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To: Board of Education members  
From: Dr. Brian Osborne, Superintendent  
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Re: Proposed middle school enhancements through the 2015-16 school year

### **A Vision for the South Orange and Maplewood Middle Schools**

The vision of the South Orange-Maplewood School District (SOMSD) is to be the top-performing diverse suburban school district in the nation. The mission is to prepare each and every student, regardless of demographic or socioeconomic background, for postsecondary educational success.

For middle schools, this means that the vision of the South Orange and Maplewood Middle Schools is to become the top-performing middle level system in the nation by focusing on academic excellence, responsiveness to student needs, and social equity.

Over the last several years, our middle school staff and administration have collectively focused on what should be taught and what teaching should look like. We have built capacity, raised test scores, improved curriculum and increased access. Revised curricula, the development of common assessments across the grade level content areas of two middle schools, and the development of a common vernacular regarding instruction have all contributed to what the Association for Middle Level Education has outlined as the first goal in moving toward a quality middle school: “ensure(ing) that all middle level students participate in challenging, standards-based curricula and engaging instruction, and that their progress is measured by appropriate assessments, resulting in continual learning and high achievement.” In addition to the work our district has undertaken around teaching and learning, our middle schools have recently instituted structural changes that were aimed at placing more of our students on a common path to excellence, with more sixth and seventh grade students provided access to our most challenging curricula. This foundational work provides the momentum for continuous improvement through further positive changes.

As we construct a plan to realize our middle school vision, we must build a path for students that challenges them to develop the essential skills and knowledge necessary for college and career success in the twenty-first century. The workforce has changed dramatically over the past few decades, and the days of having the opportunity for a life that supports a family with financial stability with a high school diploma are largely over. Our students need to be able to compete with their peers in Bangladesh and Singapore in an increasingly globalized and rapidly changing world, and that requires engaging, meaningful, and demanding coursework that gives every student the global literacy and problem solving skills they need to have the opportunity to be successful in college or in highly-skilled work when they graduate.

Engaging students in problem solving, innovation, and collaboration, as well as fostering a deep understanding of the issues impacting our local and global communities, are essential parts of the path.

### **Proposal for Implementation of the Middle Years Programme of the International Baccalaureate**

Excellence and equity are attainable when there are rigorous expectations and support for all students as they work toward high expectations. In order to ensure that SOMSD middle schools are providing the highest level of rigor for our students, we are proposing that both middle schools adopt the Middle Years Programme (MYP) of the International Baccalaureate (IB).

The MYP offers SOMSD students a prestigious and challenging framework to prepare them for the demands of Columbia High School and beyond. MYP provides a set of principles and curriculum resources to guide the evolution of the curriculum as the district moves toward the Common Core State Standards.

At the center of MYP is the Learner Profile, which defines the type of student the program is intended to foster. The MYP curriculum principles promote the merging of content area skills and knowledge for the purposes of investigating issues impacting our local and global communities, and placing the student at the center of his or her own learning. MYP shares with the new Common Core standards the desire to motivate learners to develop passion and dive deeply into subjects. An eighth grade personal project would require students to choose an academic or non-academic topic or subject for a year-long investigation.

MYP would provide guidance and training to build the schools' capacity, as well as independent verification of the quality of the efforts to prepare every student for college and career success in the 21st century. As part of the evaluation of progress to meet the expectations of the MYP, the IB organization would conduct site visits to assess the schools' capacity and implementation. In addition, IB assessors would analyze district assessments and student work for alignment with IB performance criteria against international benchmarks.

Further, because IB is an international organization, participation in the MYP allows for a comparison of school performance with participating schools across the world. SOMSD teachers would have an opportunity to become part of an international network of educators, and share resources and teaching practices, while participating in world class staff development. Finally, participation in the MYP would allow our district in future years to explore the feasibility of offering the IB Diploma Programme to SOMSD student at Columbia High School.

IB was started as a program for children of foreign service workers and international business people who wanted to ensure that they would be able to attend schools abroad that allowed them to matriculate to prestigious colleges with transcripts that embodied intellectual rigor. The excellence and accountability that the organization offers has made it a sought after resource in both elite private schools and public schools that share our vision.

Having both district middle schools accredited as MYP institutions, with three grade levels participating by the 2015-16 school year, would provide our students with what Veronica Boix-Mansilla, Harvard Graduate School of Education, described as the “much needed bridge between what is typically learned in schools and the most pressing questions that concern our society.”

The MYP would be implemented according to the following schedule:

- Year 0, 2011-12: Begin application process with staff site visits.
- Year 1, 2012-13: 6th grade staff trained for 2013-14 implementation.
- Year 2, 2013-14: Implement MYP in grade 6. 7th grade staff trained for 2014-15.
- Year 3, 2014-15: Implement in grades 6 and 7. 8th grade staff trained for 2015-16.
- Year 4, 2015-16: Implement MYP in grades 6, 7, and 8.

