

Report of the External Review Committee Language Arts-Drama PreK-12

Weston Public Schools
Weston, MA

March 2017

External Review Committee:

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Presented to the School Committee March 20, 2017

Executive Summary
Weston Language Arts-Drama PreK-12 Curriculum Review Report
March 2017

This report is the result of the Weston School Committee's request to review the district's Pre-12 Language Arts-Drama curriculum. This report summarizes the findings of the External Review Committee. As such, it responds to the specific charge we were given to explore particular elements of the Language Arts-Drama curriculum and includes our top overall recommendations for action by the district.

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Committee Process

The Committee met November 8-10, 2016. Over a period of three days, we considered the district's Belief Statements on page 5 of the Self-Assessment and the ways in which we might see evidence of those beliefs during our visit. This allowed us to better familiarize ourselves with Weston's beliefs as well as one another's. For the next three days, we observed classes in all three elementary schools as well as the middle and high schools. We had two meetings with teachers, a parent and community meeting, conversations with administrators from all parts of the school district, and a meeting with high school students. Members of the School Committee were also present at some of these meetings. We took individual notes in our notebooks, and took group notes in google documents and on chart paper.

Commendations PreK-12

- The district completed a comprehensive, in-depth, and thoughtful self-study, with a level of professionalism that is to be commended.
- The district has talented and caring teachers who often go beyond the school day to support students and create a nurturing environment.
- Teachers across the district expressed a willingness to learn and a desire to collaborate with another across grade levels, disciplines, and buildings.
- Teachers' longevity within the district demonstrates their commitment; the district can harness their institutional knowledge as it moves into the future.
- The district has a well-respected co-curricular drama program with a high degree of student participation.
- In the classes that we observed, and the conversations that we had with children, students were respectful to one another and the school community.
- Throughout our visit, it was clear that parents and the community as a whole are committed to, supportive of, and engaged with the district.

- The district has demonstrated success in literacy learning according to outside measures, such as MCAS scores. This speaks to the district's strong curriculum and instruction.
- There is sufficient funding for the district to support excellent school libraries, classroom resources, facilities, and technology. This reflects the commitment of district leadership and the community to students, staff, and the process of learning.

Important Recommendations

- We recommend that the district articulate a clear PreK-12 spiral for Language Arts curriculum and assessment that allows for clarity for all stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, administrators, community members) and facilitates greater collaboration and continuity within vertical and horizontal teams within the district. *This "spiral" would build off the information that now exists in separate documents (the Weston Language Arts Standards, scope and sequences, and programs of study).*
- We recommend that the district focus attention on creating a more transparent PreK-12 writing strand that allows for clear outcomes and common writing experiences within and across grade levels, provides students with the opportunity to build on a foundation from year to year, and offers authentic audiences for student writing throughout the community.
- We recommend that the district integrate Drama instruction throughout the elementary schools and middle school, and to create a strand of Drama instruction that is clearly integrated with PreK-12 Language Arts standards and curriculum.
- We recommend that Drama also be recognized as a Fine Art.
- We recommend that the district provide a broader diversity of texts at all levels, offering contemporary and canonical texts in a range of genres and modalities.

- We recommend that the high school offer a more varied selection of electives for students, so that all students have the opportunity to explore individual interests and to ensure that all student needs are met.
- We recommend that the district examine the Content Literacy Standards of the MA Curriculum Frameworks, which is embedded in the elementary in Elementary Literacy Standards but teased out as separate standards for Science, History, and Technical Subjects 6-12, and embark on a district wide conversation about how disciplinary and content literacy can support readers and writers who understand how to write for diverse audiences and purposes across disciplines.
- We recommend that the district improve communication about Language Arts and Drama curriculum, instruction, and assessment with the Weston community.
- To support this work, we recommend that the district provide a literacy instructional coach in each school.

Committee Report

The Weston School District should be proud of the ways in which its middle and high school students discuss their literacy learning and the teachers who have shaped them from the earliest grades. Throughout our visit, we saw the ways in which the district strives to recognize the professionalism and the intellectual and pedagogical range of each faculty member. We applaud this.

The co-chairs of the self-study clearly put a tremendous amount of time and energy into the document. The process was thorough, moving from a reflection of where the district is to an articulation of what the district believes. These belief statements are powerful and appropriate for 21st century literacy learning outcomes. The self-study team researched current practices in literacy learning, visited other school districts, and surveyed faculty, parents, and students. The Committee praises the professional nature of this report, and the depth and range of information

that was made available. The rigor with which the task was undertaken is impressive. All districts should strive for this level of detail.

The tensions that we discuss within this report reflect the tensions of a community that already has a very strong educational foundation. Students are doing well in Weston, by all measures. Even deeper structures of support and cohesion are possible. Weston's commitment to academic freedom is something to celebrate. How can that academic freedom be maintained while providing a commitment to agreed-upon common outcomes, and how can those outcomes be made more visible? It is to this end that we offer our suggestions.

