



Superintendent's Response to the Recommendations from The Task Force on High Achieving Students

September 2008

Introduction

In November 2008, I convened the Task Force for High Achieving Students and charged it to study the needs of high achieving students; to assess the effectiveness of the current educational program; and to develop programming strategies and options to effectively meet the needs of advanced students. Mary Sterling, Assistant Superintendent, chaired the Task Force, which was comprised of teachers, parents, and community members. In June 2008, the Task Force issued its final report with recommendations to begin with small steps with a view for what's possible in the future, to develop specific actions for 2008 – 2009, and to commit the district to the development of a longer-term plan. The School Committee directed me to develop a response to the Task Force's recommendations and to present the response early in the 2008-2009 school year. This report is in response to that directive.

Recommendations

The Task Force spent a considerable amount of time reviewing educational research and found that beliefs and practices on this issue are sometimes conflicting. There is often disagreement among educators about how to define and identify high achieving students and in determining what educational needs exist. As the result, the Task Force made three broad recommendations for consideration:

1. that opportunities for advance learning offered by our public schools should be responsive to a range of needs in students who are ready and capable of advance learning,
2. that a range of needs will more likely be met if the district provides different kinds of "low barrier" and "high barrier" advanced learning opportunities, and
3. that identification of students for "high barrier" opportunities should be based on multiple criteria designed to assess the students' interest and their readiness for advanced learning in different content areas.

As the result of these broad recommendations, the district will begin to build a series of both "low and high barrier" advanced learning opportunities.

Additional recommendations from the Task Force suggest that the district continue the work already begun to ensure a strong standards-based curriculum in all subject areas and to make sure that such a curriculum informs instruction and supports high expectations for all learners.

The Task Force also recommended that the range of opportunities for advanced learning should be inclusive. That is, since many students have interests and capabilities that should be encouraged and developed the district will need to use many different options. It was noted that advanced learning opportunities need to be communicated clearly so that students and parents are aware of them. If those opportunities require specific criteria for participation, such criteria should be clearly known and the selection of students for participation should be transparent. Finally, any advanced learning opportunities, which the district wishes to emphasize, should be accompanied by professional development support so that teachers have the time to build the expertise to make such opportunities successful for students.

Several specific recommendations emerged from the Task Force discussions and were considered most important to pursue on a district-wide basis in the near future.

1. Focus first on mathematics to take advantage of the new kindergarten to grade 5 mathematics program. In grades 6 to 8, while the district undertakes a review of the mathematics curriculum, it is recommended that the district pilot some opportunities for advanced learning in mathematics for middle school students. Such options may be "low barrier" and/or "high barrier" and could be part of strategies to differentiate instruction both inside and outside the classroom.
2. Encourage and refine the differentiation of instruction. Differentiation can be a powerful approach to meet the needs of all learners, including those who are ready for advanced learning. Multi-layered differentiation is complex, is difficult to do consistently and well, and will require on-going professional development for the faculty.
3. Celebrate excellence in all areas of school learning. The Task Force urges district leaders to build a sense of community and culture in each school that supports an atmosphere of excellence, creates respect for students to accomplish all kinds of things, and encourages students to take pride in their accomplishments.

Response to the recommendations

Since receiving the Task Force's report the Administrative Council has met on several occasions to discuss both short and long-term actions. While there has been relatively little time and few resources to address this issue, I am pleased with the energy and spirit with which the administrators have brought to addressing the needs of highly capable students and their initial reaction to developing and offering advanced learning opportunities. This topic will remain on the agenda for further development.

The following is a summary of activities that have been planned for this year and are either already underway or will begin soon.

1. Focus on differentiated instruction in Everyday Mathematics, grades K to 5.

The district has made the commitment to pursue all of the options within the Everyday Math program to differentiate instruction and to develop advanced learning opportunities based on assessment data for each student in K-5. During the initial six to eight weeks of the program, classroom teachers and math specialists will explore the range of learning opportunities and use the progress check (unit

assessments) to understand the impact of the program on student learning. As the district develops more data on student performance, it will explore the use of ancillary materials for additional challenge. The math specialists and content specialist for math have already begun this effort.

2. Elementary Math Clubs

Both Randy Davis and Steve McKenna are in the process of establishing elementary math clubs. These clubs will be lead by a teacher, are designed as a low barrier activity for students in grades 2-3 at Hanscom Primary School and 2-4 at Lincoln School. Depending on the number of students enrolled, they will participate for one or more 10 to 12 week sessions. The teachers, parents and the mathematics specialists at each school recommend students for math club.