This proposed adoption of MYP is conditioned on additional planning which would occur in the 2012-13 school year. Part of that effort would necessarily include:

- Review and modification of Board policy as necessary, with identification of specific items requiring passage of Board of Education resolutions
- Adjustments to the budget with expanded costs for ongoing training (an initial review indicates that MYP is feasible budget-wise)
- Adjustments to scheduling of teacher planning and prep time within the current contractual framework (see below)
- Further collaboration and consultation with teaching staff
- Training and curriculum development, starting with grade 6 in 2012-13
- Engagement with parents and plan for appropriate parental involvement
- Review of implications for our evolving model of staff evaluation
- Review of MYP’s implications for our special education practices and Section 504 Accommodation plans
- Review of MYP’s alignment with the CHS high school curriculum to ensure that we have common expectations from middle to high school
- Review of our initiatives for National Board Certification for teachers and their alignment with MYP
- Creation of a more detailed transition plan to MYP by grade and by subject

### **Opportunities for Increased Teacher Planning Time**

Research on highly effective learning communities, and schools that have achieved continuous growth in student achievement highlights the existence of high functioning teams of teachers that regularly engage in professional dialogue and reflect on professional practice. Furthermore, effective implementation of the IB MYP requires substantial time for teacher teams to collaborate in planning units of instruction, and to evaluate student work using IB MYP performance criteria. That being the case, we recognize the importance of establishing regular and substantive time for teacher teams to collaborate, and put forth the following options to achieve that end:

#### Conference Period:

- One conference period (2:45-3:15) per week would be devoted to structured team planning time.
- Four conference periods per week would be for meeting with students.

#### Faculty Meeting:

- One faculty meeting per month would be devoted to structured team planning time.
- Meetings begin at 3:15 and last for typically one hour.

Alternate Schedule: We propose that one day per month each middle school adopt an alternate schedule to free up teacher teams for two uninterrupted hours of structured planning.

- One option is for students to be on a two hour delayed opening for that one day, with staff starting at their regular time.
- A second option is for students to be on an early dismissal schedule for that one day a month, with staff operating on a full day schedule.
- A third option is for students to be housed together in the auditorium once a month for a special assembly or activity. During this time, students would be supervised by administration, while teacher teams were engaged in structured planning.

### **Proposals for Academic Placement at the Middle School Level**

An essential aspect of preparing all students for the fast-changing 21<sup>st</sup> century world they will inherit is to include all students in demanding grade-level expectations that put them on the pathway to postsecondary success when they graduate, while providing additional time for those that need it to meet grade level standards and additional challenge to those that are exceeding grade level expectations and learning at faster rates.

Educational research asserts that elimination or reduction of academic levels in middle school can serve as an important component in a broader set of reforms for increasing educational opportunity and improving student achievement. Indeed, the two most prestigious middle level organizations, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform and the Association for Middle Level Education, recommend against so-called “ability” grouping in middle schools. In the 2009-10 school year, the Superintendent’s Task Force on Excellence and Equity itself conducted a review of the educational literature with respect to middle school academic placement which led to its recommendation to move toward elimination of academic levels at the middle school level. Part of that research effort highlighted the fact that our district is out of step with most middle school practice nationally.

Changes to academic placement by itself will not make much of a difference in student readiness to have the choice to succeed in a four year college when they graduate. There are no silver bullets. Continuous improvement in teaching and learning requires persistent effort on multiple fronts. Changing academic placement is just one aspect of a multi-faceted strategy to build a culture of continuous improvement to get more students truly ready for college, and more students able to succeed in competitive and highly competitive colleges. Elimination of the sorting and classification of middle school children is a necessary – but by itself, not sufficient – condition to provide equality of educational opportunity. That is why our prior efforts have included substantial improvements to curriculum and instruction intended to benefit all students.

We believe the following changes to academic placement along with ongoing continuous improvement strategies in curriculum, instruction, professional development, assessment, and student support will increase the access of all students to rigorous learning and high expectations, and provide the additional time and support within the school day necessary for them to be successful. We propose the changes take place in the 2012-13 school year.

#### Sixth Grade:

- *Mathematics:*
  - Currently, sixth grade students are assigned to Level 2, Level 3, or Level 4 math, with the exception of students who qualify accelerating into seventh grade math.
  - We propose maintaining the existing accelerated class, and collapsing the remaining three levels into two (a grade-level and an Honors course).
- *English Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science:*
  - These three core courses already are heterogeneously grouped in sixth grade and we propose they remain so.

#### Seventh Grade:

- *Mathematics:*
  - Currently, seventh grade students are assigned to Level 2, Level 3, or Level 4 math, with the exception of students who qualify accelerating into eighth grade math.
  - We propose maintaining the existing accelerated class, and collapsing the remaining three levels into two (a grade-level and an Honors course).
- *English Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science:*
  - Currently, seventh grade students are assigned to either Level 2 or Level 4 classes in English Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science.
  - In each of the three academic disciplines, we propose condensing the two levels into one grade-level course.