Program Design

As a small district, Weston has the opportunity to articulate a PreK-12 vision of literacy education. The Belief Statements on page 5 of the Self-Study ground all stakeholders in the conversation about literacy learning. With an excellent faculty, committed administrators, and powerful community-wide support, the Weston Public School District is positioned to be a leader within the Commonwealth.

The Committee finds it difficult to identify vertical cohesion and clarity within the Language Arts program and the ways in which the Drama program connects to a PreK-12 continuum of literacy. This does not mean that such vertical cohesion and clarity does not exist. But we struggle to identify it. The Weston English Language Arts Standards do present a PreK-12 continuum of standards, with "Instructional Snapshots" and "Assessment" alongside "Learning Goals." This is a strong starting point. As we read through the materials presented to us, we navigated between curriculum maps/scope and sequences for the elementary grades, programs of study for middle school and high school, and the Weston Standards. It remained difficult to see commonalities across the literacy curriculum within the three different elementary schools because each used a slightly different structure. The elementary and secondary sections of the Program Review Self-Study also followed different structures, which made it

difficult for us to develop a sense of overall coherence to then search for evidence of during our visit. Having more of this content in a single document would be very helpful.

We also believe that the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for English Language Arts could be better utilized to encourage a district-wide conversation about the curriculum spiral. During our visit, we observed a range of attitudes and perceptions about the curriculum frameworks. Weston's own set of 2013 English Language Arts Standards "reframe" the Massachusetts Frameworks, but it remains unclear to the Committee the extent to which teachers are using this set of vertically aligned standards, and we would encourage the district to build upon this structure to create a PreK-12 literacy learning continuum and a ladder of reading, writing, listening, speaking, that would allow all stakeholders to know what is being taught at each grade level and built upon in the next. Such a continuum need not devolve into a checklist of required formulaic tasks. Rather, it can articulate the range of options that could happen at each grade level to provide vertical coherence of learning and to maximize the passions and expertise of individual teachers and teams. Draft revisions to the Massachusetts Frameworks will be brought to a vote before the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education on Tuesday, March 28th.

Weston is on its way to completing this vision. The tremendous amount of information gathered for the self-study provides the foundation for this fine-tuning, so that t greater vertical alignment can take place.

Question: How might we improve or clarify the phonics, grammar, and writing experiences in our program grades PreK-12 so that all stakeholders feel confident that we are systematically building students' skills in these areas?

Throughout our three-day visit, it was clear to us all that all stakeholders within the Weston community are interested in a clarification of the phonics, grammar, and writing strands within the school district. All stakeholders, from parents to teachers to administrators, articulated

the high expectations that they have for students, and the strong desire to foster a range of writing styles and genres within the classroom.

The Committee recommends that more specificity about the alignment to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for Language Arts or Weston's 2013 Language Arts Standards would provide a good "spine" and a clear set of benchmarks for these various strands, from early language and reading experiences to the ways in which grammar instruction can be embedded within writing instruction, to writing instruction itself. By considering the Phonics and Phonological Awareness strands within the Reading Standards: Foundational Skills portion of the Frameworks, the grammatical conventions within the Language section, and the Writing section itself, you can develop grade level planning to articulate the learning continuum. The Weston Standards are built out by grade level, which allows for the additional instructional and assessment-based content to be included. However, this makes it harder to see the continuum of skills that get built in each category.

The curriculum documents that we were presented with were more scope and sequence than standards alignment. As such, the Committee has an introductory sense of the topics and skills addressed at different grade levels with regard to phonics, grammar, and writing, but we do not know if they meet the specifics of the standards or how they build on one another PreK-12. This does not mean that they do not; we just don't have the evidence in the hard copy materials provided or online at <http://www.westonschools.org/index.cfm?pid=11676>, where the Language Arts Standard are presented by grade level only, making it difficult for us to move from part to whole.

A simple starting point would be to take the overall standards within the Weston Language Arts Standards and create a PreK-12 continuum for each Standard strand. This would be simple enough to do in Google documents, which the district already uses. From there, each grade level standard could be a hyperlink to a google doc that demonstrates the different ways that the standard is addressed at the grade level.

Such an alignment document would allow you to see more specifically the kinds of instructional experiences happening at each grade level and how they build on one another. From there, conducting a gap analysis would allow you to see where the holes are and/or where there are opportunities for teachers to build on the previous year's instruction more intentionally. District-wide committees could be established to focus on filling in any gaps or strengthening the spiraling of instruction, and professional development needs could be identified. Grade spans may identify specific areas to work on in smaller groups. For example, primary grade teachers may want to work across grade levels in both elementary schools to discuss phonological awareness and phonics instruction, and ways to differentiate. High school teachers may want time to discuss more specifically how to spiral grammar instruction within a diverse set of course offerings. In all of our sessions with teachers, they expressed a desire for time to meet with and work with another across buildings.

The Committee has more to say about writing, which we will address in a later section.