3. Elementary Math Enrichment

Hanscom Primary School will offer a high barrier math enrichment program for students in grade 3. This program will also run for approximately a 10-week session. The math specialists and teachers using performance data from Everyday Math, the district's common assessments, parent input and past performance will identify students for participation.

4. Math Competitions

Several schools will offer the advanced learning opportunities for students to participate in math competitions. At the Lincoln School, students in grades 6 to 8 will have the opportunity to participate in MathCounts, a low barrier activity that consists of local competitions leading to regional and state level competitions. At Hanscom Middle School, students will have the opportunity to participate in the American Mathematics Competition. This activity is open to all interested students, i.e., low barrier, and consists of a one-day competition. Students in the Lincoln School, grades 2-4, will have the opportunity to participate in the Continental Math competition.

5. Advanced Learning Opportunities in areas other than mathematics

1. Science Share and Science Fair

All of the Principals have indicated that students in their school will have the opportunity to participate in the Science Share (elementary level) and the Science Fair (middle school). This activity will be low barrier and is currently in the developmental stage. It will build on the initial successes from last year and it is anticipated to have greater participation this year.

2. Education and Leadership for a Nonviolent Age (ELNA)

The Lincoln School will build on last year's initial success of the ELNA group. This club provided an opportunity for advanced learning with a focus on student leadership, community service and civic engagement. The Lincoln School will also be hosting the ELNA's Middle School Leadership Conference on November 19th. It is anticipated that up to 40 Lincoln students will have the opportunity to attend the conference with 300 other middle school students from other ELNA districts.

3. Lincoln School Newspaper

Lincoln School (grades 6-8) will be starting a school newspaper that will provide both low and high barrier advanced learning opportunities for interested students. The teacher facilitator is just beginning this initiative but expects to produce a school newspaper several times during the course of the year. Initiatives such as this have the potential to provide rich experiences for students both during the school day and after-school.

4. Virtual High School

The Lincoln School is piloting participation in the Virtual High School (VHS) this fall. VHS is an international online school connecting students and teachers from many different school districts. High interest, on-line courses are offered for students who have the support of a local site coordinator. Lincoln has trained a site coordinator and five students have been selected for this high barrier advanced learning opportunity. The students have enrolled in high school level courses and are approximately one-month into their studies. Time during the elective period is provided, however, students must make a significant commitment to additional time outside the school day to participate in the program. If the pilot is successful, it is anticipated that the VHS program will be opened to more students on both campuses during the second half of this school year.

5. Opportunities for increased partnership with the DeCordova Museum.

This summer I met with the new Director of the DeCordova Museum who expressed an interest in developing a stronger partnership with the Lincoln Public Schools. While there are no specific plans at the current time, the district will begin to pursue advanced learning opportunities in the near future. I believe that this has the potential to provide significant advanced learning opportunities for students interested in visual arts.

6. Junior Great Books

Hanscom Primary School and Hanscom Middle School will continue the Junior Great Books Program. At HPS the program is offered for students in grades 2 and 3 during the fall and grades 1-3 in the spring. It is a high barrier advanced learning opportunity. The HMS program is for students in grades 6-8 and it is offered as a low barrier, high interest learning opportunity.

7. Professional Development Program

Several professional development activities, designed to support the district's commitment to differentiation of instruction and advanced learning opportunities, are in the planning stages and will begin this fall.

8. Administrators Study Group

The Administrative Council has begun a study group to develop a deeper understanding of the components and application of differentiated instruction. This work will continue for the year with the goal of being able to better support

teachers attempting to differentiate in their classrooms and to strengthen the administrator's abilities as supervisors and evaluators.

9. Teacher Study Group

The District will offer a study group for teachers on the use of inquiry to stretch, engage and energize learners. The program is currently in development with an anticipated start date in October. Depending on interest, the district is prepared to offer sessions on both the Lincoln and Hanscom campuses.

6. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Grant Application for Gifted and Talented

The DESE sponsors a competitive grant program for school districts seeking to develop advanced learning opportunities. Lincoln Public Schools has applied for a \$10,000 grant to support our initiative. Our focus is for professional development and expanded on-line learning opportunities.