

SPAN Meeting Minutes November 29, 2011

A. SPAN membership (Prior Lake/Savage Chapter of MCGT)

*Reminder that SPAN (Synergy/SAGE Parent Action Network) is really the Prior Lake/Savage chapter of the MN Council for the Gifted and Talented. Please consider becoming a member of MCGT (www.mcgt.net). Current SPAN Board members:

Apryl Henry, Co-president and secretary

Lisa Garborg, Co-president

Julie Mueller, Vice President

Anne Fry, Treasurer and Webmaster

B. Treasurer's Report

*No transactions in the last month; current balance is \$1309.46.

C. SPAN website

*The Prior Lake/Savage chapter of MCGT (SPAN) now has a website! It just went live and will have copies of minutes, useful links, and contact information. Please visit our new website at <http://mcgt.net/priorlake/>. If you lose the link, you can find it at www.mcgt.net and clicking on the Chapters link.

D. Introduction of middle school principals and teachers in attendance: Sasha Kuznetsov, principal at HOMS; Dan Edwards, principal at TOMS; Angie Toeller, Synergy specialist for the middle schools; Nathan Dapper, 8th-grade social studies teacher at TOMS; Alison Fasking, 7th-grade science teacher at TOMS; Sara Murr, 7th-grade Language Arts teacher at HOMS; Emily Albrecht, 6th-grade Language Arts and Geography teacher at HOMS.

Discussion of middle school advanced programming:

Angie first gave an overview of middle school advanced programming: This is the 3rd year of a 3-year transition to advance programming in the middle schools. Her role is as a resource for students, staff, and parents. Social/emotional needs of gifted kids are being met through Primetime. She offers activities once/week during Primetime according to student interest. She started with the Stock Market Game (made possible by a grant from Wells Fargo). Her plan is to offer book clubs, career exploration, and strategy games in the future.

New projects to meet the needs of advanced learners:

*History Day for 8th-graders: A theme is given each year, and students pick a topic within that theme and then choose their presentation mode (create a website, create a documentary, give a related performance, create a poster, or write a paper). This year's theme is revolution/reform/reaction. A focus on the project is the use of primary sources, according to Mr. Dapper. There will be a culminating display of student work, and students have the option to compete and move on to regional and then state competitions.

*World Savvy for 7th-graders: The focus here is on 21st-century problem-solving. The theme is sustainable communities. Students research a related topic and choose a presentation method. There is a culminating competition in March held at Macalester College.

Most of the remainder of the meeting was a question/answer session.

Q: How is it determined which incoming 6th-graders are eligible for advanced classes?

A: There are identification criteria. The current criteria are focused on 90th + percentile MAP scores, but this may change for next year, as the Middle School Advanced Programming

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Steering Committee is convening in a few weeks to discuss this. Students and parents will be notified before registration for which classes their child is eligible to enroll in advanced sections. The students/parents then commit to taking or not taking the advanced classes during the registration process. The number of commitments determines the number of sections of each advanced class offered. Currently, there are 3 sections each of Advanced English, Advanced Geography, and Advanced Science at the middle schools (1 section at one building and 2 sections at the other).

Q: It there consistency in what is being taught in the advanced classes between the 2 middle school buildings?

A: Yes.

Q: Which classes have advanced sections?

A: The 4 core courses (English, social studies, science, math). Next year, all 3 middle school grades will have advanced sections in the 4 core areas. The subject of each year in social studies may change next year, though, as new State standards will be coming out.

Q: What is the current science sequence in middle school?

A: 6th-grade: physical science; 7th-grade: life science; 8th-grade: earth science. There were very recently new State science standards implemented, and this sequence follows the standards.

Q: Are all sections of all 4 advanced classes taught in each building?

A: Yes; currently, 1 section in 1 building and 2 sections in the other. Some students do have to cross the street to attend an advanced section of a class.

Q Is this crossing difficult/cumbersome for the students who have to do it?

A: It can (and is being) done.

Q: Are an equal number of male and female Synergy students opting to participate in the scheduled Primetime activities?

A: With the stock market game, there are an equal number of males/females in 6th- and 7th-grades, but there are more males in 8th-grade. The ratio depends on the activity.

Q: How are Explore test results used?

A: The Explore test that 8th-graders take is pre-ACT test that measures both interest and ability. Counselors explain the results to students as a group before they register for high school classes. It is a start; students get more guidance on classes and careers at the high school.

Q: Could teachers please describe the difference between advanced and regular sections?

Allison: Advanced science parallels regular sections with respect to standards; advanced sections have more depth/content; different labs; more application.

Sara: In Advanced English, they use a totally different curriculum; do word masters (connections/analogies with words); read different novels; greater depth of discussion—Socratic method; use of Touchstones curriculum; more writing; different styles of writing.