Question: Should we adopt commercial “programs” for the teaching of reading and writing, particularly at the elementary levels? What are the benefits and limitations to such uniformity?

Throughout our three-day visit, we had the opportunity to meet with and observe a range of teachers from kindergarten through grade twelve. We were impressed with their passion for teaching, their commitment to students, their professional expertise, and their desire to work more cohesively from elementary through secondary. Because of the strong teaching capacity within the district, the commitment to academic freedom, and the desire that teachers have to talk with one another about teaching reading and writing, we do not believe that the district needs to adopt a formal program for reading and writing at any level.

Our conversations with the middle and high school teachers revealed a committed group of educators who want more time to be able to talk to one another about the ways in which they can scaffold reading and writing experiences more intentionally, and we believe that providing

professional development time to have those conversations throughout the year would be most fruitful. From those conversations, and the creation of a document that articulates the Language Arts continuum, teachers in grades 6-12 can participate in differentiated professional development - or curricular projects - based on what they have identified as next steps, and coordinate such work with the elementary schools.

The Committee does not believe that a packaged program is appropriate at the elementary level, either. However, we do believe that more consistent approaches, processes, and common language regarding literacy learning should happen at the elementary level, as should the accompanying professional development to move towards greater alignment with one another. Such work does not happen overnight. It needs time and attention and resources. As with the secondary teachers, more time to talk to discuss curriculum horizontally between Woodland and Country, and vertically across Woodland, Country, and Field is a valuable next step. From there, we believe decisions should be made that allow for more common understandings of guided reading, reading and writing workshops, and literacy integration in science, social studies, and mathematics to ensure that students are having consistent reading and writing experiences. Greater alignment does not mean “sameness.” The Committee recognizes that different schools have different personalities, and that teams of teachers work best drawing upon their knowledge of students, school culture, content, and pedagogy. As much as teachers need a range of teaching strategies to meet diverse students’ needs, they also need to share a common language and common set of structures. None of that can happen without professional development that provides teachers with time together to build that common language and shared structures.

A small district like Weston has the opportunity to provide teachers and administrators time to work together outside of a program to create a greater sense of Prek-12 coherence. Doing so requires more support, and we believe that money is best invested in creating a language arts coordinator or literacy coach at each of the the schools. Literacy coaches assume

different roles within the context of their school or district. Most consistently, coaches support teachers in furthering literacy learning, by helping to plan and facilitate instruction, develop curricular materials, and oversee professional development to foster the larger conversation about literacy learning throughout the school or district. For more information on the role of the literacy coach, we recommend the International Reading Association's (ILA) Standard 2010 Standards, which define the role of the reading specialist and literacy coach (<https://www.literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/standards/standards-for-reading-professionals>) as well the knowledge and skills needed for the role. Furthermore, the ILA standards articulate the other roles within the district and the elements of literacy learning they need to know and understand. Weston might also want to consult the resources of the Massachusetts Reading Association (<http://massreading.org/>), in addition to the ILA, to learn more about how literacy coaches are operating at the elementary, middle, and high school level within the Commonwealth. Finally, in 2006, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) created standards for literacy coaches working at the secondary level (http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Positions/coaching_standards.pdf), to further support an expanded understanding of disciplinary literacy in science, social studies, math, and the arts within the district.

Question: What can we learn from other schools' course recommendation/override/appeals processes that might benefit Weston students?

The community (parents/School Committee) has expressed concern about the selection process and the override process for Honors English, particularly for Grade 10 Honors. In the *short term*, we recommend that a consistent understanding be established throughout the school community regarding the course content/requirements in each level, consistent expectations be established among teachers in each department regarding course placement, and that departments use more than one measure for placement. In the *long term*, we recommend the creation of a universal placement recommendation document that has some

overriding requirements that each department will honor. If the override process continues to exist, it should be consistently applied. All documents related to the selection and override process should be transparent and posted on the WPS website.

Question: How can we best maintain the current excellence of the secondary Drama program, primarily as a curricular entity but also being mindful that the curricular serves the co-curricular program and vice versa, especially in a time of diminishing enrollment and great competition for students' elective choices?

The Drama program in the Weston schools is excellent. The middle and high school curricular program offers widespread student participation in a variety of well-developed required and elective courses. Both schools are staffed with hard working, creative and dedicated teachers.

The Co-Curricular Drama Program in Weston is exemplary. It has all the elements that you would want in a drama program: dedicated and creative teachers who work with challenging and sophisticated material. According to many sources, the artistic quality of the productions is excellent. The process by which these productions put together encourages student creativity and personal growth. The productions are populated with enthusiastic and well trained students and supported by faculty, administration and by parents. A group of six parents at a talk back session were effusive in their praise for the drama faculty and for the program in general. They described working on the drama productions as being one of the most significant experiences that their children had in the Weston Schools.

The Committee recognizes the strength of the Drama department and the unique role that it plays in the Weston School District. Drama, both curricular and co-curricular is anchored in the ELA department. This makes sense in that drama teaches both speaking and listening. Currently, beyond this, there is little connection. We recommend that changes be made to bring drama more fully into the ELA Department while also carving out a space for drama in the Fine Arts Department.

