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From the Assistant Superintendent, Marci Trahan

Essential Standards Update

Direction from the Strategic Plan

As you know, the Strategic Plan that was adopted by the board in spring 2007 charts our path for the next five years toward the district we envision for our children. Originally in the strategic planning process, there were 2 committees “engaged learning” and “standards and assessment” that were later merged into one. The challenge to this subcommittee was to integrate and resolve the demands of deep engagement in learning, accountability for State standards and the development of life-long learning skills. As you will notice, our Strategic Plan intentionally does not define us by the STAR test scores alone. Once the Board approved the Strategic Plan, a group of teachers, parents and administrators interviewed five consultants to determine which would best match our needs in addressing this goal area in our Strategic Plan. The group unanimously selected the Leadership and Learning Center.

I am thrilled to be coordinating and guiding this very important and exciting work this year. As a broad overview of this body of work, once the Essential Standards are identified and aligned across grade levels, multiple-measure assessments are developed to provide the evidence of student attainment of the Essential Standards. The resulting data are systematically collected, examined, reported, and used to improve curriculum and instruction. A natural outcome of the development of essential standards is that teachers determine other information they need to assess student progress beyond STAR scores.

Process to complete the work

Because of the resources of time and money we have available to us, we are using the “accordion model.” We have an Essential Standards Work Group, a fabulous team of 30 teachers and administrators representing all grade levels and the core (English/Language Arts, history, math and science) subject areas, who learn how and begin the work of each phase of our Essential Standards work. We also have an Essential Standards Leadership Team, a subgroup of the Work Group, 12 exceptional teacher leaders who I work with to facilitate and guide the work on Staff Development Days, Wednesdays, and release days of all the teachers in the district in their Grade Level and Subject Area Teams. It is through this process that all teachers in the district are taught and participate in learning, reviewing, creating, refining, and continuing this work.

Essential Standards work begins

Our work on this endeavor began on September 27, 2007 when the Essential Standards Work Group met with a consultant from the Leadership and Learning Center to be trained in how to identify the essential standards. Essential Standards are prioritized standards that are derived from a systematic and balanced approach to distinguishing the standards that are absolutely essential for student success. No state standard is eliminated; however, Essential Standards are a subset of the complete list of standards for each grade and for each subject. They represent the “safety net” of standards that each teacher needs to ensure that every student learns prior to leaving the current grade. Students who acquire this “safety net” of knowledge and skills will exit one grade better prepared for the next grade.

The criteria established in determining the essential standards at each grade level and core subject area were:

Endurance Will this standard provide students with knowledge and skills that will be of value beyond a single assignment, project, or test date? Which standards represent concepts and skills that *endure*?

Leverage Will this standard provide knowledge and skills that will be of value in multiple disciplines? Which standards are critical for our students to know and understand; which standards, according to the state assessment, do we especially need to emphasize?

Readiness for next level of learning Will this standard provide students with essential knowledge and skills that are necessary for success in the next grade level or the next level of instruction—for success in school and in life? What knowledge and skills do this year’s students need so they will enter next year’s class with confidence and readiness for success?

At the October 22, 2007 Staff Development Day, I provided an overview of the work thus far, and the Leadership Team and other members of the Work Group trained all other teachers in the district on identification of Essential Standards, they reviewed the drafts, and continued the identification. On Wednesdays and during some release days in the fall, teachers then vertically aligned them across all grade levels to be sure there were no gaps. You can see the draft Essential Standards for grades K-8 and for the core subject areas on our website. Go to the RVSD website (www.rossvalleyschools.org), click on District, go to Education and then click on Curriculum. The Essential Standards are in bold with a box around them.

Unwrapping the Standards

The next phase of our work continued on January 11, 2008, when the Essential Standards Work Group met with our consultant from the Leadership and Learning Center to learn how to “Unwrap” the Standards. Unwrapping is a process in which we analyze each Essential Standard to identify the key concepts and skills that are embedded within each standard and develop the Big Ideas and Essentials Questions which are then used to focus learning. Big ideas are the enduring understandings, those students retain after they have forgotten many of the details. Essential Questions focus instruction and guide assessment that requires students to apply their knowledge to determine solutions.

On Wednesday, January 30, 2008, at the District Wide Grade Level meetings, the Essential Standards Leadership Team provided their respective teams with the draft essential standards and the work they had drafted on the unwrapped standards. They taught their team members how to unwrap and continued the unwrapping of more standards.

We will use available District Grade Level Wednesday meetings to continue the unwrapping process. For all elementary schools, the first subject area of focus has been math (English/Language Arts is the next area of focus). For middle school, because a teacher doesn’t teach all subject areas, in grades 6-8, the focus is math and English/Language Arts, and additionally science in grades 7 and 8. We hope to complete all these subject areas by the end of the school year.

We have completed unwrapping math K-8 and now will select a standardized format for the unwrapped standards that will then be utilized for all grade levels and subject areas. Teachers will then review the unwrapped standards to ensure vertical alignment and continuity between and across all grade levels. The final “unwrapping” document will then be ready to publish. Our goal is to complete this work by the end of summer 2008.

Assessment

We all feel very eager to see the entire process of application of our essential standards work, so on May 13, 2008, a consultant from the Leadership and Learning Center will return to train the Essential Standards Work Group on the process of developing local assessments, or, in other words, teacher-created multiple-measure assessments that are collaboratively designed to allow students to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of formats. This collaborative work will provide consistent expectations within a grade level, course, and department regarding standards, instruction, and deliberate alignment of classroom, school, district, and state assessments. Assessments for learning will be administered to all students in a grade level or course several times during the year to provide regular and timely feedback regarding student attainment of the most critical standards. The results will be analyzed, providing ongoing collaboration opportunities for grade level and subject area teachers, in order to identify if students have mastered particular concepts or skills and to guide instructional planning to better meet the learning needs of all students through differentiated instruction.

Next Steps

We will begin applying the assessment training with summer work teams and/or continuing the work at our fall Staff Development Day and Wednesdays throughout the 2008-09 school year. In this process, we may also make some revisions to what has been identified as Essential and to our Unwrapped Standards.

In 2008-09, we will be working simultaneously on assessment as well as unwrapping other subject areas. This will be the point when another group of teachers begins the unwrapping of another subject area while the existing group works on assessment. Work will be shared so continued input from all teaches is utilized. At the same time we work on and implement assessments, we will be analyzing and making refinements to our instructional strategies. We will continue this work until it is completed for all grade levels and core subject areas.

This is completely fascinating and energizing work. If you would like more information, please contact me at mtrahan@rossvalleyschools.org or 451-4064. You can also talk to your site principal and teachers. To quote one of our teachers, "I feel like I've never been more ready to take on a project like this. We all got used to pulling the Herculean load, and it takes a real shift in how you think to make the necessary changes to what is truly essential. It's also really delicate work and requires great interpersonal skills. Yep - it's big."