate was as follows: 13/14 (92%), 14/15 (54%), or 15/16 (29%). Therefore, the student participation rate and academic performance rate for the small subgroup of students with disabilities was even lower.

That brings us to the main issue; we are not testing enough students in grades 3-8. The committee understands the opposition to “high stakes” testing as it relates to identified subgroups, but we have discovered, the high stakes apply more to the district than to individual students. If the test refusal rate holds steady or increases, the designation will remain in place; and in fact, the designation will progressively move to identification of Focus School, Priority School, or “Receivership” School/District. In addition, if the participation rate remains low and NYSED investigated and found that we were refusing to follow state regulation and guidelines, they could limit or withdraw funding. Our low test rate, combined with the size of our district and Focus Designation place us on a very short list of school districts that could become a target for much more serious consequences – the loss of our identity.

The data from these assessments is valuable to the school district. The district uses this data to drive instruction, to pinpoint areas of weakness in the curriculum. Additionally, the district uses this information to assist students and parents in knowing individual student academic strengths and weaknesses and in providing intervention support for students. The existing designation has caused us to review programs and practices in our special education department in order for us to make decisions and changes that will better serve our students and promote their success.

Other parental, teacher, and administrator concerns voiced to the Committee regarding the 3-8 Assessments are:

- Poor performance results are the sole determinant for placement in Academic Intervention Services (AIS)/Response to Intervention (RtI) or referral to the Committee on Special Education.
- Test scores are linked to teacher evaluation.
- The timed exams created detrimental testing conditions and unnecessary stress for students.
- Students with Disabilities were unfairly tested because there were no “Test Read” accommodations.
- The assessments are lengthy and contain poorly written test questions.

However, please review the links below that detail the efforts on the part of NYSED to improve the 3-8 Assessments. In the first link you will find information regarding the elimination of the “timed”

component, shorten exams, improved questions developed by educators, and in the second link is approval for Students with Disabilities to have “Tests Read” if it appears on his/her Individualized Education Program (IEP).

<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/ei/2016/changes2016grades3-8ela-math-tests.pdf>
<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/specialed/publications/testing-accommodations-ela-grades-3-8.htm>

In regard to the individual performance piece as it relates to AIS/RtI and the CSE process, most of that is specific to a school’s Response to Intervention or AIS Plan. Our current RTI Plan uses a framework that requires multiple forms of assessment data in order to provide academic services and has tiered levels of intervention prior to CSE referral.

Therefore, how do we move from a Focus District to a School in Good Standing? The solution is really quite simple; our students need to take these exams in order to prove our excellence as a district! We will not be able to remove the designation without data from testing. Therein lies the next question, how do we increase the number of students proficient on State Assessments?

- through educating parents about State testing and parental, student and district responsibilities;
- through using assessment data to better intervene and support student growth through curricula and instructional differentiation;
- through parents requiring their child to take the test regardless of the excuse that “their friends” are not taking the assessment;
- through inviting parents with concerns and questions regarding the assessments to pick up the phone and call our new principals;
- through including school community leaders in the discussion in order for them to make informed decisions based on knowing all of the information and the consequences of students not engaging in NYSED 3- testing; and,
- through trusting in our school leaders to provide your son/daughter with the best possible educational experience.

As a committee, we feel quite strongly about our pride and commitment to this community and school district. We all share the same goal: ensuring the success of our K-12 students and making sure that our school district survives and thrives for generations to come. Therefore, please support us by having your son or daughter take the NYS 3-8 tests. If you have questions or need clarity, please contact the school principals:

K-12 Executive Principal, Mrs. Mary Facci	315-768-8124
K-12 Principal, Mr. Brent Dodge	315-768-8129

Respectfully,

The District Steering Committee