Drama is both a teaching tool as well as a separate field. As a teaching tool, drama can support students' ability to interact with texts, develop language, and consider audience and purpose. We recommend that drama faculty make regular visits to both elementary classes and middle school ELA classes to teach creative dramatics, work on speaking and listening skills, or to assist in drama related curriculum. For example, the drama teacher and 7th grade ELA team could plan a drama unit, which includes *The Diary of Anne Frank* as an anchor text. In addition, groups of students could read other one-act plays (which could also be thematically related) to deepen their understanding of drama as a genre. The drama teacher could then explore the techniques in which playwrights convey characterization and how actors delve into the subtext to create a believable character. At the elementary schools, drama teachers can teach a creative dramatics lesson or work on scenes, plays, or drama related projects related to literacy and content learning. At the high school, students should continue to take the required speech class. Students who met with us spoke at length and with great enthusiasm about the value of this class. The ability to speak comfortably and effectively is a powerful life skill. Weston should be congratulated for emphasizing these skills through this course.

The Committee also recommends maintaining the current high school drama elective offerings, but developing new opportunities for student involvement by creating new, more narrowly focused elective offerings, such as Playwriting, Musical Theater, or Acting for Film. Such courses support many of the literacy skills foundational to a well-rounded student, and such specializations may allow students who may be less interested in traditional or canonical English classes to connect with the curriculum and fine-tune their reading, writing, listening, speaking, and language skills.

The Committee also recommends the expansion and recognition of drama as one of the Fine Arts, with unique characteristics and intrinsic value beyond their connection to the ELA department. Placing Drama in this both/and context affords the opportunity to strengthen the PreK-12 drama focus within the English-Language Arts curriculum and showcase the Drama as

subject worthy of deep exploration. The Committee recommends establishing a PreK-12 committee with the charge of defining the relationship of the curricular and co-curricular aspects of the Drama Program. In most schools, Drama is not in their ELA departments. Rather, Drama is a stand-alone department or combined with other Arts in a Fine Arts Department. A Fine Arts Department format recognizes that Music, Visual Arts and Drama play an integral role in the social, emotional and intellectual life of students. The Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for the Arts makes this case compellingly.

A separate Fine Arts Department would initially offer students broader exposure to the arts, an essential element in a “well-rounded” education, but would also provide an outlet for creative expression to students who carry heavy academic loads and to those who thrive in music, art, and drama. A separate department would be better able to address students’ social and emotional being.

Therefore, we recommend a two-pronged approach. As drama is being fully aligned/integrated with ELA, Weston should also take steps to redefine the relationship between drama and ELA. This newly expanded relationship could take the form of a separate department with a special “collaborative curricular relationship” with ELA. Or It could make drama a “subset” of the ELA department with more autonomy and recognition. Depending on what is being covered in the ELA department meeting, drama teachers should be allowed to have separate department meetings to discuss issues pertinent to the drama program. Either way, Weston would be acknowledging that drama has a unique place in the curriculum. In the long run, if Weston should pursue the idea of a Fine Arts Department, we recommend that drama be included in this department. Even if this were to occur, we recommend that the special relationship with the ELA be recognized and continued.

We noticed that the Drama enrollment numbers are relatively low at the high school. In order to strengthen the department and to bring opportunities to a wider group of students, we have several recommendations. First, in addition to maintaining the already existing drama

performance classes and Technical Theater class, Weston should create the aforementioned courses that would appeal to a wider range of students: Musical Theater, Drama and Social Issues, Playwriting, etc.

We noticed the lack of professional development time which was specific to drama and recommend that drama teachers as a group be encouraged and supported in efforts to develop their own professional development. This could involve visits to other schools, attendance at workshops, meetings with other arts teachers within the Weston Schools, or other ideas which the drama faculty can develop.

The demands of the technical aspects of theater have grown tremendously. This is true in every school theater program, but most especially in a system like Weston where technical theater operates on a very sophisticated level. In order to sustain and grow, more technical support is needed at both schools. Stipends already exist for some aspects of current productions, although at the high school level, several of these stipends are funded only through grants.

We recommend that Weston create the part time position of Theater Technical Director for each school. This person could work on the technical aspects of each show, oversee and maintain equipment, along with other tasks related to the overall program. This position could be held by a current teacher to be performed in addition to his or her teaching duties, or it could be a qualified person from outside the Weston system.

The question arises as to whether the afterschool productions are really co-curricular or actually part of the curriculum. Music concerts and arts festivals are celebrated as parts of the curricular experiences, but drama performances are regarded as co-curricular. Yet play productions are extensions and representations of the curriculum itself. A larger conversation needs to be held within the department and the school about how to resolve this.

We recommend that a committee be formed to examine this issue with a charge to recommend a new and clearer definition of where the co-curricular program fits into the Weston schools.

