

SCHOOL SELF-ASSESSMENT PROJECT

Selections from a Report from the School Quality Review

of

Sunnyside Middle School

Introduction

The Sunnyside Middle School is located in Breezy Point, Michigan. Located in an attractive, well-maintained building, the school houses about 440 students in grades 5-8. About 15 percent of these students are special education students drawn from surrounding areas and the school district. The school has a staff of over 50, including administrators, teachers, and support staff, allowing for class sizes of less than 30 students per teacher. It has an after-school program featuring several sports activities, and a tutoring program involving peer tutors from the eighth grade and students from a nearby college. The school has collaborated on several school improvement projects.

The review team consisted of nine members and a convener. This report represents the collective perspective of the team members. The team visited every classroom in the school at least once, for a total 51 visits; conducted 56 interviews in person and by phone with parents, members of the community, students and school personnel, and had frequent and varied informal interactions.

The framework guiding the review was provided by the school in the form of its mission statement, and a request that the team focus on the school goals related to literacy and respect. An outline of the framework follows:

- **The mission statement:** “Sunnyside School will bridge the gap between elementary school and high school by developing skills and providing opportunities for learning while encouraging all students to reach their highest potential.”
- Respect includes
 - Self-respect
 - Respect for others
- Literacy includes
 - The ability to read and write well
 - The ability to comprehend oral and written material and to make oneself understood orally and in writing
 - Being able to engage productively in problem-solving in all curriculum areas
 - Being able to think, read and write critically and reflectively

- The appreciation, enjoyment and application of reading and writing; and familiarity with the many forms of literate expression, such as newspapers, magazines, plays, poetry, research, debate, book reviews, journals

In writing this report, the team worked to create a document that reflects the school to members of the school community. We focused on the relationships between the school's goals and the patterns of teaching and learning we observed at the school. This document does not evaluate individual teachers and learners. It provides a broad context within which individuals can reflect on their practice. Specifically, this report presents evidence to support how the school is meeting its mission and fulfilling its goals. Following the evidence for each goal, we have included questions for reflection in order to promote thoughtful deliberation in this area.

Goal 4: *Literacy includes the ability to write and read well*

There is some evidence that the students are able to write well. For example:

In a language arts class, students created and composed mini-books with illustrations on every page. The mini-book stories were well-organized and flowed logically. The authors correctly used quotation marks and commas throughout the stories. The books had a dedication page and a copyright date.

In one class, students produced mini-newspapers. The newspapers included articles on weather, sports, local and national issues. The newspaper, which was set up in column format, included headlines such as "A la Carte Disappears," "Soaring Eagle Resort Opens", and "Storm hits New York." The mini-newspaper also featured cartoon drawings by the students. The articles were brief, clear, and concise. They captured the essence of current events and maintained the interest of readers.

In a computer class, an assignment resulted in well-written letters inviting parents to attend Parent-Teacher Conferences. The letters included detailed information such as when and where the conferences would be held, as well as the length of time required for a conference. The letters were appropriately addressed "Dear Mom," in most cases and were appropriately signed, "Sincerely" with the student's name. The letters displayed correct paragraphing and indentation.

In a mini-studies class, students composed poetry in various forms to develop well-written pieces. Students created personification, diamond, tongue-twister, inside/outside, and Thanksgiving poems. The poetry was original, imaginative, and appropriately formatted.

In another class students demonstrated their ability to write well in journals. The journals featured carefully crafted ideas that did not stray from the original topic. The journal entry topics included notes of appreciation to parents and events of the weekend. Students indented and created new paragraphs when needed. The journals also reflected teacher comments on the students' ideas and writing mechanics.

There is some evidence of the students' ability to read well. For example:

In several classrooms students were involved in reading novels orally in a cooperative small group setting. In one room they discussed context clues from the reading in order to define words. In another class where the chosen novel was *The View From Saturday*, students were excited as they alternated from the role of reader to listener. In a third classroom, conversation regarding the characters' actions revealed the students' ability to read and understand the role of the characters.

In a language arts class the students aloud read the story *Ramona Forever* by Beverly Cleary. The students were given the opportunity to engage in a great deal of interaction and talk about the story. The students were also able to develop connections between their own lives and events in the story. One student was able to compare the sad feelings she experienced when her grandmother moved out of town with the sad feelings experienced by the major character when her aunt announced her wedding plans.