#### Eighth Grade:

- *Mathematics:*
  - Currently, eighth grade math students are assigned to Level 2, Level 3, Level 4, or Level 5, with students who qualify accelerating into Geometry at the high school.
  - We propose maintaining the accelerated Geometry course, and condensing the remaining levels from four to three (one grade-level course, one Honors course, and one Advanced Honors course).
- *English Language Arts:*
  - Currently, eighth grade English Language Arts students are assigned to Level 2, Level 3, or Level 4 classes.
  - We propose condensing the three levels into one heterogeneous course taught on grade level.
  - In addition, we propose the creation of an accelerated English Language Arts section that would have eighth graders who qualify taking ninth grade English.
- *Social Studies and Science:*
  - Currently, eighth grade students are assigned to Level 2, Level 3, or Level 4 classes in both Social Studies and Science.
  - We propose the creation of one heterogeneous course taught at grade level.

## **Proposal for Additional Time and Support for Learning at the Middle School Level**

In order to ensure increased achievement for all students without sacrificing rigor and high standards, it is essential that additional time and support be available to students who need additional learning time to meet grade level expectations, and additional challenges be given to students who are surpassing already rigorous standards.

The additional time supports are most effective in schools when they are systematically implemented within the school day, and when they increase in intensity if struggles continue. To this end, we propose both *fixed* and *flexible* interventions to support struggling learners and to provide them with the additional time they need to master essential concepts and skills. *Fixed interventions* will meet each day and will be a constant part of the student's schedule. *Flexible interventions* will result from unsatisfactory student progress as indicated by performance on common assessments, a progress report, or marking period grades. *Flexible interventions* will cease once the student is meeting a satisfactory level of performance. Fixed and flexible interventions will be implemented in each grade level as follows:

### Additional Time and Support in Sixth Grade:

- *Fixed Intervention:*
  - Currently, every middle school student's schedule consists of a thirty minute advisory period, and a thirty minute lunch.
  - For students who score Partially Proficient on the 5th Grade NJASK in Language Arts, Mathematics, or both, we propose they receive daily fixed support during this sixty minute block of time. To accomplish this, we propose restructuring this sixty minute block of time to include a support period during an extended alpha, and a shortened lunch.
- *Flexible Intervention:*
  - We propose that sixth grade students in need of flexible intervention as indicated by their performance on common assessments, progress reports, or marking period grades, receive it in place of their fifty minute Related Arts course. Like the Related Arts classes students were removed from, these support classes would take place every other day.
  - Once the student was achieving at a satisfactory level, the intervention would be removed, and the student would be rescheduled into their Related Arts course.

### Additional Time and Support in Seventh and Eighth Grade:

- *Fixed Intervention:*
  - Fixed interventions currently exist for seventh and eighth graders at both middle schools in the form of Project Ahead Math and Project Ahead Language Arts. These meet on a daily basis for fifty minutes in place of World Language.
  - We propose maintaining this fixed support, but expanding it to include special education students.
- *Flexible Intervention:*
  - We propose that seventh and eighth grade students in need of flexible interventions as indicated by their performance on common assessments, progress reports, or marking period grades, receive them during their sixty minute advisory/lunch block. To accomplish this, we propose restructuring the block of

time for students so that they have a support period during an extended alpha, and a shortened lunch.

- Once the student was achieving at a satisfactory level, the intervention would be removed, and the student would be rescheduled into their regular lunch and advisory.

### Additional Challenges for Students Exceeding Rigorous Standards

- *Student-driven projects.* Student driven projects are a vital part of the MYP approach for all students, enabling the fastest learners to excel at their level of challenge within heterogeneously grouped classes that are aligned to IB principles.
- *Accelerated Math and English Language Arts courses* (see above). Students who qualify would be able to take 9<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics and English Language Arts courses for high school credit while in eighth grade. While the criteria would need to be set in the 11-12 school year, we anticipate this being approximately 12-15% of the eighth grade class for both subject, similar to the current proportion for mathematics.
- *Online learning opportunities.* In addition to the project-based approach of the core classes, the world of online content and coursework is proliferating rapidly, offering a vast array of opportunities for the most motivated and fastest learners to pursue their passion and complete high school level work. For those students who demonstrate readiness, these additional challenges would be tailored to individual student interest.
- *Content-specific enrichment activities.* Pending budget considerations, we propose after school content specific enrichment activities for qualifying students, such as the Intel Science, Model United Nations, Mock Trial, and Technology Student Association programs.

### **Conclusion**

Taken together, these proposals build on the foundational work accomplished over the last several years, which have positioned us to take these next steps toward invigorating teaching and learning at the middle level while increasing access to more rigorous coursework.

Pursuing rigorous and relevant curriculum with independent international verification of quality through MYP authorization, including all students in courses that put students on a pathway to postsecondary success, providing additional time for students who need it to succeed in those courses and additional challenges for those who exceed rigorous standards, and increasing teacher planning time are all next steps in our continuous improvement process that will help advance our mission to prepare every student to be prepared for success in college and career when they graduate.