Question: Are the levels we offer appropriate and offered at the appropriate times in the course of the program?

While this question seems to focus most specifically on the high school and the tension between college prep and honors courses, we want to also use this as an opportunity to talk about the organization of the literacy curriculum at the middle level. There are two courses that students are enrolled in: Reading Writing Connections and Grade 6 English. The separation of writing from the overall English course was confusing to us, particularly when writing instruction seems to be an important part of the Grade 6 English course description. Through our conversations and observations, we know that the teachers work to collaborate and integrate the two as much as possible. But it would seem more beneficial to students and teachers to have a Grade 6 English class with a three-day-a-cycle writing lab component, to further foster the reading-writing connections and reading and writing for different audiences. This may be somewhat challenging to determine within the schedule structure. However, we believe that students would benefit from having this focused attention. Teachers would have fewer students and more time with them during the day, and thus be better able to give them targeted feedback within the “narrative” of a single course. The writing lab experience would also be an opportunity for teachers of science, social studies, and mathematics to partner work with English Language Arts students on writing goals and processes for those disciplines, grounding students at the start of their secondary experience with the notion of multiple, discipline-based reading and writing identities.

The community continues to consider the advantages and disadvantages of college prep and honors courses at the high school level. Because Weston's student and parent population holds high academic standards for all, the existence of "College Prep" levels may be viewed as "less

than acceptable" for some families. On the contrary, offering these different course levels means that all students' needs can be met with fidelity. In any district, some students excel academically with little or no additional support. Others, however, are more successful with some additional College Prep support, which can offer more scaffolding, feedback, practice, and instruction. This conversation occurs in many districts demographically like and unlike Weston. The College Prep level course should not be seen as a "lesser" option for parents and students, but a beneficial one. This might mean a bit of a cultural shift as a district, with the goal being the success of every student, at every level not only those students who excel in Honors level classes on their own. We also recognize that many students have a range of interests, and a broader selection of electives might allow for students from all levels to share these courses, pursue their interests, and learn from one another.

Question: How do we measure our level of success?

This question will be answered in the "Curriculum" section, in response to two additional but like-minded questions.

Question: How might we best achieve consistent calibration of what student achievement looks like - as part of addressing the need for greater vertical alignment?

Question: How well do we use assessment effectively to provide useful feedback and make instructional choices to benefit students?

The district already has common assessments at each grade level. We believe those can be a starting point for considering the vertical alignment of the most important standards for reading and writing, and how those are fostered at each grade level. With vertical alignment comes the opportunity for creating common *vertical* assessments at each grade level that can be used as a measurement for the ways in which students are meeting the standards that go beyond MCAS scores and reflect the values and mission of the district. Such locally-constructed projects can be written, visual, and/or multimodal and embedded within a curricular context, to avoid adding unnecessary assessments and to make them as authentic and meaningful as

possible to students. Projects can focus on just one or two sub-standards of a particular strand of standards, or they can cover a combination of standards. Different standards can have assessments in different years. For example, grades 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11 could have a common assessment that focuses on speaking and listening, while grades 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12 could have an assessment that focuses on reading. Grade level teams can develop the assessments, or identify pre-existing projects that could be used as a common assessment for the agreed-upon standard(s). Each spring, an in-service day could be devoted to analyzing grade level common assessments both vertically and horizontally. Teams of teachers could compare and contrast students' levels of proficiency and identify the instructional shifts the student work suggests. The vertical alignment would not simply label what people are doing in a compliance mindset, but instead serve as a tool for making instructional and programmatic decisions.

Adopting a PreK-12 digital portfolio system would be yet another way to capture student work throughout the year, and connect that work to specific standards. This allows for an even more flexible and robust examination of locally-based, curriculum-embedded authentic assessments as a means for identifying student achievement and revising curriculum and instruction. Lesley University's Graduate School of Education has been using "key assessments" since 2010 to determine whether or not candidates achieve specific program and university outcomes over the course of their graduate work. The university started with one platform (<http://www.chalkandwire.com/>) and then moved to another (<https://www.livetext.com/>). Software options for K-12 digital student portfolio options are: Google classroom, already in use in Weston, Moodle (<https://moodle.org/>), Brightspace (<https://www.d2l.com/products/eportfolio/>) Canvas (<https://www.canvaslms.com/k-12/>), or Schoology (<https://www.schoology.com/k-12>) . Schoology, Canvas or Brightspace are the best learning management systems (LMS) for a k-12 district which uses multiple types of computers--Macs, PC's, iPads and tablets--and have the financial resources to implement the LMS district-wide. A venture into digital learning environments would require districtwide professional development, in order to explore

technologies that will engage the kids in pedagogically sound multi-media projects, self-paced eLearning, online writing communities, school magazines, digital portfolios and more.

External packaged assessments are disconnected to teachers, students, and locally-created curriculum. Weston-based vertically-aligned common assessments would respect the in-house expertise and professionalism within the district, provide teachers and administrators with meaningful ways to talk about curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and serve as a model to other school districts.

