**Brent Elementary School – Strategic Plan, 2014-2015**

**Report from Working Group 3: Strengthening Specials**

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Working Group three has been tasked with producing recommendations to improve the delivery of “specials” at Brent, including specific issues: broadening art instruction, increasing physical education time and strengthening the foreign language program. The group examined all specials offered by the school: Art, Chinese, Library, Music, PE and Science. Members met six times from October through December. After examining data on specials offered at other well-regarded DCPS elementary schools and the results of the parent survey from spring 2014, the group undertook the following:

* Studied alternative systems of course scheduling that would create additional blocks of time in the school day that could be potentially used for additional specials;
* Researched types of foreign language programs at elementary school and issues that influence the effectiveness of language programs;
* Developed a questionnaire for Brent specials teachers and examined the responses;
* Developed questions on specials for a Brent parent survey held in December 2014;
* Interviewed all Brent specials teachers;
* Interviewed leading researchers on applied linguistics[[1]](#footnote-1)

The working group has produced the following:

* Brief observations and recommendations presented in this memo;
* A proposal for an alternative course schedule (Appendix A);
* A “Language Matrix,” a document laying out issues that the Brent administration should consider in reviewing the foreign language program (Appendix B).

Observations and Recommendations:

* The specials teachers all spend a significant part of their day (typically 1-2 hours) carrying out duties in addition to their specialized teaching. These include supervising lunch or recess and providing supplemental instruction in math, reading and writing (RTI). Because of these duties, specials teachers do not currently have extra blocks of time that could be devoted to teaching additional sections of their specialized classes. If the curriculum were to be revised to add additional instruction in specials such as PE, Chinese or Music, the non-specialized duties would have to be reduced, eliminated, or transferred to more appropriate staff RTI efforts would be led by math, writing or reading specialists, while lunch/recess supervisory duties could be handled by additionally hired aides.
* Several specials teachers said they had few opportunities to meet with general education teachers to coordinate their lessons with the general curriculum.
* Morale of the specials teachers could be increased and awareness of their contributions raised by highlighting their efforts for Brent via presentations at general PTA meetings, articles in Tues News, and back to school night open classrooms. Increased knowledge of specials courses would allow parents to understand and support their children’s work in these classes. We recommend that there be an opportunity for direct contact between specials teachers and parents near the beginning of the year.
* Several specials teachers indicated that their time would be better spent focusing on the subject areas in which they have professional training. In some cases, they also said their schedules left them with little time to plan and set up their regular classes in addition to the RTI.
* Ideally, we would recommend that Brent adopt a Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES)2 program that would allow students to build on their knowledge of the language from year to year and continue study of the language in middle school at an intermediate level. This concept is called articulation and is repeatedly stressed as essential for successful language acquisition (Pufahl and Rhodes (2011), D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education (2009), Blazer (2012).
* The best FLES programs include at least 90 minutes of instruction per week, preferably three times a week for a minimum of 30 minutes. We recommend, therefore, that foreign language instruction time be increased to that level. If necessary, FLES language instruction could be limited to grades 2 through 5, with ECE-grade 1 having a less intensive Foreign Language Experience/Exploratory (FLEX) program
* Further, it is recommended that language instruction be student-centered, culture-focused, constructed around themes of interest to the student, supported outside the classroom, and structured around cumulative goals and assessments. Rote memorization is discouraged (Blazer (2012) and D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education (2009).
* In his interview, PE teacher Mr. Mitchell said he could rarely hold PE outdoors because during most of the day there were other groups of students using the playground. Mr. Mitchell also noted that other people sometimes walk through the cafeteria during PE instruction. Since children benefit from spending time outdoors, we recommend that PE be held as often as possible outdoors. We recommend that PE get priority on the playground, with other groups staying outside the area utilized by the PE class, or that PE take place in nearby parks, weather permitting.
* In view of the limited time available for PE, we recommend that physical activity and movement be integrated into the school day for all grade levels.

2 There are three main types of foreign language programs for elementary school students in the U.S.: FLEX, FLES and immersion. Foreign Language Experience/Exploratory (FLEX) programs focus on exposing students to culture and language (basic words and phrases), and developing interest in further study of foreign language. Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) programs have more ambitious goals of having students acquire listening, speaking, reading and writing skills as well as an appreciation for other cultures. FLES programs may also teach other subject matter in the foreign language. Finally, Immersion programs have as their goal acquisition of a high level of proficiency. This is achieved through teaching at least 50% of the day’s lessons in the foreign language. (Pufahl, I. and Rhodes, N., (2011)).

**Bibliography**

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D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education (2009). World Languages Standards.

Pufahl, I. and Rhodes, N., (2011). Foreign Language Instruction in U.S. Schools: Results of a National

Survey of Elementary and Secondary Schools. *Foreign Language Annals*, 258-288.

1. Ms. Nancy Rhodes, Center for Applied Linguistics; and Mr. Marty Abbot, Executive Director, The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)