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Nathan: This is the first year of advanced sections of 8th-grade social studies. They go into more depth; connect current events to history, go deeper with primary sources—different interpretations of history from same primary sources.

Emily: First year doing geography in 6th-grade; focus on more on culture with advanced sections (rather than focus on text, as is done in regular sections). Students will be picking a country to research and apply the ideas learned in the course. Students also look at current events and report monthly on a particular current event.

Same standards for regular and advanced sections of English. Do same units, but advanced classes may do author studies (reading multiple novels by the same author), look at themes, have Socratic seminars. Expectation of stronger writing skills.

*6th-grade is a big transition year for students with changing classes, having many more teachers, having a locker, etc. Taking 4 advanced classes on top of this can be a lot of students. (Multiple parents of 6th-grade students who are taking 4 advanced classes said that having 4 advanced classes was not an issue.)

Q: Do you evaluate for eligibility for advanced classes and Synergy each year?

A: This has yet to be determined.

Q: Are the advanced sections of classes at each school the same?

A: Sara: Yes; she is working closely with the Advanced English teacher at TOMS.

Emily: No; they teach the same overall units, but they use different resources/novels. (Anecdotal experiences that have been shared with me indicate that what is happening in the 6th-grade advanced classes at each school is not the same.)

follow-up Q: What if students change teachers at the quarter or semester? Will this cause problems? A: No.

Q: How are SAGE students placed at the middle school?

A: They go through the same identification process (90th-percentile or above MAP scores) as everyone else. Identification procedures may change for next year.

Q: If a student chooses to opt out of an advanced class as a 6th-grader, how easy is it then to enroll in an advanced section as a 7th-grader?

A: It can be done with the exception of math. Switches can also be made either into or out of an advanced section between quarters.

Note: Per School Board approval Monday 11/28 night, all 6th-grade students will take Spanish (no option for World Language) next year. This may add to the workload for students.

Q: Current 5th-grade SAGE students are all doing 6th-grade math. What course will they take as 6th-graders?

A: Advanced 7th-grade math.

Q: How are the social studies standards changing?

A: Previously, the State indicated what needed to be taught overall but didn't designate particular grades in which the material needed to be taught; the new standards will specify grades. A variety of very different-looking proposals have been considered, so we really

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don't know at this point what to expect. The decision was supposed to have been made already, so we also don't know when a decision will be made.

Q: How does the homework load in advanced sections compare to that in regular sections?

A: There is not more quantity, but the homework may provide a greater challenge and therefore require more time. Not as much class time is used for homework completion.

Q: How are twice-exceptional (gifted + other special need) students' needs addressed at the middle school? organizational needs?

A: Such students often take advanced courses in their passion areas but not in other areas.

Q: Is having 6th- and 7th-grade students mixed in a math class an issue?

A: No; they are often grouped together. Parents whose children have been mixed in with older kids agreed that this is not an issue.

Q: What percentage of students who are eligible to take 3-4 advanced classes opt out of taking all of them?

A: They don't have stats on this, but the guess is 5-10%. There is a deadline for choosing to take advanced classes, but it's not a firm deadline. Students/parents can change their minds at a later date.

Q: Are there resources available for parents to help them and their children decide how many advanced courses to take?

A: 5th-grade teachers do advise on this. Middle school counselors come into 5th-grade classrooms to guide as well. Parents' input was that if students are eligible, they should take the advanced sections.

Q: Is there more homework in advanced sections as you move from 6th- to 7th-grade?

A: The rigor level continues to increase as the grade level increases, requiring more energy for homework. Parents' input is that the amount of homework in 7th-grade is greater than the amount in 6th-grade, but it is manageable.

Q: When does registration occur?

A: There will be an informational meeting in early February for next year's 6th-grade students and their parents.

Q: How are students to find answers for 7th-grade advanced science homework (HOMS), as they don't seem to be in the (high-school-level) text?

A: Talk to the teacher; see if the student can come in before/after school for help. Email a request for a meeting to the teacher.

Q: Is there scaffolding for the increased rigor? Why is one class (7th-grade advanced science at HOMS) seemingly so difficult for students when their other advanced classes are not?

A: Make an appointment to talk with the teacher. We do a disservice to students if we don't stretch their minds.

Meeting adjourned after 8:30.

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E. Tentative plan for future SPAN meetings:

Tuesday January 31	State of gifted education in our district (Superintendent Sue Ann Gruver & Curriculum Director Jeff Holmberg scheduled to come)
Thursday Feb 23	Gifted education at the high school (high school principal & Synergy specialist scheduled to come)
Tu March 13	CHAT night...College Planning for Gifted Kids
Tuesday April 24	??Summer activities for gifted kids??

All meetings except for the CHAT night are scheduled from 7-8:30 in the WW Media Center. CHAT night will take place in the lecture hall at the high school.

****Next SPAN meeting: Tu. Jan. 31, 2012 7pm****