Question: Does our curriculum include sufficient writing experiences of sufficiently varied types?

The conversation about writing instruction, the role of writing in the curriculum, and the diversity of writing experiences across the schools was a consistent “through-line” during our visit. In our conversations, with teachers, parents, students, and administrators, writing instruction and the need for more writing experiences PreK-12 recurred again and again. Throughout the Weston community, all stakeholders seem to be aware of the need for more writing opportunities and more specific writing instruction, particularly at the elementary level.

The Committee is unable to say whether or not students are doing enough writing, or not enough writing, because there are inconsistencies across and within grade levels. Parents echoed this concern again and again, and expressed particular concern about the lack of writing strategies students had when entering middle school. Two students having a range of different elementary teachers could begin middle school with a very different set of writing skills and experiences to draw upon. At the high school level, students and parents expressed appreciation for the level of attention their writing gets from teachers.

The Committee recommends that the district develop a common language for writing assessments K-12. The challenge is to determine what language can be consistent but developmentally-appropriate at each grade level. Starting with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and Weston’s Language Arts Frameworks, Weston can build a locally-based

writing curriculum that would provide a common language to be used across the district. During our meetings with parents, teachers, and students, a desire for greater clarity and consistency with grammar and spelling instruction was evident. Weaving grammar and spelling into the writing curriculum would make that instruction visible PreK-12 to all stakeholders.

The Committee also recommends that the district focus on a PreK-12 vision of writing instruction that embraces disciplinary literacy. Disciplinary literacy has been defined as “the specialized literacy practices of a given disciplinary domain” (Moje, 2015, p. 256). By drawing upon the content literacy expectations embedded in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, particularly the separate Content Literacy Standards in Science, History, and Technical Subjects Grades 6-12, teachers can create a context in which students develop reading and writing identities and a sense of agency as they write across disciplines for different purposes. Students need opportunities to write in science and social studies as much as they need to write in English-Language Arts. They need to know that scientists write in ways that differ from literary critics, journalists, or fiction writers. Ensuring that secondary science and social studies have appropriate professional development is essential in making this transition to teaching writing with a disciplinary lens.

The Committee noted that there was a universal rubric at the secondary level. We commend the district for this. But it was unclear to us how fully it “lived” within the English department and across the other disciplines. It might make sense for the district to consider the ways in which that rubric could be revised from three levels to four. At three levels, we imagine that much writing may fall in the “meets” section, and as such, the rubric may not help to stretch writers’ growth. We recommend that rubrics should be designed to guide students in how to create writing pieces in distinct genres and disciplines with examples and explanation that avoid arcane explanations or “academic-speak.” The rubric could also be revised so that there are

some discipline-specific options, to foster the ways in which good writing differs across disciplines as much as good writing can be similar across disciplines, genres, or purposes.

Across all grades, parents have expressed concerns that their children “are not writing enough” or “I don’t see any writing coming home.” A few expressed concerns that they did not see enough variety in different writing formats. Having a digital portfolio would eliminate some of those concerns by making writing visible to all stakeholders. Students noted that writing became less diverse while moving through school where AP English is basically an analytical essay writing course. The greater irony is the comments made by the parents and the school committee that “not enough” true analysis is being taught. The Committee cautions that analytical writing is not “the holy grail of high school writing.” Students at all grade levels PreK-12 should have the opportunity to write in a range of genres. Writing widely, both in response to literature and research, as well as for creative production, and in multimodal formats, deepens students’ ability to communicate effectively with a consideration of audience and purpose.

The Committee recommends that teachers, department heads, literacy coordinators, and principals communicate with parents regarding student work, sharing what writing assignments students have been working on. Moreover, the Committee encourages all teachers and administrators within the district to consider student writing for authentic purposes and audiences. Writing should be available in and out of school. Digital portfolios would allow for parents to see student writing as it is being composed and when it is published (digital or otherwise). Students of all ages should have the opportunity to share their writing at school-related events, reading and presenting their work to small and large groups. Reading and writing buddy programs across the district would allow for more ways to share writing, as would partnerships with local organizations, such as the Land’s Sake Farm, Regis College, and the Spellman Museum of Stamps & Postal History. Finally, digital publication of writing through classroom blogs, newsletters, and student newspapers provides yet another venue.

We recognize that many of these suggestions are already happening in classrooms across the district. However, the Committee repeatedly and consistently got the message from a range of stakeholders that writing instruction was unclear and inconsistent at the elementary level, and that greater consistency and volume was needed throughout the PreK-12 continuum. We encourage the articulation of a writing progression that emphasizes writing for real-world audiences and real-world purposes.

Question: Does our reading curriculum include sufficiently engaging texts at varying levels for all learners?

Question: How might we ensure that teachers have sufficient standards-aligned materials for low- and high-achieving students?

