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TO: Dr. Kristine Gilmore, Superintendent

FROM: Dr. Casey Nye, Middle School Principal

SUBJECT: Middle School Schedule Changes: recommended for implementation in 2012-2013

DATE: Tuesday, January 17, 2012

Background

The middle school schedule offers students a terrific variety of experiences. Our eight period day supports this array of programming, but an imbalance exists in how we use student time. Recent reductions and related scheduling changes have exacerbated these issues, but they have been perennial challenges.

At the sixth grade level nearly all students have multiple study halls. Additionally, with the reduction of service learning for this school year, sixth graders have a quarter-long study hall. During the scheduling process last winter we anticipated that “team study”, a twice-per-week study hall, would not be necessary due to programmatic reductions being made. In an effort to salvage positive attributes of team study a once-per-week advisory period was developed and implemented. This means that for 45 days some sixth graders come to school on Friday morning and have three consecutive periods of non-instructional time. Consider the experience of an 11-year old in an elementary schedule versus this 126-minute space in our schedule.

In seventh grade students have their first “elective” opportunity as they choose to take, or not to take, a world language. While the rest of our programming continues to be “exploratory” (an automatic part of most students’ schedule) the world language option is a positive and exciting one that many of our seventh graders choose to pursue. Choosing to take French, German or Spanish at the 7th grade level means a guarantee of no study hall. Expectations of students independent work outside of the classroom naturally increase in seventh grade, yet our schedule shows no response to supporting this need. It is typical to have a number of schedule changes in August and during the first week of school. This school year, however, brought nearly 40 “drops” in direct response to this lack of study hall. Parents, typically of high-achieving students, sought remedy for an over-whelming course load. In nearly all cases a music ensemble or world language were eliminated from these students’ seventh grade experience.

Additionally, it is important background to note that several positive resources for students contribute to this time quandary. Those include:

-Offering five “core” classes (to support literacy, a district and building priority, we offer both English **and** language arts; compared to four in most middle-level settings, including our own Junior High)

-Supporting an exploratory approach for our youngest secondary students (this is a recommended best-practice that also has strong faculty support)

-Employing a “core plus more” approach to interventions (students are “doubled” in math, reading and/or for other needs)

Moving forward

In my five years at the middle school I’ve regularly heard our staff lament over the challenges noted above. Teachers recognize that we are not the only school that struggles with time issues. At the same time, they want our students’ experience to be world-class and know that some changes are necessary in order to find a better balance. We moved forward with the following principles in mind:

- Protect our priorities for students (strong and rigorous core, house and exploratory approach, responsive interventions)
- Seek balance in how we use students’ time
- Improve schedule without significant cost/ FTE increases

Faculty members were quick to engage in our scheduling committee. They were given the charge to look at the “big picture” and recommend a schedule that improves the school day for the “whole student”. Over 30 were direct participants in this committee. Other mechanisms were put in place to ensure communication, and participation, was broad and thorough.

Process

Our scheduling committee met formally over a period of 8 weeks this fall and early winter. At the onset an explanation of the steps in this process was discussed. A summary of the major steps is included below.

Education	Review and discussion of DPI requirements, district/building priorities, current schedule
Brainstorming	Open discussion and small group activities to generate ideas and clarify needs
Formal Options Generated	All staff were invited to suggest solutions and alternatives in writing or in person
Review/Discussion of Options	Ten options were generated and documented for committee members to consider

Narrowing of Options	Four options were administratively eliminated due to cost; the committee then recommended two options from the remaining six for full staff consideration
Curriculum Coordinator Review	Coordinators met with Mrs. Devine and myself in order to ensure they thoroughly understood the two options recommended by the committee
Department Meetings	Coordinators were directed to meet with their department and listen to teacher feedback
Curriculum Coordinator Recommendation	Coordinators met with Mrs. Devine and I to share feedback they gathered from their department. We discussed the options, and their implications, in detail. Coordinators made a written recommendation as leaders of their department.
Staff Survey	As an additional check-point as to the validity of this process a teacher survey was conducted.
Principal Recommendation	Upon review of the process and all available information a recommendation was chosen to be forwarded.
Superintendent's Cabinet Review	Cabinet reviewed this recommendation and voted before a recommendation was forwarded to the Board.

Between each step in this process time was given for committee members to share and receive ideas with their colleagues who might not be formally participating. Each meeting would include this new knowledge as we built on previous discussions to move forward. I feel confident that this process was inclusive, transparent and provided for a wide-range of input. Similarly, I feel that the recommendation below has strong faculty support.

Schedule Recommendation

The schedule that is recommended has the backing of over 90% of our teaching staff, our building leadership team, and unanimous cabinet support. The option preserves our diversity of offerings, while expanding access to more students. A greatly improved balance in independent learning time for both sixth and seventh graders can be achieved. The schedule, highlighted on the next page, includes:

6 th Grade	7 th Grade
8 period day	8 period day
5 core classes (English, language arts, math, science, social studies)	5 core classes (English, language arts, math, science, social studies)
Physical Education (every other day) Music (every other day ensembles)	Physical Education (every other day) Music (every other day ensembles) World Language (available as either daily or every other day)
Quarter Rotation (Art, Family and Consumer Education, Technology Education, World Cultures*)	Quarter Rotation (Art, Family and Consumer Education, Technology Education, Health)

The most significant changes are the addition of World Cultures in sixth grade and an every other day option for World Language in seventh grade. World Cultures would be a newly developed course that we anticipate our World Language department being lead collaborators in creating. In addition to the every other day World Language option at seventh grade a very positive door has been opened at the Junior High. Previously families chose between a 7th grade or 9th (or high school) entry point for beginning study of a world language. Beginning next year 8th graders will also have this option available.

Additionally, it is important to mention correspondence that you recently received from district world language teachers. They expressed concern over schedule options that existed at that time. Although there is still work to be done, and no schedule is perfect, it is important to make you aware that their comfort level is much higher with the proposal documented here.

Conclusion

I am grateful for the many hours our teaching staff invested in these discussions. Mrs. Devine was an important leader and invested a great deal of time in her leadership of this effort, as well. Curriculum coordinators were active and important participants throughout this process.

The work of our building committee is not quite complete. Two additional topics need to be discussed, but would be inefficient to consider until Board action occurs on this recommendation. Following that, our staff will consider a small amount of “commons time” (to support remediation efforts) and whether our quarter classes need to be offered in a “semesterized” (every other day for a semester instead of 45 continuous days) format. Additionally, staff will participate in a more in-depth review of our grouping pilot on two of our house teams. Collectively, these discussions constitute an excellent and healthy review of how we use our most valuable resource: student time.

I appreciate the Board’s thoughtful deliberation of this recommendation and look forward to answering any questions they may have.