Questions for reflection

Recently there have been many advances in knowledge about reading and writing instruction. What provisions can be made so that all teachers in the school can become familiar with new ideas and information?

How can the school provide additional opportunities for reading within the school day?

How can teachers provide more opportunities for students to interact in order to develop greater understanding of their reading material? For example, students might engage in role-playing fictional characters or historical persons.

In a math class we saw an example of students writing a paragraph that detailed the process of finding the least common denominator. How can teachers provide more opportunities for students to experience writing across the curriculum?

Goal 8: *Literacy includes the appreciation, enjoyment and application of reading and writing, and familiarity with the many forms of literate expression.*

The team observed some efforts by teachers to develop this literacy goal.

- In a 6th grade class involving a cross-aged project, students created storybooks for an elementary class and shared them in a story-telling project. This project enabled students to apply both written and oral language skills in the context of an authentic learning experience.
- Students who had participated in a cultural exchange trip with Detroit students exchanged letters with their trip partners. Students also produced a documentary video of the exchange trip for the purpose of sharing information with the school community.
- Students in a mini-class were observed scanning, searching, locating, then reading specific sections and articles from a newspaper. This activity gave students hands-on practice in identifying the layout and features common to newspapers plus the enjoyment of reading articles of personal interest.
- Evidence of journal writing was noted in a special education and a language arts class.
- Pen Pal activities familiarized students with letter writing as a personal form of literary expression.
- The art of book review writing was practiced by a group of 6th graders when they were asked to write a review of the novel *On My Honor*. In this review students were to write about what they liked or disliked about the characters, plot, and outcome and whether or not they would recommend the book to someone else.

An easily accessible library provides opportunities for students to become familiar with different forms of literary expression. Library materials were readily available to all students, and students were encouraged to use them. For example, students in a language arts class were choosing novels to read from an assortment available in the classroom. One student wished to read a novel not available in the classroom and asked for a pass to the library to search for the book he had in mind. Students were observed coming in and out of the library throughout the day, using and selecting materials then checking out books independently.

Print-rich environments were noted in some classrooms. In one classroom magazines with titles such as *Bikes*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Outdoors*, and *Better Homes and Gardens* were displayed as well as paperbacks and non fiction illustrated books on Native Americans, presidents, covered wagons, and the states. An EMI classroom contained a display of picture books dealing with human anatomy and the digestive system. These books expanded and enriched the teacher's

lesson on the human digestive tract. Another classroom housed three sets of encyclopedias as well as stacks of newspapers. These resources were available for students doing research.

Students are encouraged to become familiar with fiction as evidenced by observation of students reading and listening to fiction in classrooms and in the library. Students were observed reading *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Pinballs*, and *Call of the Wild*.

A student newsletter titled “Icicle Edition” contained a fictionalized account of how new staff members had arrived at school by space ship. This student newsletter is an example of students appreciating, enjoying, and applying writing skills.

Questions for Reflection

Many students have ideas of what constitutes excellence in various areas of sports and physical education. How can the school provide students with examples of excellence in other areas of knowledge, for example literature, including drama, poetry, fiction and non-fiction?

Many of the learning experiences provided by this staff have enriched the learning environment. How could the staff plan for more cross-age, cross-curricular, learning experiences that relate to the needs and interests of the students?

The school provides opportunities for students to be involved in band. How could the school expand opportunities for students to become familiar with other forms of creative expression, especially in the area of the performing arts, such as drama, dance and music?

The team saw teachers using technology to reinforce reading and writing skills. How can the school ensure equal access to technology and technology applications for all students?

Additional Questions for Reflection

The team has seen successful inclusion of Special Education students in academic areas. How can inclusion be extended to non-academic and social areas, for example, communication among students and teachers might be facilitated with a course in American Sign Language.

Student-generated ideas and activities to support other students and families who have experienced loss or tragedy have been supported by the school. How could the staff capitalize on the enthusiasm of Middle School students to respond to community needs and use them as service learning experiences?

In parent interviews, the team heard several parents indicate their eagerness to volunteer their time to support the school in whatever is needed. How could the school capitalize on the talents and time being offered by parents to support the school's goals.