Overall, the Committee recommends a greater diversity of texts at the secondary level, reflecting contemporary authors from the United States and around the world. There are some excellent individual courses that highlight global literature, but we recommend a great diversity of texts throughout the year and across the curriculum, including more young adult and middle grade fiction and nonfiction at the middle grade level. In general, a globalization of the reading curriculum K-12 would be beneficial to all students in Weston. For consideration of how the curriculum can be further globalized, the district may be interested in the framework provided by the Global Learning Alliance at Teachers College, Columbia University (<http://www.globalsei.org/global-research/>).

At the secondary level, we recommend moving away from a curriculum centered on the single narrative as the norm, and a move away from teaching a book to a move towards teaching a concept, skill, or theme more explicitly. The faculty at the middle and the high school are talented and committed, and we believe are well-prepared to diversify the curriculum even more intentionally if given time to develop this work together. By transitioning from a single text as the focus to a range of texts within a text set, secondary ELA teachers will have the opportunity to differentiate instruction by ability and/or interest, and have students exploring

fiction and nonfiction, or different genres of fiction, for the purposes of investigating a topic or theme. Such structures put students at the center of meaning-making, as they work collaboratively to make sense not just of their individual texts, but of the collection of texts being read in the room (Cappiello and Dawes, 2012). This allows all students to “bring something to the table” as they construct meaning. We recognize that it is still important that students respond to the same themes in common writing exercises; and it is also important that classic literature is addressed on a class-wide level with group projects, discussions and guided analysis skills being taught. However, it is equally important to provide a range of explorations concurrently, with the opportunity to make connections across genres, historical time periods, and global perspectives.

We believe that this rethinking of the curricular structure may also allow for units that are more strategic and might move more quickly if students are reading at the appropriate challenge. For example, it has been common practice to teach a well-loved single novel to the entire class, using additional materials to build background knowledge and critical thinking skills. As a result, these units can stretch on for months, especially in the elementary and middle school levels. We recommend a more diverse structure to conserve time and broaden the amount of reading students can accomplish.

One possibility is to use a genre study approach over a two-three-week period. The focus should be on what makes the genre unique, reading strategies specific to the genre, and central ideas which connect to other books in the genre. For example, students could read historical novels that focus on the same time period, theme, or that examine same group of people, such as African-Americans, over time. Additional titles at various levels can then be offered for book clubs/literature circles. Students can prepare for discussions through annotation and pondering the essential questions of the unit.

Another possibility is the thematic or topical approach to unit organization, or one designed around an essential question, with students reading fiction, nonfiction, and drama on

the theme or topic, coming together to explore common texts such as short stories, podcasts, documentaries, photo essays, and primary source documents. While teachers frequently utilize short texts and multimodal texts to help students access a theme or connection in a novel at the center of a unit of study, we encourage Weston to consider the ways in which novels don't have to be the centerpiece of a unit of study.

As a Committee, we embrace the reading and writing connection, and we think that students, particularly at the high school level, should have more opportunities for writing beyond the academic essay. From our visit, we believe that students have some opportunities to do this. However, we would recommend even more opportunities for student blogging and digital text production, as well as a focus on writing in the genres in which students are reading. If they are reading literary fiction, do they have any opportunities to write literary fiction? Or are they always writing *about* literary fiction? Are they always being assessed on their reading through writing? What other alternatives are possible? To what extent do students have opportunities for multi-genre writing projects in response to units of study (Romano, 2000)?

It was unclear to us the extent to which students K-12 have the opportunity to develop their own questions in response to their reading. Having students at the center of multimodal, multigenre text sets on topics or themes allows the students to be situated as meaning-makers, creating their own questions and comments. Such an approach, K-12, allows for students to have a highly-developed sense of their own agency by the time they reach high school.

Instruction

Question: To what extent is the student experience from teacher to teacher and/or year to year as variable in quality as some respondents (parents and students) report? What might we do to address inconsistencies?

During a three-day visit, we do not have the level of exposure to student work and experiences to be able to report with any fidelity whether or not students are having disparate experiences based on the individual teachers from one year to the next. However, it became

clear to the Committee during our visit that there is a lack of coherence and clarity around the PreK-12 curriculum spiral, particularly with regard to writing. The recommendations that we have made throughout this document, if considered and implemented, will ideally help to alleviate the pressure that any one teacher feels, and create a common set of expectations at each grade level that individual teachers and grade-level teams can meet with a balance of shared and consistent coverage and outcomes and personal passions.

The lack of coherence should not be blamed on a variation in teacher quality. However, we believe that it is easier for teachers to work together collaboratively if given time and space for that work, and for that work to be clear and purposeful, fitting into a common set of expectations and outcomes. For example, it seems that all stakeholders want clarity around writing curriculum, and that elementary teachers in particular want professional development and time to create and implement such a curriculum. This would minimize any sense of uneven experiences, if common outcomes and assessments (some, not all) were established by teachers and literacy coordinators within the district.

Question: How well do we provide sufficient differentiation in instruction to reach all learners? How can we support teachers so that they feel they can effectively differentiate?

The Committee believes that the adaption of a common format for articulating the K-12 sequence would allow teachers to focus even more on instruction and differentiation. Differentiation is a challenge for many districts; teachers need training in this area of instruction and support as they implement more differentiation in their lessons. Instructional coaches can be successful in their support of teachers in this area. What does differentiation look like in language arts at the different grade levels? In our observations at the secondary level, limited as they were, we did not see a lot of classes using pairs and small groups. Instruction seemed much more teacher-directed at the secondary level than at the elementary level. To what extent do elementary teachers feel as if they are differentiating all the time based on their guided

reading groups? To what extent do high school teachers feel that the system has taken care of differentiation by offering separate Advanced Placement, honors and college prep classes?

There are some specific concerns regarding assessment and differentiation at the elementary level that came out in our meetings and conversations. For example, at the elementary level, the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System is an in-depth method to determine reading comprehension skill development, but it is extremely time consuming. It takes approximately 30 minutes to administer one reading selection. In order to find each student's independent, instructional and frustration level for fiction and nonfiction, a great deal of valuable instructional time is sacrificed. Does every student need such in-depth assessment? We recommend considering the following online screening assessment:

The Scholastic Reading Inventory:

http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/product_info/pdf/SRI_Research%20Summary_Reviewed.pdf

This assessment calculates a student's comprehension level by Lexile, which is a measure of text complexity. This fast, initial screening can assist teachers in determining the students who need additional reading assessment with the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System. This can save valuable class time at the beginning of the school year. This reading data can also help to further develop students' independent reading lives through learning to self-select "Just Right Books", increasing reading stamina, and monitoring student growth.

Question: Are teachers effectively equipped with the appropriate tools to foster and provide feedback on student writing?

Writing instruction and assessment is difficult and complex. Reading student writing and providing the appropriate feedback for students to improve their writing over time is a delicate balance of encouragement and constructive criticism. The older the students get, the longer their written works grow. The Committee recognizes how much work it takes to create a writing workshop in the elementary grades or run a genre study at the secondary level. The most

appropriate tools to foster and provide feedback on student writing are: teachers and time. With a committed faculty and ongoing support through a literacy coordinator, instructional coach, or department chair, teachers can provide students with the feedback they need to grow as writers.

Articulating a district-wide approach to writing instruction that shares a common language makes it easier to support writers collectively. Utilizing a digital portfolio that follows students allows students to be more reflective on their growth as a writer, and allows teachers to see their work from year-to-year, to better understand the changes individual students have made. Transforming the high school common rubric to one that can be used at different grade levels would also be a wonderful local resource that provides consistency PreK-12. Please see our conversation about writing in the Curriculum section for more on this.

Communication and Community

Question: How might we more effectively communicate with parents about the program and their children's work?

The Committee has noted that in other program reviews, the question of communication has been raised. In the 21st century, there are many ways for school districts to keep parents apprised of what is happening in school. We believe that any communication problems that the district might experience could be stemming from the difficulty in seeing a PreK-12 literacy learning continuum. Should the district establish a clear continuum, with evidence of student outcomes that is embedded in the ongoing curricular work, and should the district focus on a PreK-12 writing strand that elevates writing beyond the classroom and into the life of the community, we think that parents and community stakeholders will have a better understanding of what is happening within the schools. It is as important for the schools to develop their communication habits and methods with one another, within and between schools, as it is with the larger community. Such alignment work should help to facilitate that.

Conclusion

It was a pleasure to spend three days in the Weston School District. The teachers are respected by their students, and personally invested in teaching. The students seemed to be equally invested in their schoolwork and happy to be in the classroom. Administrators seem proud to support the work happening in classrooms, and eager to provide the structures to make that work successful. The community is deeply committed to public education. The Committee looks forward to what happens next, and appreciates the opportunity to be a part of the conversation.

References

Academic Resources

Cappiello, M.A., Dawes, E.T. (2012). *Teaching with text sets*. Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Education.

Moje, E.B. (2015). Doing and teaching disciplinary literacy with adolescent learners: A social and cultural enterprise. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2), 254-278, 301.

Romano, T. (2000). *Blending genre, altering style: Writing multigenre papers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Web Resources

Digital Portfolios

Canvas. <https://www.canvaslms.com/k-12/>

Moodle. <https://moodle.org/>

Schoology <https://www.schoology.com/k-12>

Brightspace <https://www.d2l.com/products/eportfolio/>
Scholastic

http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/product_info/pdf/SRI_Research%20Summary_Revised.pdf

Literacy Coach Definitions, Roles, and Responsibilities

International Reading Association Standards for Reading Professionals

<https://www.literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/standards/standards-for-reading-professionals>

Massachusetts Reading Association

<http://massreading.org/>

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Coaching Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches

http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Positions/coaching_standards.pdf

Globalization

Global Learning Alliance, Studies in Educational Innovation at Teachers College, Columbia University

<http://www.globalsei.org/global-research/>